

The Greatest Man's Secret

²² After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. ²⁴ For John had not yet been thrown into prison. ²⁵ Then there arose a dispute between *some* of John's disciples and the Jews about purification.

²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" ²⁷ John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. ³⁰ He must increase, but I *must* decrease. ³¹ He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. (John 3:22–31)

On the last Sunday of the year, we look back and reflect on the year. Sometimes we ask the question this way, "What did I achieve this year?" In other words, did I make this year count? Did I make a difference? Was it a great year?

I suppose if you kept having year after year of great years, it would add up to a great life. And some lives would perhaps rank up there as the greatest lives. But how would we judge that? How should we judge what makes up a great year, great years, and a great life?

Few people can claim the title "the greatest man who has ever lived". But with the exception of the Lord Jesus Christ, there would be a few contenders. Other religious leaders like Mohammed, Confucius, Buddha would be on the list. Some would put Paul, maybe Christopher Columbus, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Aristotle, Constantine, Leonardo Da Vinci, Moses, Galileo or others in their top 10. But it might surprise you to find out who the Lord Jesus ranked as the greatest man who had ever lived.

⁷ As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft *clothing* are in kings' houses. ⁹ But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰

For this is *he* of whom it is written: '*Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.*' ¹¹ "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:7–11)

In Jesus' estimation the greatest man ever, the greatest life ever, has been John the Baptist. That's a strange choice, right? He wasn't a king like David or Solomon, or a judge like Gideon or Samson or Samuel, or a prophet like Elijah or Isaiah, a priest like Aaron or Melchizedek. He wasn't even a scribe like Ezra, or a wise man like Daniel. He didn't write a book, lead an army, found a movement. (By the way, Christian who call themselves Baptists are not followers of John the Baptist. His proper title would be John the Immerser, and it is only an accident of history that churches like ours are called Baptist churches.) There were no monuments built to him, no songs composed about him. And yet the Lord Jesus called John the greatest man ever. In God's eyes, the man who was most successful, most useful, most influential. To unlock the secret of why Jesus regarded John so highly is really to unlock what God esteems in a human being. It is to unlock, in many ways, the secret of a well-lived life, a life of eternal value.

John's ministry, John's mindset, and John's motto together give us three building blocks of the greatest life ever. Using these, we can evaluate our own lives.

I. John's Ministry

John was the son of Zacharias the priest and his wife Elizabeth, who was also of priestly descent, which was regarded as a special union. His birth was announced by Gabriel, with his name chosen by God- John or Yochanan, which means Yehovah is gracious.

Gabriel predicted John to have five distinctives: I) being great in the sight of the Lord, and ii) shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. iii) He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. " iv) And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. "v) He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luk 1:15-17)

We don't know much at all about his upbringing, except that Luke 1:80 says "So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel." (Luke 1:80). Undoubtedly, he grew up being taught by his father until at some point he went into the deserts. In the deserts, John lived a rugged life of seclusion, eating wild honey and locusts, and wearing camel's hair and a leather belt.

Somewhere around 28 or 29 A.D, about a year or a year and half before Jesus began His ministry, John began preaching. He began preaching a powerful message of repentance, demanding that Israel not depend on their ethnicity for salvation, but individually repent and believe. He began immersing them in the Jordan, just as Gentiles who were converting needed to have a ritual bath or mikveh before they were considered Jews, so now John was saying to Jews, you need to be converted. You need to repent and get your hearts ready for the coming Messiah.

So successful was his ministry that Matthew 3:5 tells us all Jerusalem and Judea went out to him. Thousands upon thousands of people came to listen to John. He soon gathers many disciples, who become his pupils, people who live with him, learn from him, follow him. He didn't do any miracles, but such was his popularity and power in preaching that many speculated that he was the Messiah. When they did that, John told them that Messiah was still coming, and that he was the fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah 40 of one preparing the way for the Lord.

John was the very first prophet Israel had heard in 400 years. He was the last prophet to predict the coming Messiah. He was the bridge between the old covenant and the new covenant. He is literally the focalpoint of Israel, the centre of Jewish religion. Disciples are following him. He has the respect even of some of the Pharisees.

But all of that changed when one day after about a year and half of ministry, standing in the queue to be baptised was his cousin, whom he knew well – Jesus. He had known that Jesus was the Messiah. His mother Elizabeth had no doubt told him how he had leaped in the womb when Mary came to visit her those many years ago. But John did not know when Jesus would begin His ministry. On that day, He stood there requesting baptism, and John told him, "I need to be baptised by you – how can you ask me to baptise you?" Jesus told him, "Let it be so, by doing so, we will complete the perfect example of righteousness." John then saw the Spirit of God as a dove descending on Jesus.

From that day on, Jesus began declaring Himself to Israel, preaching, doing miracles. And now the focus shifted. People stopped flocking to hear John, and began flocking to hear Jesus. People stopped coming to John to be baptised and began going to Jesus to be baptised. People stopped becoming John's disciples and began becoming Jesus' disciples.

And so John's disciples come to him with worrying news:

And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!

Master – the one you were bearing witness to – everyone is flocking to Him. He’s stealing your thunder. You’re losing popularity and followers, and He’s gaining. You helped Him, and He’s just moving on! You’re getting left behind!

Maybe you can identify with the disciples' panic. Ever had that feeling that others are getting the credit you deserve? Or that life seems to be working out for everyone else, while yours is just falling behind? Or that you've done so much for others, who just seem to be carrying on without you? Or that despite all you've done to get the life you wanted, it seems to be slipping out of your grasp, and the years go on while you get left behind? You want to push the emergency stop button on life, and say “Wait! This is not how it was supposed to be! It was supposed to turn out better for me! I was supposed to get the credit, or get the white picket fence life, or get the position, or the job, or the health, or the spouse or the child I wanted! I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere!”

It is in John's response that we find out why Jesus called him the greatest man ever.

II. John's Mindset

²⁷ John answered and said, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent before Him.’ ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled.

John's response is not jealousy. “Yes, everyone's fascinated with Jesus now”. It is not sneering envy “These fickle crowds are always after the latest things!” It is not self-pity “Yes, I'm a spent force, a used-up prophet”. It is not manipulative ploy, “Yes, no one wants to follow someone like me, anymore.”

No, John responds this way. First, God is sovereign. Whatever a man has, in any season of his life, is from God. My ministry was by God's design, and now so is the ministry of Jesus. You can no more argue with the decisions of Heaven, than you can change the direction of north and south.

But secondly, John reminds them: you heard me say, I am not the Messiah, I am the forerunner of the Messiah. John then uses an analogy. He compares himself and Jesus to the men at a wedding. In a Hebrew wedding, the friend of the groom was the man who conducted the marriage negotiations on behalf of the groom. He carried messages between the bridegroom and the bride during the time of the betrothal. He had the privilege of standing next to the groom, when the bride and groom were brought together into a private room or under a canopy, and he get to see the expressions on the bride and groom's faces and hear their first words to each other.

John says, I am not the groom, Jesus is. It is His day now, His day of finding His bride. It's not my day, not my wedding, not about me. John does not pretend to be the groom, or to try and steal the day from the groom.

Imagine a best man at a wedding seeking to be the centre of attention, trying to get into every photo, interrupting speeches, making his the longest, and just continually diverting attention to himself? What would we think of a man who kept trying to act like the groom, when everyone knew he was the best man. We’d think, “sit down, stop it! It’s not your day, it’s his!” A best man does his job best when he makes a success of the groom's wedding day, clearing the way, making sure everything goes according to plan.

And nothing pleases a best man more than to see his friend kiss the bride, and put the ring on the

finger, and walk the aisle jubilantly. John says the “the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. “

In other words, my role was to draw attention to Jesus and set Him up for success. And now that has happened, so my joy is complete. I couldn't be happier.

John's disciples are thinking in terms of carnal categories: followers, popularity, numbers, legacy, maybe even financial support. John is thinking in spiritual categories: what is my role in God's plan, and have I performed it? What is my life's calling and have I done it for God's glory?

How many of us are evaluating our lives by John's two categories: His sovereign control of where I am and what I am, and His specific calling to the role He has given me?

John looks at his life and says, “A man can receive nothing except what God ordains He have – whether it is my ministry or Jesus's ministry. I don't need to be discontent, restless, or envious. Why? “The steps of a *good* man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way.” (Ps 37:23) “A man’s heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.” (Proverbs 16:9). Do you believe that God has sovereignly placed you where you are, given you the abilities you have, the opportunities you have, the adversities you have? Can you rest in the truth you cannot open doors God has shut, or shut doors God has opened? That's God's control.

Second, he looks at his life and says “My calling was to prepare a people for Messiah. That's what my whole life has pointed towards, that's what my preaching was for, that's why I baptised. If I lose every one of my disciples to Jesus, then it is actually success. Because that was my calling.” Why?

But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. (1 Corinthians 7:17)

Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.(1 Corinthians 7:20)

Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. (1 Corinthians 4:2)

To fulfil your calling, your role is to find ultimate usefulness. The goal is not to change your calling, but to be faithful in it. Do you believe that if God has placed you as a husband, as a wife, as a single, as a parent, as a child, as a manager, as a worker, as a church leader or church member that this is your calling, and you are meant to be faithful in it? That's God's calling.

John saw his life through the lens of God's control and God's calling. But it was John's summary of his life's goal that shows us the heart of his greatness.

III. John's Motto

³⁰ He must increase, but I *must* decrease

John sums up his life in these words: Jesus must increase; I must decrease. Jesus must grow in fame and honour, I must simultaneously diminish and be forgotten. Jesus must be known and published abroad, I must fade into obscurity. The Person and works of Jesus must become the talk of Israel, the person and works of John the Baptist must be yesterday's news. People must come to decide about Jesus, people must no longer be thinking about John at all. The amount of Jesus' disciples must grow, my disciples should wither away, leave me, and go to Him.

John's life is wrapped up in another Person. And he is not faking it, falsifying unselfishness. He

says his joy is maximised, fulfilled when he lives this way. The more Christ increases in glory, and the more John decreases in glory, the more John increases in joy!

What do we call this attitude that says, He must be first, He must be glorified, but I must recede? The Bible calls it humility. Humility is the first of all virtues and the secret of spiritual success, because it is where you get yourself out the way and let God be God. Christianity 101 is the realisation that if God exists then life is not about you. If God exists then there is someone more important than you, greater than you.

“Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance. Do you desire to construct a vast and lofty fabric? Think first about the foundations of humility. The higher your structure is to be, the deeper must be its foundation.”

“Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion, I should reply that the first, second, and third thing therein is humility” - Augustine

Humility is not pretending you are less than you are, or trying to think meanly of yourself. It is simply accepting that God is God and you are not. Life is not about your glory. Life does not revolve around us.

God is Creator, we are creatures. God is the sun, we are the planets. Our role is to be image-bearers, those who reflect His glory, not try to increase our own.

That's why so much of this psychology and self-esteem teaching is unbiblical. A mirror doesn't need to have a good self-image. It doesn't need a self-image at all. It reflects someone else's image. My role as a saved human being is to reflect God's glory back to Him.

John knew he must decrease in the fame of his own ministry. But by extension, humility can apply the same words to our lives. Less of Me with a capital “m”, less of self with a capital “S”. As God's firstness increases, so my firstness decreases. As I live for God's fame, God's honour, God's glory, so too I must die to my fame, my honour, my glory.

And here's why living in this humble way makes us great in the kingdom. It's not because of how great we are. It's because of how great God is, and the humbler we are, the more room there is for God to manifest His greatness. Humility is cleaning out the pipe so more of God can flow through. Humility is washing the mirror so the image is clearer.

Matthew 18:4 : “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 20:26 : “But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; ²⁷And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: ²⁸”

“But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹²And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” Matthew 23:11-12

Now try to imagine a life, where every expansion of God's glory results in a reduction in your glory. And try to imagine, becoming happier every time that happens. If that's hard to imagine, then it shows you how heavy the old nature of Adam sits upon us, where we desire to be as gods, as Satan promised us. We don't want just joy and happiness from a life of knowing and loving God, we want glory, power, honour. But mirrors are not lights. Mirrors are mirrors, and when they bend in on themselves and try to reflect themselves to themselves, they break, and shatter.

Jesus came to die on the cross to save us from the shattering effect of that rebellion and sin. He came to restore us back to being mirrors that rejoice in reflecting God. If you are in Christ, then your attitude will be one that feels the rightness and the appropriateness and the beauty of “He must increase, and I must decrease”.

What would it look like to live like this? It means I worry less about if I am known or acknowledged as a leader, or as knowledgeable, or as powerful, or wealthy, or cool, or beautiful, and I am more concerned that people acknowledge the Lord Jesus as beautiful and powerful and wise and worthy.

It means I do not panic if my name, and my brand seems to be diminishing if I am being used to point more and more people to Christ.

It means I am satisfied in a world of celebrity and followers and influencers to be anonymous and unknown and unrecognised if only my life is a signpost to the saving work of Jesus Christ.

It means less and less of carnal ambitions for power and wealth and status and popularity and more and more spiritual ambitions for God's glory and God's name, and God's church.

Less of my plans, my goals, my ambitions if they are selfish, unconsecrated and worldly. More of His calling, His plans, His design for my life.

Less of the old me. More of Him. Less self-centredness. More Christ-centredness. Less worldliness.

Why was John the greatest man who ever lived? Because he was the humblest man who ever lived. But here is the amazing thing. When Jesus said John was the greatest who had ever lived, He then added these words: but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. In other words, if you are humbler than John, then you are greater than John. Of course, if you seek to be humble so as to be the greatest at humility, you've missed the point, and your pride has deceived you. But if you adopt John's attitude: He must increase, I must decrease, and do so, even more than John, it may be that you exceed him in honour in Heaven's eyes.

A great life is a life that accepts God's control, submits to faithfully perform your calling, and then lives with the motto of humility: He must increase, I must decrease. Picture 2022 with “He must increase, I must decrease” on your heart as you get up in the morning, as you feed your family, as you drive, as you work, as you witness, as you study the Word, as you relax and take your leisure, as you parent, as you come to church. Picture a year where your greatest concern is that Jesus grow in fame, honour, glory, and that self die, shrink, and shrivel. If you are saved, you are not only picturing the greatest year of your life, you are picturing the greatest joy of your life.