

# John 3:22-30

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*Jesus and his disciples go south into Judea. His disciples baptize repentant Jews. Nearby, John the Baptist's disciples are inspired to jealousy by seeing that Jesus attracts larger crowds than John. John answers his disciples, saying that the whole point of his ministry was to prepare people for Jesus's ministry. Now that Jesus's ministry is growing, John is happy for him, and will intentionally fade into the background.*

Now John shifts scenes, telling us *After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea.* The *land of Judea* was the southern part of Israel, where Jerusalem was located. Its name comes from the tribe of Judah. When the kingdom of Israel split, the northern ten tribes were generally known as Israel, or Samaria. And the southern kingdom was Judea, which consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. About 60 miles east of Jerusalem was the Dead Sea, and between them was the Judean wilderness. ([See Image.](#))

Jesus and His disciples were in Judea, *and there Jesus was spending time with the disciples and baptizing.* The word translated *baptizing* is from the Greek root word “baptizo.” Rather than translate to English, the translators transliterated, and created a new English word from the Greek, “baptize.” The Jews were prolific baptizers. Visitors who go to archeological sites in modern Israel can see many examples of ancient baptismals, known as “mikvehs.” It is a well with stairs, allowing someone to dip themselves, then reemerge. ([See Image.](#))

A good example of ancient mikvehs can be found at the site of ancient Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. At Qumran is located the ruins of what might be thought of as an ancient Jewish monastery. One of the primary activities of the people who lived there was hand-copying scripture. Before each instance of writing down the word for “God,” they would do a ritual purification in a mikveh. The mikveh had to have running water, called in Hebrew “living water.” Qumran is located in an arid, barren area near the Dead Sea, so the ancients ran an aqueduct from the hills in order to bring “living water” to the numerous mikvehs located there.

Qumran was likely in operation during the time of Jesus, and might have been within a few miles of where Jesus' baptism took place, on the other side of the Jordan River.

Another example where a mikveh has been found is an ancient house in the Jerusalem area thought to be the house of a high priest from the first century. In this house is a private mikveh. The priest would have had it in his home due to the many occasions he would be required to participate in ritual cleansing. Perhaps the greatest example of mikveh from this area is at the temple. A large number of mikvehs have been found near the entrance to the temple. It is believed that visitors to the temple would do a ritual purification, a baptism in the mikveh, prior to entering the temple.

So baptism was very familiar, and common among Jews. However, John's baptism apparently had a new twist. He had come baptizing for repentance. In the case of John, the baptism

represented a commitment to a change of heart. John discouraged people from being baptized without a change of heart. It is likely that Jesus' baptism was similar (although Jesus did not baptize, but only His disciples, as noted in the next chapter).

As Jesus's disciples were baptizing, *John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there.* The specific location of *Aenon* which was *near Salim* is not certain. John baptized Jesus at Bethabara beyond the Jordan River, which means on the eastern side of the Jordan River, which might also be a clue as to their location. There was *much water there.* The Jordan River was untamed, so this was apparently an accessible place on the river, with running (living) water. John tells us that *people were coming and were being baptized* by John the Baptist. John the Apostle notes *for John had not yet been thrown into prison.*

That significant numbers of people were coming to John to be baptized is notable. This area was likely barren and sparsely inhabited, as it is today. The distance to Jerusalem is about sixty miles, which would have been on the order of a three day walk. This shows there was a spiritual hunger. The Jordan would have been a good place for John to baptize, as it was "living water" or running water. But there are mikvehs for baptism conveniently located in Jerusalem. So crossing the Judean wilderness to go to John the Baptist to be baptized showed that many people found that purification at the temple was not enough. This might be part of the reason the Jewish authorities did not care for John.

Now that Jesus' disciples are in the same area as those of John the Baptist's, *Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification.* The discussion noted by the Apostle John is between *John's disciples* on the one hand and *a Jew* on the other hand. The term *Jew* likely came from the word "Judea." It is sometimes used in the New Testament to refer to all the people of Israel, as in the phrase applied to Jesus by the magi as well as by Pilate, "King of the Jews." However, John often used the term "Jews" to apply to the rulers of Judah, as we see in Chapter 1, where "the Jews sent to him (John the Baptist) priests and Levites from Jerusalem (1:19)"

In this instance, it is likely the *discussion* with *John's disciples* was being had by an authority from Jerusalem (the *Jew*). For the most part, it seems the authorities were none too pleased that large numbers were braving the wilderness to come hear John tell them how corrupt they were. The *discussion* was about *purification*. Baptism was a form of *purification*. John introduces the *discussion* with *therefore*, connecting the *discussion* with the arrival of Jesus and His disciples into the area. This connection infers that the *Jew* was attempting to stir up strife between John's disciples and Jesus and His disciples. This would fit the pattern of the Jewish authorities opposing both John the Baptist as well as Jesus, and devising numerous schemes to reduce their influence.

It apparently worked. John's disciples were spurred on, and *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."* The phrase *He who was with you beyond the Jordan* is a reference to Jesus, whom John Baptized *beyond the Jordan*, as noted in John 1:28-35. John the Baptist's disciple notes that Jesus *is baptizing and all are coming to Him.* In other words, "His

crowds are bigger than ours.” John’s disciple likely had this pointed out by the *Jew*, which was why that detail was included.

John the Baptist now begins to pass the baton to Jesus. *John answered and said, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.”* John is not worried about losing popularity with the people. His was a stewardship given to him by God. It wasn’t his in the first place, so he had nothing to lose. It was God’s before, and it is God’s now. So nothing has changed, from John’s perspective. Further, John notes that his job was to be a witness to the Messiah, not to be the Messiah. This testifies to John’s greatness, that he was solely focused on serving the mission given to him by God, and was not worried what people thought. Jesus affirmed John the Baptist’s greatness (Matthew 11:9-11).

John the Baptist continued, speaking to his disciples, saying *You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Christ,’ but, ‘I have been sent ahead of Him.’* John the Baptist reminds his disciples that he had told them plainly that his role was to prepare the way for *the Christ*. John was clear that he was *not the Christ* himself. He reminds the disciples that *you yourself are my witnesses* that he told them these things. We can infer from the tone of the conversation that John’s disciples were a bit perturbed at him, likely stirred up by *the Jew*. They might have been saying “We are losing our audience, what are you going to do about it?” John’s answer: “Celebrate. That is my job.”

John then uses the illustration of a *friend of the bridegroom*. John states that *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*. In Jewish tradition, a marriage was not consummated until the couple had sexual intercourse. Part of the job of the *friend of the bridegroom*, that we might call the “best man,” was to stand outside the door of the bedchamber listening for the *bridegroom’s voice*, he who *has the bride*, indicating that he had reached sexual climax. Then the *friend of the bridegroom* would know that the marriage was fully consummated. At that point, the *friend of the bridegroom* would not be jealous because he wanted to be the one having sexual intercourse. Rather, the *friend rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice*, knowing that the marriage has fully transpired.

In like manner, John the Baptist is not grumpy because of Jesus’ success in ministry. He is like the friend of the bridegroom, that is rooting for the joy of his friend. John says *So this joy of mine has been made full*. Seeing Jesus gain larger crowds than his is, for John the Baptist, like the joy of a *friend of the bridegroom*. Rather than be grumpy, as perhaps his disciples were, John has *joy* that has been *made full*.

John recognizes his role, and is committed to play it to the fullest. John’s job is to introduce Jesus, to pave the way for Him. John states to his disciple, matter of factly, *He must increase, but I must decrease*. This is likely a big part of the reason why Jesus said of John “among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). True greatness is doing as unto the Lord what we do best with the gifts and calling God granted us. Paul stated that the Lord gives “the reward of the inheritance” to those who do whatever they do as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23).

John the Baptist's job was to help Jesus *increase* in ministry impact, while his own ministry decreased. The *Jew* who was apparently trying to stir up strife with John's disciples might have succeeded with the disciples, but got the opposite effect with John. Rather, it created an opportunity for John to help his own disciples see the bigger picture. John was pointing his disciples to One greater than himself.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>22</sup> After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing.<sup>23</sup> John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and *people* were coming and were being baptized—<sup>24</sup> for John had not yet been thrown into prison.**

**<sup>25</sup> Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification.<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup> John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.<sup>28</sup> You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.'<sup>29</sup> 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. So this joy of mine has been made full.<sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease.**