

The Person of Truth

John 3:22–36

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Three Questions I Struggled With Growing Up

Most of you know that I grew up in the church. My father was a pastor, and in the fourth grade I formally received Christ — though I had done so many times prior — and was baptized. But simply saying the believer's prayer and being baptized is not the end of being a Christian. It is just the beginning. As I grew — through middle school, high school, and into college — there were three areas of faith that I deeply struggled with, and I want to express them as questions.

The first question was: *What does it mean to be a Christian?* The Christians around me — including me — seemed so much like the non-Christians. Same goals, same wants, same behaviors, same struggles. What was the difference? What does it mean to be a Christian in today's world?

The second question had to do with suffering and poverty. In my senior year of high school, our Spanish club went to Mexico, and for the first time I encountered vast poverty — the slums. It really disturbed me. Most people around me simply ignored it, which seems to be the norm. But I couldn't. Why is there poverty in this world? Why do people suffer? And as a Christian, what is my response to it all?

The third question was one I wrestled with in college: *Why am I a Christian?* Is it because of tradition? I was baptized in the fourth grade. My father was a Baptist minister. I grew up in a Christian culture. If I had lived in India, I would probably be Hindu. If I had grown up in Pakistan, I would probably be Muslim. Is my Christian faith simply a product of my culture, my upbringing, the traditions that were handed to me?

When I began to ask that question, it was terrifying — because I liked being a Christian. I liked the Christian fellowship, the discussions, the retreats. I liked the sense of eternal security and the hope of heaven. There are many benefits to being a Christian. But basing my belief and my life on tradition or benefits alone was not sufficient for me, if what I believe is not actually *true*.

And so for a period of time I searched for truth. I wanted to give my life to something — not because my culture or upbringing told me to, but because it is true. I explored. I genuinely sought to understand Buddhism, Islam, and other old and new religions. That is part of why I

became a religious studies major. And I did this with the conviction that if the Christian faith is true, it will stand. It will hold. I don't have to defend it — for it will defend itself, if it is true.

After that period of searching, that is exactly what I discovered. There is a weightiness and depth to the Christian faith that speaks to my soul like nothing else. There is a truth, an authenticity to it, that nothing else has.

I came to the point where I am a follower of Jesus — not because of tradition, and not because of the benefits, though both are important and good — but because of truth. I want to live my life by truth. I believe in Christ because He is true.

This is the message of our passage this morning.

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison). Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness — look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' 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. He must increase, but I must decrease." He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. 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.

— John 3:22–36 (ESV)

He Who Comes from Above

John the Baptist was one of the world's greatest preachers. He had a clear vision statement: *Repent*. He had a unique style of ministry — dunking people in water, dressing in camel's hair,

and projecting a charismatic personality that drew crowds. His congregation grew and grew. And eventually, even this man named Jesus came and was baptized by him.

I imagine — and this is just a thought — that some of John’s followers may have expected Jesus, after his baptism, to simply come and take over John’s ministry, that John’s disciples would be fast-tracked into Jesus’s inner circle. And indeed, one or two of them were. But right away, Jesus was obviously very different from John. He was going to wedding feasts, turning water into wine, visiting the temple, meeting privately with Pharisees — things that John’s desert community would likely not have done.

And then, as we see in our text, Jesus did not join John’s congregation at all. He moved down the road and began his own ministry. John’s people started making their way to Jesus’s group, and Jesus’s ministry began to grow larger than John’s.

So some of John’s disciples came to him with a complaint: *Rabbi, you know that man from beyond the Jordan, the one you told us about — people are leaving and going to him.* I suspect these disciples were hoping John would respond with some criticism of Jesus. Maybe Jesus is too friendly with the wrong sort of people. Maybe he and his disciples don’t fast the way we do. Maybe he’s not calling people to repentance the way he should.

But John does none of that. Instead, he says simply: it is right for people to go to him, because He speaks truth. In fact, he bears witness to a truth that no one else can bear witness to — because he alone has come from above.

He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard.

— John 3:31–32

Speaking from Above in a World of Shallow Lies

Many people have tried to name the cultural age we are living in now. There is widespread recognition that we are past postmodernism. Postmodernism described the second half of the twentieth century — an era defined by the conviction that there is no such thing as absolute truth, only subjective and personal truth. You create your own truth. We can still see the influence of postmodernism in the cultural battles of today: those battles are no longer primarily about *what is true*, but about demanding that others accept what *I* hold to be true.

But with the advent of the internet, smartphones, and continuous data streaming, we have entered a new age. Some call it post-postmodernism. Others call it pseudo-modernism. The term I find most fitting is *digimodernism*, described by Alan Kirby as “a triteness and shallow-

ness resulting from the instantaneous, direct, and superficial participation in culture made possible by the internet, mobile phones, interactive television and similar means,” producing a “trance-like state” in those participating in it. The net result, Kirby argues, is a “silent autism” superseding “the neurosis of modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism.”

In plain terms: people today are living shallow lives, trying to construct meaning and personal significance through social media, trends, reality television, entertainment, and twenty-four-hour news cycles. *Pseudo* means false, untrue — and we live in an age where people are trying to build their lives on lies. This is exactly what John means in verse 31: *He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way*. The earthly way is the pseudo-modern way.

But we have one who comes from above.

Think about driving on a two-lane highway here in West Virginia — Route 10, winding down toward Logan. Long, curving, narrow road. Have you ever been stuck behind a coal truck? It’s awful. You can’t pass because you can’t see around the curves. You have no idea what’s coming. If you’re two or three cars back in the line, you may as well reset your clock.

Now imagine you’re in a small airplane, high enough to see the whole road — all the curves and turns — but not so high that you can’t make out the individual cars. From up there, you can see the coal truck, the string of cars behind it, and also the long clear stretch ahead. You can see it’s safe to pass. But the drivers below can’t hear you. Then you watch as one car finally pulls out to pass — and from above, you can see a car coming from the other direction. You scream for him to get back in his lane. He can’t hear you, but at the last second he swings back. Close.

Our Lord sees the whole road. Not just the corner we’re on right now, but all of life — every hill and valley, every turn and twist. He sees it all at a glance. And not just our individual lives, but all of time. Because he has that vantage point, that perspective, he holds a view of truth and reality that no one else has.

This is why John says: *go and believe in him*. He sees what we cannot see.

He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard.

— *John 3:31–32*

And this is exactly what Jesus did — he bore witness to that truth across three dimensions.

First, Jesus revealed the truth about the kingdom of God breaking into this world, and what it means to live in the reality of that kingdom. The truth he taught is that we should speak honestly, live open-handedly, be generous, be faithful in marriage, that sex outside of marriage is dehumanizing, that when enemies attack us we respond in love. The world says that’s crazy — no one actually lives like that, and if I tried I’d be miserable. But Jesus says: *I am from*

above. I can see the whole road. I long to spare you the wreck I can see coming. Let me lead you in the ways of righteousness.

Second, Jesus revealed the very nature of God — a truth we cannot know apart from him. He showed us that God is a God who loves, that he is relational, and that because of his great love for us, he has made a way for us to be in relationship with him. As we are told in verse 36: *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.*

Third, Jesus spoke a truth about the very condition of our own lives. It is even voiced in this passage: *He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony.* Why do people reject the truth? That question deserves a much longer answer than I can give this morning. But I want to summarize it with one word: *pride*. It is pride that says, *I create my own truth. I decide what is good and right for me.* That posture ultimately produces the pseudo-modernism of our day — lives constructed on lies. And when we build our lives on lies, we never fully experience or know truth.

Setting Your Seal

But our passage also gives us something remarkable — perhaps one of the clearest teachings in all of Scripture about what it actually means to receive Jesus Christ. We tend to reduce this down, to make it simpler than it is. But the text is very precise.

Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

— John 3:33–34

Setting one's seal was how a person signed a legal document in the ancient world. It is the equivalent of signing a contract and having it notarized — a public, binding attestation that you did indeed agree to its terms. To receive Jesus Christ, then, is to enter into a legal, binding, and public covenant with God. And this covenant has conditions. There is fine print. What John's own example shows us is what it actually looks like to believe.

It means accepting God's sovereignty over your life. John says in verse 27: *A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.* Your life is given definition by God. He places you where he wants you, and so there is a deep trust involved — trust in God for the corner you find yourself in. Pride says, *I am in charge*. Humility says, *God is in charge*.

It means accepting your own condition. John says of himself in verse 28: *I am not the Christ.* The Bible describes our condition in many ways — broken, sinful, deprived, separated, unrighteous. There is debate about exactly what all those words mean and describe. But John

makes it simple: *I am not the Christ*, which means I cannot save you, and I cannot even save myself. Our condition is one of need. Pride says, *I don't need anything*. Humility says, *I do*.

It means accepting that your joy comes from a right relationship with God. John says in verse 29: *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.* Pride says, *Only I know what will make me happy, so you have to let me do whatever I want.* But if that were true — why aren't people happy? Scripture teaches that joy is rooted in a right relationship with God. John's joy is complete not because he got what he wanted, but because he is a friend of the bridegroom and hears his voice.

It means accepting that it is all about him, not you. Verse 30: *He must increase, but I must decrease.* Pride says it is all about me — I have to be seen, I have to be first, I have to be noticed. But when you receive Christ, you are saying: *Lord, everything I am and everything I do is for your glory.*

So do you believe in him? Have you set your seal — publicly, bindingly, covenantally — to the truth that God is sovereign, that you are in need, that your joy comes from him, and that it is all about him?

That is what it means to receive Jesus Christ. Not because of tradition. Not because of the benefits. But because he is true — and he alone has come from above.