

## 14. THE FRIEND OF THE BRIDEGROOM (3:22-36)

### CONTEXT

Before we dig into the text itself, it will be helpful to consider some of the context behind it.

### The Ancient Jewish Wedding

Jewish weddings in ancient Israel consisted of ten steps:

1. **Selection of the Bride:** The bride was usually chosen by the father of the bridegroom. He would send His most trusted servant to search for a bride for his son (e.g. Gen. 24).
2. **Bride Price:** Brides were purchased in the sense that an agreed price was paid to the father of the bride, both to compensate him for the loss of a worker and to show him how much the bridegroom loved and valued the bride.
3. **Betrothal:** The marriage ceremony consisted of two main parts, beginning with the betrothal. This is similar to modern engagement but with a greater sense of commitment in that the couple enters into a covenant and were legally married in all aspects except for the physical consummation of the marriage. At the betrothal ceremony, a marriage contract (*Ketubah*) was presented to the father of the bride. This contract would consist of all the bridegroom's promises to his bride. The bride would cherish these promises.
4. **The Bride's Consent:** Although marriages were arranged, the bride still had a choice. In Genesis 24:57-58, Rebekah was asked, concerning Isaac: "*Will you go with this man?*". She said, "*I will go*". She gave her consent. This was her "I do".
5. **The Cup of the Covenant:** After the terms of the contract were accepted, a cup of wine was shared to seal the marriage covenant. The second cup of wine would be shared many months later during the marriage ceremony.
6. **Gifts for the Bride:** The Betrothal included the giving of gifts by the bridegroom to his bride. Many times a bridegroom gave a coin or other object of value to his betrothed bride. It would always be something special that would help her remember him while they were apart. This was because the real focus of the gift giving was to be on the giver and not on the gift. This is similar to the modern engagement ring.
7. **Departure of the Groom:** Once the marriage covenant was sealed, the bridegroom left his bride to go to his father's house to prepare their future home. The Bridegroom could be gone for many months, so during this time the Friend of the Bridegroom would protect the bride to make sure that she remained faithful and undefiled during the bridegroom's absence (see below).
8. **The Consecrated Bride:** The Jewish bride was set apart, consecrated, separated unto her bridegroom — the one who purchased her. So, while waiting for his return, she was to stay faithful. It was probably easy at first. But when his return was delayed, the temptation would be great. After a while, the bride may even start to question his return.

9. **Return of the Bridegroom:** Jewish bride grooms usually came for their brides late at night, near the midnight hour. The sound of the shofar would break the silence of the night and there would be great shouting and dancing in the streets.
10. **The Hometaking:** The second half of the ancient Jewish wedding ceremony is called the “hometaking”. After the Bridegroom returned for his Bride, the couple were escorted to the bridal chamber where they would be alone for seven days. Thereafter the bridegroom would take his bride to their family home.

### The Friend of the Bridegroom

Some commentaries will tell you that the friend of the bridegroom is like the best-man of today, but that is not entirely accurate as there is for more to it than that. The friend of the bridegroom serves the bridegroom in at least the following ways:

- He is the go-between, between the bride and the bridegroom.
- He is involved in sending out invitations.
- He plans the wedding ceremony.
- He oversees the whole wedding feast (cp. 2:1-12).
- While waiting for the bridegroom to return from building the new family home (step 7 above), the Friend of the Bridegroom guards the door to the bridal chamber (i.e. the room where the couple come together to consummate their relationship) to prevent anyone from entering that should not be there because the only person allowed to enter is the bridegroom (step 8 above). Then when the bridegroom returns (step 9 above), the friend opens the door for him with great joy. The bridegroom enters the bridal chamber to be with his bride and the friend closes the door and walks away rejoicing because his job is done (step 10 above). This is the Friend of the Bridegroom’s most important role.

### Baptism

Verse 22 tells us that Jesus and His disciples have returned to the south of Israel, to the Judean countryside, and are baptising people. Two things we need to be clear about here.

1. This is not Christian baptism. That does not start until after Christ’s ascension. Rather this is baptism similar to what John was doing in chapter 1 – a baptism of repentance to prepare the people for what Jesus is going to say and do. It is also a baptism of identification – that is, a baptism that serves to show they are identifying themselves with Jesus, and are choosing to follow Him. Although both of these are important in Christian baptism, this baptism does not symbolise the internal change that is essential in Christian baptism, but that is based on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus which has not happened yet.
2. We learn in 4:2 that Jesus is not doing any physical baptising Himself, but it is His disciples who are doing so. However, because those being baptised are identifying themselves with Jesus, it is

as though He is baptising them. The disciples, therefore, are baptising under Jesus' authority, and so in that sense He is baptising.

This baptism, however, leads to a discussion in verse 25 between the disciples and a certain Jew. Unfortunately the ESV is a little mild in its translation as the Greek word for *discussion* is more intense and refers more to a debate or an argument. We do not fully know what their debate is about, other than that it has to do with purification and some concern over the baptism that Jesus is doing and the baptism of John.

### PRINCIPLE 1: WHAT YOU HAVE HAS BEEN GIVEN TO YOU BY GOD (V27)

It appears from the text that John is losing popularity as people leave him to follow Jesus and John's remaining disciples begin to worry about the dip in numbers. So in verse 26, we see that they question John about the situation, expecting him to do something to revive his ministry. In ancient Israel rabbis competed with one another for popularity, and they would do anything possible to maintain their numbers. So although it is not mentioned, John's disciples are probably somewhat shocked at John's response because he does not seek to reclaim popularity, but humbly steps aside for Jesus.

John begins his answer with, *"A person cannot receive even one thing, unless it is given him from heaven"*. Here we have a principle that is repeated over forty times in the Bible (e.g. Deu. 8:18; 1 Cor. 4:6-7) as it is something that we need to be constantly reminded of.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with people's talents and abilities. And in practically every instance, it comes across as though the source of their talents is themselves and not God. We see this even within the church as musicians, preachers, and other gifted individuals are praised for their talents with little to no recognition of God giving them those abilities.

But not only do gifts and talents come from God, so too does authority. A good example of this is when Jesus is tried by Pilate. Jesus initially remains silent during Pilate's interrogation which leads to Pilate growing somewhat irritated. But then,

*"So Pilate said to him, 'You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?' Jesus answered him, 'You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above'"* (John 10:10-11).

People love to assume authority today. They do this based on worldly factors such as academic achievements, having certain skills, belonging to a particular family, or wealth. We see it all the time in government and business, but we see it in the church too. There are many pastors who have assumed authority based on similar things, many of whom should not be there.

Yet despite what they may think, the only reason they have any authority at all is because it has been given to them by God.

This principle ties in with verse 35, *“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand”*. There is not a single thing in the entire universe that the Father has not put into Jesus’ hands, including you. It also includes the church or ministry that you belong to. No gift, talent, authority, etc. is outside of Jesus’ authority.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How does this principle challenge the common thinking that the what we have in the church is based on man’s abilities? How does it affect how you view the church and ministry and your role in either or both contexts?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-9. The world and the church love to put people on pedestals. Even many preachers who the lay person may put on a pedestal also have their favourites who they put on a pedestal. How does this principle challenge that mentality? How will you view preachers (and other gifted people in the church) from this point on based on this principle?

## PRINCIPLE 2: KNOW YOUR ROLE IN THE CHURCH (V28)

John reminds his disciples of what he previously told them about his role, *“You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him’”*. Although John tells his disciples He is not the Messiah, he does not downplay his role to the point of insignificance, as if to say, *“Well, I’m not going to receive any reward or praise, so I might as well not continue”*. Instead he acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah, but at the same time understands his role in Jesus’ ministry – *“I have been sent before him”* to point the world to Him (cp. 1:19-23).

Furthermore, John is quite content to do what God has called him to do as seen in the fact that he does not try to assume the role of Jesus for Himself, nor another on the same level as Jesus. God’s will for him is simply to point people to Jesus, and then to be executed by Herod, and John is content with that.

John also understands that part of his role is to proclaim the words of the Lord – something which he does in all the accounts we have of him in the gospels. This links with verse 34, *“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure”*. Although seemingly insignificant in the eyes of the world, uttering the words of God is a huge responsibility that is not as simple as it seems. Many pastors are tempted to neglect preaching God’s Word for fear of losing popularity or simply to keep the peace.

Conrad Mbewe , in his book, *God’s Design for the Church*, categorically states that many churches have lost the Gospel – that it is not being preached, taught, or lived by many so-called Christians – and makes a scathing indictment against the modern church:

“Having lost the Gospel, the church members are still spiritually dead. They do not know God, nor do they love Him. They have no real hunger for the teaching of God’s Word and they do not desire corporate prayer. They do not know what it means to fight the good fight

of faith through evangelistic enterprises. Sending out missionaries is the furthest thought from their minds. The book of Acts sounds like an account of life on another planet. Church is merely a social club for people in the neighbourhood or village”.<sup>73</sup>

Mbewe further goes on to illustrate that invariably what happens in such cases is that the Gospel is put aside and true worship is lost, and they are replaced with programmes or entertainment designed to draw people in to keep the numbers up.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. What can you or your church do to prevent people from ignoring their role, or overstepping their bounds when it comes to church ministry?
2. Mbewe states that “We need to recover the Gospel if we are going to recover real New Testament church life”. Do you agree with this assessment and that of the other quote above? Can you give some examples of churches or ministries where this is the case?
3. In the sermon, the question was asked, “How do I know what my role in the church is?”. The counsel given was “What has God put in your hands?”. How does this counsel help you when it comes to determining your role in the church in your current stage of life?
4. What is your role in the life of the church in within the particular ministry that you serve? How does this second principle challenge your approach to serving in the church or ministry?

## PRINCIPLE 3: IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO GUARD THE BRIDE

We see this in verse 29 that refers to the role of the Friend of the Bridegroom discussed above, “*The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete*”.

John is making three very important statements here:

1. He says that the one who has the bride is the bridegroom. This may seem like a strange statement, because logically you cannot have a bride without a bridegroom and vice versa. But note that he does not say “A bride” or “A bridegroom”, but rather “THE bride” and “THE bridegroom”. This means that he is talking about a specific bride and bridegroom. In this case Jesus is the bridegroom, and the people He is returning for – the church – is the bride.

This is based on the Old Testament picture of marriage that is used to illustrate the relationship between God and Israel. It is because of this relationship that when Israel falls into idolatry, it is considered to be adultery (e.g. Isa. 62:1-5; Hosea).

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73 Mbewe, Conrad. 2020. *God's Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p60.

God's relationship with His people as a marriage continues in the New Testament with the church (cf. Eph. 5:31-32). John is therefore declaring that Jesus is in a relationship with His bride in the same way that God is in a relationship with Israel. Therefore, since these two relationships are the same, John is further implying that Jesus is God. This links with verses 31 and 32 that refer to the one who came from above, which is Jesus.

As we have dealt with Jesus as God already in our earlier studies we will not go into it again here.

2. John says about himself that he is the friend of the bridegroom (refer the Friend of the Bridegroom to notes above). Here John is saying that his role before the arrival of Jesus is the same as that of the friend of the bridegroom – to protect the bride. But now, the groom, Jesus, has arrived and is with His bride, therefore, the friend can now walk away with great joy. His job is done.

This is a good reminder for any church leader, in fact, for anyone who does anything in the church, that our primary task is to protect the church. Jesus is not present with His church physically today, but He will return. So while He is away He has left the responsibility of protecting His bride to the elders of the church (cf. Acts 6:1-7; 20:28-31).

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Based on the above, what is the primary role of the elders in the church? What specific tasks does Acts 6 state the elders are to do that form part of the role?
2. In what ways can you assist the elders in their task? (See Acts 17:11)

## PRINCIPLE 4: DO NOT ALLOW PRIDE TO RULE YOUR HEART

This we see in verse 30, which quite simply reads, *“He must increase, but I must decrease”*. In many ways this sums up all four principles, for each one requires humility on our part as Christ is exalted. But it also sums up John the Baptist's humble attitude seen here and in chapter 1. He understands that his work is done and must step aside for Jesus. He also understands that he has had his fifteen minutes of fame and does not need to be remembered for anything more than pointing people to Jesus – something that he continues to do even in death.

As a believer you must recognise and admit that you must decrease and He must increase in all areas of your life. Whether it is in your family, your work, your church, your ministry, even within the daily mundane activities of life. But this is easier said than done, for we all have to face the reality of the sin referred to as the pride of life (cf. 1 John 2:16). A sin that is ever-present yet is probably the least confessed, because we all long to be seen, recognised, respected, and honoured because of what we do or who we are. But this attitude is from the world and does not belong in the life of a believer.

This is what makes John the Baptist such an extraordinary man, in that even though he would have had to battle the same pride of life, he does not allow it to control his heart when it comes to Jesus. Instead he graciously steps aside because he believes in the Son and because he believes, he also obeys.

This ties in with verse 36 as a contrast to the one who does not believe in the Son, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*”. By obeying his King and stepping aside, John is saying, “My work is done. It’s time for Jesus to do His”.

A lesson in business that is very appropriate in the life of the church is that no-one is indispensable. Too often pastors, elders, deacons, and even lay leaders think that God needs them. That if it was not for them then there would be no-one to do the work. But that kind of thinking denies the truth that Christ is building His church, not us, and shows an attitude of not truly believing in the Son and being willing to step aside and decrease as Christ increases.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Review the meaning of the “*pride of life*” from 1 John 2:16. In what ways has “*the pride of life*” been evident in your life? Why is John’s statement in John 3:30 the opposite of “*the pride of life*”?
2. John the Baptist disappears from the Gospel of John after these words in verse 30. In what ways does the truth of this verse affect you, your prayers, your motivations, your ambitions, your attitude, and your ministry?

### CONCLUDING REMARK

Verses 31 to 36 are essentially a summary of all of the teachings of chapters 1 to 3, that the writer, the Apostle John, does not want his readers to miss. Although we have loosely linked them in this study to John the Baptist’s reply in verses 27 to 30, I encourage you to study them in your own time in light of everything we have studied so far in the Gospel of John (esp. 1:11-12).