The Secret of Greatness

"He must increase, but I must decrease."
John 3:30

The 'musts' in John's Gospel run in pairs. Often there is a divine 'must' followed by a human 'must'. Earlier in chapter 3 we read, ***"You must be born again"*** (v. 7) and ***"So must the Son of Man be lifted up"*** (v. 14). The human 'must' is based on and made possible by the divine 'must'. In verse 30 we read, ***"He must ... I must."*** These are the words of a very great man about an even greater!

John the Baptist was a very great man. Jesus confirmed this (Mt. 11:11), ***"Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no-one greater than John the Baptist."*** The One who is the Truth said this. So John was truly a great man. Jesus also said of John, ***"He was a burning and shining lamp"*** (Jn. 5:35). John the Apostle sees Jesus as the light and John the Baptist as a lamp. In the same way Jesus is 'The Word' and John the Baptist is 'a voice' crying in the wilderness.

In what did John's greatness consist? Was it his rugged simple life-style (camel hair coat, leather girdle – eating locusts and wild honey)? Bodily discipline and self-denial are good, but John's greatness was different and of a higher nature. Was it his eloquence and fiery denunciation of sin as he warned the people of his day ***"To flee from the wrath to come and bear fruit in keeping with repentance"***? (Mt. 3:7-8) His preaching was great. It would certainly cause the same sensation today as it did then, but this was not his greatness.

His greatness surely rests in this – that he had discovered the exceeding greatness of Jesus! He was Jesus' forerunner. He appreciated who Jesus was and was eager for His glory no matter the personal cost to himself. John thought, ***"He is worthy ... He must increase".***

John might have had a different attitude to Jesus:

- He was Jesus' cousin and one cousin doesn't usually find it easy to step aside and promote another.
- John was the older of the two. It takes grace for the older to make way for the younger.

John has seen his 'little cousin' as 'the Lord of Life, the Saviour of the World'. Cost what it may his consuming ambition was that Jesus would increase. As he gazed at the Lamb of God, personal considerations and private ambitions fell off without a struggle or effort. John takes all the natural interest he would have had in himself and focuses it on His Lord.

Watch how this worked out in John's life, ***".....John was standing with two of his disciples and he looked at Jesus as He walked by and said, 'Behold the Lamb of God'. The two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus"*** (Jn. 1:35).

As any leader knows, it isn't easy to lose two of your best team members. John didn't complain but rejoiced that two more had discovered the exceeding worth of Jesus.

Towards the end of John chapter 3 it is evident that large crowds were following Jesus. The crowd that had been around John had gone. Only a few remained and they spoke to John in a way that would have stirred up any latent jealousy that was in his heart, ***"Rabbi, He who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, look He is baptising and all are going to Him."***

John's reply is proof of his greatness! He is full of joy. As the bridegroom's friend he knows the bridegroom has come. So John begins to pass out of the public gaze. He began on a path that would take him lower and lower until finally his head was presented on a plate by a dancing girl!

This then is the secret of greatness. John is always longing that he might put the Lord Jesus where He should be – in the middle of the throne. By nature Jesus was John's cousin, but by revelation He was his Lord. John responded to this discovery by being willing to decrease so that Jesus might increase.

John understood that these two 'musts' were inseparable! We must also realise this truth. This is the secret of effective ministry. Has God's wisdom, grace and love given you a revelation of the greatness and loveliness of Jesus? If so, there is a price you must pay, ***"He must increase...I must decrease."*** If Jesus is to take over the "I", that inward, persistent and all too often unsurrendered self that is critical and unkind, aggressive and opinionated, irritable and touchy, self-pitying and self-indulgent must leave the throne of our lives and the throne of our ministries. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in us is fully focussed on achieving this objective.

In His wisdom and purposes God has chosen us and sent us to where we are. He has chosen us to work among people that He loves, alongside others He has also called and perhaps in difficult circumstances. It is where we are today that we must put to death self-concern and self-seeking.

William Law, wrote in his spiritual classic, **A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life**, **"Receive every inward and outward trouble, every disappointment, pain, uneasiness, temptation, darkness and desolation with both hands as a true opportunity and a blessed occasion of dying to self and entering into fuller fellowship with your self-denying and suffering Saviour."**

"I must decrease!" Is this way hard? Yes, but the more we discover the love and loveliness of Jesus the easier and more desirable it becomes and we begin to sincerely long with all our hearts that He may increase.

One fellow worker in the Muslim World has this prayer on his desk:

"O Jesus, meek and humble in heart, please hear me. Deliver me Lord Jesus from the desire to be loved - to be extolled - to be honoured - to be praised - to be preferred over others - to be consulted and to be approved. Deliver me from the fear of being humiliated - of being despised - of being forgotten - of being wronged - of being suspected.

Lords Jesus grant me the grace to desire that others might be loved more than me - might be esteemed more than me - might, in the opinion of the world, increase while I decrease - might be chosen and I set aside - might be praised and I be unnoticed - might be preferred to me in everything - might become holier and more successful than me as long as I become as holy as I can be. Amen.