

Jesus is the Greatest

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Olivia. Good morning, everyone. Great to have you with us, whether you're here in the building or watching online. Let's start with a question, and our question this morning is, who wants to be a goat?

That may sound a rather strange question and say, well, why would anyone want to be a goat? But actually, there are lots of people who might want to be considered a goat. Here's four possibilities. Who is the male tennis goat? Is it Lever, Federer, Nadal, or Djokovic?

Or who's the football goat? Do you think Pele, Maradona, Messi, Ronaldo, maybe someone else? Or the female singer goat? Rita, Whitney, Beyoncé, Taylor?

You can probably add half a dozen names, depending on your age and your musical tastes. In case you're not aware of it, goat is an acronym for greatest of all time.

And these people I put on the screen, to a greater or lesser extent, would have a claim to be the greatest of all time in their field. But here's the thing. If you went up to one of these people and said to them, do you consider yourself the greatest of all time?

[1 : 1 1] They would probably kind of smile modestly and say, well, I try not to compare myself to others. I do my best. It's great when I win trophies or awards. But I'm really not thinking like that.

If you went to one of their fans, one of their followers, and asked the question, you would immediately get 20 reasons why this person is the goat, the greatest of all time.

If you want to start an argument with me, you'd come to me and suggest that Djokovic is greater than Federer, or that Maradona is greater than Pele, and I have quite strong views on these, and I'm sure a lot of people do as well.

And that's what we're looking at, I think, in our passage this morning. The question is, who is the greatest? We have John, and we have Jesus.

And John's disciples are saying to him, this fellow, this fellow who is with us across the world, don't even give Jesus a name. He's doing all the things that you're doing, John.

[2 : 1 2] He's baptizing, he's drawing lots of people to him. And there's almost, John, you need to do something about this. You're the greatest, you're the Baptist. Why is this other person doing the things that really belong to you?

Because they thought John was the greatest. And we won't talk about, obviously, the greatness of Jesus, but let's just recognize the greatness of John for a second.

Jesus said, among those born of woman, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. In other words, John does have a claim to be the greatest of all time.

Mind you, Jesus then qualifies it by saying that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. But John is very clear here with his disciples, and previously in John, that Jesus is much greater than he is.

So if you cast your mind back to chapter 1, John said, He who comes before me has surpassed me because he was before me. And the passage we're looking at today, as John presents the greatness of Jesus, and then there's a commentary on it, which I think is by John, the writer of the gospel, what comes across is actually there's no question at all.

[3 : 36] Jesus is much, much, much greater than John the Baptist or than anyone who's ever lived. And what I hope we'll go away with this morning is recognizing that Jesus is way, way above anyone else, that he is the one who deserves our praise and our worship, that he is the one we should be following.

Let's start, though, with a little bit of background. I think it's always helpful to try and orientate ourselves as we go through books of the Bible. And it's very easy in John to say we go from one incident to another incident to another incident and perhaps lose a bit of track of the big picture.

So the big picture in John is that John is trying to convince us, to help us to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And everything we read in John's gospel has that purpose.

It's not just a series of random incidents in the life of the Lord Jesus. Every one of them, John wants us to understand a bit more about the greatness of Jesus and that he is God's Son.

And so in this particular section of John's gospel we're looking at over these few weeks, we have a number of conversations, a number of encounters between people. We saw Nicodemus last week.

[4 : 57] Next week we'll look at a woman at a well. And then there's a royal official. There's a series of people who have conversations with Jesus and gain from that the understanding of how great Jesus is.

But in the middle we have this slightly peculiar instance. Jesus isn't in this conversation. It's a conversation between John and his disciples.

And yet it does fit within the flow of what John is doing at this point in his gospel. He's presenting Jesus as the Son of God through a series of conversations.

And in chapter 3 of John is conversations with religious leaders. So last week or two weeks ago, we thought about his conversation with Nicodemus, who is the leader of the religious establishment, if you like.

This week the person who's in the forefront is John the Baptist, who's the maverick religious leader working outside the formal constraints of Judaism.

[6 : 02] And I think in each of these two incidents, John has a pattern in the way he develops it. So he starts with the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus to begin with, and then between John and his disciples.

And then we have some commentary from John, the gospel writer. So verses 1 to 15 are Jesus and Nicodemus. Verses 16 to 21, I believe, are John the writer's commentary on that.

Now, if you disagree with me, please talk to me afterwards. There are lots of different views on this. But it makes sense to me that the first part, verses 1 to 15, is a conversation of Jesus and Nicodemus. Verses 16 to 21 are John the gospel writer's commentary on that.

And then similarly, verses 22 to 30, we have the conversation between John and his disciples. And then we have from verse 31 on, John the gospel writer's commentary on that.

So John is saying, here's what happened. Here's the conversation that took place. And here's what it means. Here's the significance of it. Here's how it shows how great Jesus is.

[7 : 08] So with that in mind, let's look at the passage this morning. So we've got a situation where Jesus has been in Jerusalem, talking to Nicodemus, been at the feast before that.

And he goes out into the Judean countryside, the area around the River Jordan. And he is baptizing people. Now, if we read next week, we'll see it wasn't actually Jesus who was baptizing people, his disciples, but they were doing it on Jesus' behalf.

Now, the baptism we're talking about here is a little bit different from the baptism that Graham was talking about, or those who may be baptized in the next month or so. It is very much similar to the baptism of John.

It is a baptism of repentance. So it doesn't have the full significance that we would attach to Christian baptism, of identifying with Jesus, being buried with him, and so on.

It is the baptism of repentance. At the start of the account today, there's some Jew, and he's not really named, and he comes and has a discussion with John's disciples about purification.

[8 : 13] Now, we don't really know what that discussion was, but perhaps the Jewish leader or whoever it was was saying, well, why do you need to baptize Jews when we've got all our own purification rituals?

Baptism is for Gentiles who want to come into the Jewish faith. It's not for Jews. And maybe that's what it was. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that this seemed to have prompted something in John's disciples' minds, and they thought, well, we really need to talk to John about this fellow who's baptizing and drawing all the people away from us.

It's really not right that he is doing that. And so they come to John, and they say, what's going on here? Why is this person baptizing?

Why is he taking people away from you? That shouldn't be happening. And John reminds them of what he has said from the start.

And John reminds them of the perspective that he has. It's verses 27 and 28, if you're following along. John says, I've made it very clear that I'm not the Messiah.

[9 : 25] I have my job to do. I've been given my job from heaven. And I've done it, and he's done it faithfully. But he says, I'm not the Christ.

I am only the one who is sent to prepare the way for him. In other words, don't put me on a pedestal. I'm nothing extra special.

I'm just a guy who's been chosen by God to do a particular work. And I've done it the best I can. And then I will step aside afterwards. There's no place, says John, for me to be jealous of Jesus and the fact that he is attracting people more than I am because he is greater than me.

He's the Christ. I am only the forerunner. Great lesson there for us if we ever are tempted to get proud in our ministry for the Lord Jesus.

To think I'm someone special because I can preach or because I can talk to other people about Jesus or because I can do this because I can do that. None of us are that special. We're only messengers for God, serving him the best we can, but recognizing that Jesus sits way, way above where we ever could.

[10 : 38] There was a famous missionary, I'm sure most of you have heard of him, called Hudson Taylor. Hudson Taylor was a real pioneer missionary in China. It was said of him that since the Apostle Paul, no one had had a wider vision for missionary work or carried out a more systemized plan of evangelizing a wide geographic area than he had.

In other words, if you're looking at great missionaries, you're going to have Hudson Taylor on that list. One time Hudson Taylor went to a report meeting as missionaries do, and as sometimes happens at these meetings, the chairman went a bit overboard in talking about him.

We've got this great man, this great missionary with us here today, doing a great work in China. He's the founder of the Great China Inland Mission, and it's a real privilege to have him come and speak to us today.

Hudson Taylor stood up and very quietly said, Dear friends, I'm the little servant of an illustrious master. That's a great description, and that's how we should feel as well.

Little servants of an illustrious master. Anything we can do for Jesus is great, but let's not build ourselves up, let's do it for his glory and recognizing that he is the one who is great, not us.

[12 : 02] We need a right perspective. Then John says we need to have right priorities. He has this lovely picture of a wedding.

Now, Jewish weddings were a little bit different from weddings that we would have today, but there were some common features. One of the common features was there was someone who we'd call the best man. What is the purpose of the friend of the bridegroom?

Well, the friend of the bridegroom, the best man in our terms, he's there to reassure the bridegroom, to make things run smoothly, to give a funny speech, and so on.

But he's not there to be the main person. His job is to do the work that he's been given and then to step aside and to leave the bridegroom with his bride.

It says in the passage that the friend of the bridegroom rejoices when he hears the bridegroom's voice. I'm not sure if that is maybe a reference to the kind of vows you would have. As the best man hears the vows of the bridegroom, he can say, that's great, we've got to this point.

[13 : 10] In a sense, I've done the main part of my job and now I can step to one side. And John the Baptist says, that's my position. I was here to prepare things for Jesus, but I'm not the bridegroom, he is.

And now it's my turn to leave. He must become greater, I must become less. The description Jesus gives of John the Baptist later in John as a burning lamp.

Someone who came into a dark place and brought light to it. But the light that John brought is the light of the lamp. The light that Jesus brings is the light of the sun.

And if you've got the sun, you don't need the lamp. And that is what John is saying. Someone much greater than me is here. I've done my job. I'll move on.

Sadly, John was moving to prison and to martyrdom. I'll move on. I need to leave the stage so that he can become greater and I can become less.

[14 : 17] And again, let us learn the lessons from John. We are here. We're given a job by Jesus to do. Let's do that to the best of our ability. Let's serve in the church and elsewhere.

But our priority must be to raise Jesus up that he may become more and we may become less. Let's move on then and move to the part of the passage that I'm suggesting was John, the Gospel writer's commentary on what John the Baptist has said.

And we're looking at the greatness of Jesus. I think John says three main things about Jesus that make it very clear how much greater he is than any of us, than anyone else who has ever lived in this world.

And the first thing is that Jesus is sent from God. The word sent occurs more in John's Gospel than in any other book of the Bible. And 40 times it's used of the Lord Jesus, God's Son, being sent by God into the world.

And so John is saying here that Jesus is the one who has come from above, who's been sent from God, who is above all.

[15 : 40] We said earlier in the Gospel that John the Baptist was a man sent from God. But he wasn't sent from heaven. He was a man who grew up, who was born at a normal birth, grew up, and then God said, here's your mission, this is what you have to do.

The Lord Jesus was with God from before the beginning of time. He's the one through whom the universe was created and hold together.

His rightful place was at God's right hand as a member of the God's head, the Trinity. But he was sent and he chose to come into our world to be the saviour of the world.

The one who comes from heaven, from above, is above all. Jesus had come very differently from any of us.

He was God from eternity past and he chose to take the humble form of a man and to live among us. But uniquely, he came from God, from heaven, sent by God to be our saviour.

[16 : 59] The second thing about Jesus that we read about in these verses is that he was speaking for God. So that's from verse 32 through to verse 34.

It says, He bears witness to what he has seen and heard. Whoever receives his testimony says the seal to this that God is true.

Jesus uniquely speaks for God. Everything he says is God speaking to us. What he has received from the Father, he says, he passes on to us.

He has received it directly from God. And therefore, he comes with a special authority that no one else can have.

But later this month, we're going to have a budget, at least a financial statement from the Chancellor and he'll stand up in the House of Commons and he will speak with the authority of the government, with the support of the Prime Minister and so on.

[18 : 02] We'll be hearing directly from someone who is involved in constructing the budget and thinking about the nation's finances. If previous budgets are anything to go by, in the papers in the weeks before that, we'll read things that are attributed to sources close to the Prime Minister or senior members of the government, always unnamed, which are largely speculation about what will happen.

Sometimes right, quite often right, sometimes not right. But there's a difference there, can you see? If you hear it directly from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, you know that is the government's policy.

If you read it in the paper attributed to someone anonymous and you're not terribly sure who it is, well, it's not got that same authority, has it? So what John is saying to us here is all of us, John the Baptist, and all of us can talk about the Lord Jesus, can talk about God, and can do it with authority if we do it from the Scripture.

But Jesus had that special authority that he'd been with the Father, he'd seen everything that was happening, he knew the Father's will, and he was able to pass it on perfectly.

And none of us can claim to do that. Remember at the start of the book of Hebrews, the writer says, in the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.

[19 : 29] And that was wonderful, great to read the Old Testament and see what God said through the prophets. But, says the writer, in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

Do you see again the difference? Prophets who God has spoken through and they got God's word and they passed it on faithfully. The Son, who is the heir of everything, through whom the universe was made, who has been with God from before the start of time, he comes and he speaks with the authority of God, he speaks for God.

There's a little phrase at the end of verse 34 where it says, he gives the Spirit without measure.

Now it's not entirely clear what that means, but I think the most likely explanation of it is that God gives the Spirit to Jesus without measure. Now all of us, if our trust is in the Lord Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit within us, guiding us and helping us and directing us.

But our lives are not fully directed by the Spirit because we have our sinful nature and we like to go our own way a lot of the time. people who wrote the Bible, the men who were responsible for the various books in the Bible, they received a special filling of the Spirit for that in that the words they wrote are the Word of God and are absolutely trustworthy.

[21 : 05] And they for a period had that inspiration. But at other times, they were just like us and although they would have had the Spirit in them, they didn't always walk in line with the Spirit, they didn't always do what the Spirit would have wanted.

Jesus was different in that he had God's Spirit in him in the fullest measure and everything he said was God's Word.

If you see the words of Jesus in the Bible, you know that what you're reading is true and is something you really need to think about and let affect your life.

a lot of the older Bible, I think some of the modern apps have the words of Jesus in red and I think in some ways that's quite helpful. Not that the rest of Scripture isn't inspired, but there is something special about the words that came out of Jesus' mouth.

He was speaking uniquely always for God and that makes him much greater than anybody else. And then finally in verses 35 and 36 it tells us that Jesus was sanctioned by God.

[22 : 21] Now sanction is one of these funny English words that has almost opposite meanings depending on his context. So we're not talking about the kind of sanctions that might be imposed on Russia or North Korea or whatever here which are restrictions.

We're talking about the sanctioning which is authorizing approving someone in the work that they're doing. They've been sanctioned by some higher authority.

And so Jesus it says here has been sanctioned by God. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

There's a great study to be done and we've not got time to even scratch the surface of it this morning of the authority of Jesus. Of what God has handed over to Jesus as the one who is in ultimate control in our world.

The one under whose feet God has placed everyone. The one who is able to say to his disciples as an encouragement as he sent them out to be his witnesses all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.

[23 : 31] God the Father is pleased with God the Son and he has given them authority over everything. And in our world although there is much evil there is much goes on that is grieving to God and to the Lord Jesus ultimately the Lord Jesus is in control and will be seen to be in control when he returns in glory and he rules over our world.

He is the one who has been sanctioned who has been authorized who has been approved by God. Who is the greatest? There is no question.

It's not like a discussion about whether Nadal or Federer is the greatest tennis player and there's arguments on both sides. When you look at the evidence as John presents it here there is one person who sits way way above any of us.

Jesus is the greatest. Jesus is the one who was sent from God who spoke for God who was sanctioned by God. And so says John in verse 36 our ultimate destiny depends on our attitude towards Jesus.

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.

[24 : 58] Ultimately the thing that matters the most of all in our world and for each of us is what do we make of Jesus? Do we recognize him as the greatest person who has ever lived as the Son of God who came into our world?

Do we see him as the one who died on a cross to take the punishment for sin? And do we commit our lives to him recognizing we can only have forgiveness through him and the only way to avoid God's wrath the punishment that we deserve for all the wrong we've done is through faith in the Lord Jesus.

And ultimately that's what we would really wish for everyone here today that we know Jesus as the one who is God's Son as the greatest person who has ever lived but more than that that we know him as our saviour that we have a personal relationship with him.

As we go away let's go rejoicing in the greatness of the Lord Jesus but let's also go making sure that we have a personal relationship with him and that we have the confidence that in him we have eternal life.

Let's join together in prayer. Our Father we thank you for your word to us today. We thank you for the way John presents the ultimate greatness of Jesus.

[26 : 32] For the insight John the Baptist had of how Jesus is so much greater than he is. But then the reminder that Jesus is the only one who came from heaven.

He's the only one who speaks completely for God. He's the only one who has been given authority by God over all things.

And we thank you too that he is the only one who is able to take our place and to die on the cross for us. We thank you that he did that and that through that we have life in him.

May each of us have our trust in him, receive the son into our lives and then live lives of service and of humility for him.

We give you thanks to be with us as those in the building shared together in a time remembering the Lord Jesus in communion. For those who are leaving us now, we pray that you will be with them and bless them through the coming week.

[27 : 32] We give our thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.