

1933

# The Divine Necessity: John 3:30, 1933

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<sup>Divine</sup>  
THE GREAT NECESSITY

John 3,30.

At midnight on April 30th of this year the first third of the twentieth century passed into the ~~timid~~ shadows of eternity. What it has meant to the world is still hidden behind the veil which surrounds all history in the making; what it has meant to the Church is still vague and shadowy before our timebound and sindarkened eyes. Standing today in the sunset of the world and the twilight hour of humanity, it is difficult for us to read the writing of the years. Only one thing seems to be clear. ~~The~~ The eternal counsels of the living God have used these troubled years to bring to the world and to the Church a testing and a winnowing time which has filled the hearts of men with fear and trembling. Within the memory of all but the very youngest of us God has sent upon the world in swift and fierce succession three great trials --- the World War, the days of unprecedented prosperity, and the recent years of economic distress. This morning it is perhaps still too early to read clearly what his eternally moving fingers have written during these twenty years. ~~But~~ But of one thing we may be sure: When the light of eternity will fall upon the pages of our recent history it will become fearfully and finally evident that the greatest of these trials was the second --- the years of prosperity. It was the old, old story -- the story almost as old as humanity itself. Outwardly the Church prospered. It grew and became rich. It flourished and built great churches. It looked strong and healthy. But inwardly -- God pity us -- all the worms of our twentieth century civilization were eating its heart away. Here was a man who still came

to Church but who had long since found the gold of America more important than the gold of the city of God. ~~And~~ Here was a woman who saw more beauty in society than in her church. ~~And~~ Here was a young man who felt that the thirty pieces of silver of a growing business were even today more to be desired than a Savior from sin. ~~And so~~ We went down and down and deeper down ~~And~~ until God came and did what ~~he~~ he always does when the hearts of men turn away from him. He took away <sup>the</sup> ~~these~~ things that we considered important and brought out of the confusion of men's opinions, out of the wreck of human hopes and human ambitions, out of the disaster of an entire philosophy of life, a new vision, ~~and~~ a new hope, and a new faith in Him who even today stands unchanged and unchanging above the shifting fortunes of men ~~still~~ holding in His crosstorn hands all the days of your life and mine.

~~And now~~ --- <sup>in the history of men</sup> It is at this ~~very~~ moment, <sup>in the evening</sup> that we have come together here to consider the work of the Church <sup>hour of the world</sup> ~~at our annual mission festival~~. God knows that this is no time for a vague appeal for money for the heathen in India or China.

We are today still a puzzled and bewildered Church, a Church from which the shadows have not yet lifted, a Church which is still paying bitterly for the mistakes of the faithless years.

~~And so~~ <sup>therefore</sup> there is <sup>nothing</sup> for us to do but to return once more to the great Author and Finisher of our faith, to tear away the shadows which have come over our vision of the Crucified and to see once more that if the Church is to move forward in this sunset of time there must come over <sup>our</sup> ~~your~~ hearts ~~and the~~

a new consciousness of our Godgiven mission in the world  
and a new realization of our relation to the living Christ.

~~And~~ All this I find in the words of our text. It  
hits bedrock. It is the <sup>ultimate</sup> ~~last~~ reality. There is nothing  
beyond it. If it is clearly understood, there is nothing  
more to be said. "He must increase; but I must decrease."  
You will permit me to speak to you for a few brief moments on  
<sup>Divine</sup>  
THE ~~GREAT~~ NECESSITY.

John himself divides our theme into two parts:

- 1- He must increase;
- 2- I must decrease.

Our text is one of those many <sup>quite simple</sup> divinely simple statements in  
the sacred record which look ~~so easy~~ at first, ~~and~~ and then  
become fraught with meaning when one proceeds to examine them.  
~~We must~~ Consider for a moment the situation in which John found  
himself when he spoke these words. For a time the great  
masses <sup>had been</sup> had followed him. He ~~was~~ the eloquent preacher of the  
crossroads beyond the Jordan. Singlehanded he had often  
confused the scribes and Pharisees who had come out of Jerusalem  
to argue with this young man who had left the comfortable home  
of his father, the priest Zacharias, to eat locusts and preach  
Christ in the deep valleys of the Jordan country. The crowds  
had followed him. He had been popular. ~~There~~ there could be no  
doubt about that. But all that was in the past. He was now  
nearing the end of the road. One by one his disciples had left  
him. The crowds had gone away to hear the new preacher who

had come down from Nazareth. He was almost alone.-- ~~and~~  
 through the veil of a few months his prophetic eye could  
 perhaps see the grim shadow of Herod, the dancing figure  
 of Salome, and the pale gleam of the sword that was to send  
 his head rolling into the dust. And yet ~~there~~ there he stands.--  
~~and he~~ <sup>He does not whine</sup> has no complaint. ~~no whining~~ over his apparent failure,  
<sup>He gives</sup> no thought <sup>to</sup> ~~of~~ the grim shadow over his head. ~~There~~ There is  
 a note of pride in his voice and the ring of triumph in his  
 words as he answers a question about Jesus with the divinely  
 simple sentence: "He must increase; I must decrease."

What did John mean when he said, "He must increase"?  
 Certainly not that there could be anything added to the work  
 of Him to ~~Whom~~ whom he had pointed as the Lamb of God that taketh  
 away the sins of the world. That cannot be increased. John  
 knew why his Lord Christ had come into the world and what His  
 task would be. That was His work. ~~and~~ ~~He~~ He trod the winepress  
 of God's wrath over the sins of men -- alone. ~~and~~ Just as  
 clearly <sup>we</sup> ~~you~~ ~~and~~ I must see today that there is nothing that we  
 can add to Calvary. When the lonely Sinbearer of the world  
 raised His head in His final farewell: "Father, into Thy hands  
 I commend my spirit," it was the world's easiest farewell, ~~the~~  
 the farewell of atonement completed, of sins forgiven, of work  
 accomplished. There was nothing more to be done. Now He could  
 go home.-- ~~And~~ as He came the tall lilies of heaven bent left  
 and right, ~~and~~ the choirs of eternity stood silent, and the only  
 sound <sup>of any meaning</sup> <sup>highly</sup> in heaven and earth was the significant sound of the  
 tearing of a veil. ~~and~~ That was enough. No man before or

since has ever added anything to that. Uncounted thousands have tried -- tried to add their own thoughts, their own works, their own blood -- only to go down into the dust crushed and broken when they finally found that the redeeming Christ cannot be increased in that way. His atoning work is His own, ~~and~~ and not yours and mine.

"He must increase." What then did John mean?

~~My dear friends,~~ ~~He~~ meant exactly what we are trying to do today in our preaching of the Gospel, in our churches and our schools, in all our work for the <sup>advancement of the Kingdom,</sup> ~~cause of missions.~~ He must increase, ~~an~~ ~~an~~ ever greater number of sinton men and women must be brought to His atoning cross, ~~an~~ ~~an~~ ever greater number of men and women must see Him even today as he moves over the earth in His body, the Church, still calling to the wandering hearts of men, forgiving their sins, strengthening the weak, raising the fallen, ~~g~~athering the little children, bringing healing to sorrow, giving His own Body for food and His own Blood for drink, and letting the world feel from generation to generation the pulse beat of His eternal love. He must increase --- in the millions who have never heard His name -- in the millions who have heard it and turned away from Him -- in our own hearts that have grown weary and silent and cold. -- There He must increase.

~~My dear friends,~~ John here places his finger upon the very heart of our Christian life and work. This is a divine "must". He uses the word used so often in the Sacred Scriptures to denote the great divine necessity, ~~the~~ the driving, compelling

power of the living God in the individual Christian life. Desperately and vainly men may try to avoid the implications of that divine "must" -- they may try to hide behind their own weaknesses -- they may see a thousand other necessities in their sinbound hearts. This "must" comes back. It stands immovable. It brings to Christ-redeemed and sanctified souls the final purpose of their lives. It reveals in a moment all the great, driving power behind a Paul, a Luther, a Walther -- behind all the saints and martyrs of all the heroic years who have been driven by this divine "must" to offer up their lives at the marching feet of the conquering Christ. It is the "must" of sublime, unshakeable faith. There is no choice about the matter. There is no cautious weighing of the probabilities or possibilities of success or failure. This is no twentieth century committee report. This is final. There is no more to be said. He must increase.

~~And~~ Now John turns the picture: "I must decrease." We shall lose much of the meaning of John's great declaration unless we see clearly that the logical relation between the two parts of his statement is one of cause and effect. There lies in them a view of life and a vision of service so far-reaching in its meaning that we can only stand before it in wonder and amazement. Where did John get this second "must" -- "I must decrease"? There is only one answer: Deep down in his heart John knew that he had to decrease if Christ was to increase. He might just as well have said: "He must increase, because I decrease. One great reason why Christ did increase

and will continue to increase is that I have decreased, ~~and~~ I have given up all hope of power and glory. ~~At~~ ~~I~~ I have given up wealth and position, ~~and~~ I have brought all I have and am to His who is fairer than all the children of men. I have gone down in order that He might go up."

We come here upon one of the most mysterious facts in God's eternal plan of salvation for the children of men -- the fact that even today, as far as this world is concerned, the power and glory of the redeeming Christ -- yea, even His power to touch the hearts of the world -- depends upon the presence of men and women in the world who are willing, by the sanctifying grace of the spirit of God, to decrease in order that He might increase. Paul touches upon the mystery when he says: "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." How deeply this has etched itself upon the mind of Christianity we can see from a very old legend in the Eastern Orthodox Church. At twilight on the evening of Ascension Day our blessed Lord came to the gates of heaven. There He was met by the angel Gabriel. ~~And~~ Gabriel said: "Oh Lord, it is finished?" <sup>answered</sup> ~~And~~ Our Lord ~~said~~: "It is finished." Gabriel said: "Shall I now send down the legions of angels and archangels to proclaim to the weary hearts of men that their redemption has been accomplished and that the proud gates of eternity are once more open before them?" And our Lord looked down upon the earth, ~~and~~ down to where He could see a small band of men slowly going down a little hill in Galilee, ~~and~~



and He turned to Gabriel and said: "No, I have left down there a handfull of men and a few women, and from now on it is up to them." And so today -- after two thousand years in which no angel has come down from heaven to preach the eternal Gospel and no archangel has reached down to touch the bleeding hearts of men with the tender hand of heaven -- after all these faithful and faithless years -- it is still up to us. Even today there is only the Lord Jesus, and you and I upon whom the ends of the world have come. It is still up to us. We must decrease.

The voice of John comes across the years, "I must decrease". ~~and~~ We, the children of an age of organizations and drives and committees, are immediately struck by the intensely personal note in his statement. I -- I-- must decrease. He made no attempt to evade the final issue, no effort to get around the eternal and inimitable fact that the problems of <sup>the Church</sup> ~~missions~~, the problem of <sup>the</sup> ~~increasing~~ Christ in the world is not a problem of boards and committees and organizations, but first and last a problem of the individual human soul. <sup>It is</sup> ~~the~~ challenge of the living God not to my Church, but to me.

I know today that many of you have already answered this challenge by offering up much of your time, your talent and your strength in the building of the Kingdom here and abroad. But for how many of us is the entire matter still summed up in the routine offering at a routine missionfestival -- as if God in heaven could be satisfied with the few dollars I can spare in order to enable other people to do my personal task. Have

we forgotten that God never comes first to a man's pocketbook and then to his heart -- but ever, always, and eternally to his heart alone. ~~and~~ the rest will take care of itself. Behind and above all our offerings for the <sup>marching Kingdom</sup> ~~cause of missions~~, ~~it~~ behind and above all our love for our fellowmen, ~~it~~ behind and above all we do and are in the Church, ~~it~~ there must stand the living, vital, heart-warming, personal faith in the redeeming Christ which alone will enable us to say with John: "I must decrease."

"I must decrease" -- decrease in what? Decrease in all those things which now stand between us and our vision of the living Christ -- in worldliness and selfishness -- in the bitter hate and fearful malice which at times creep into our organizational life -- in all those things which have made our hearts cold and our hands weary and have brought to us the bitterness of the last few years. Nothingless than that will do. Across the solemn centuries the voice of the Savior comes to us: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me". ~~and~~ the graves of the world are full of men and women who have gone down into the dust crushed and broken because they thought that something less than that would do.

~~You see~~ There is something heroic, something high and holy about John's view of life, ~~it~~ something that has always made a tremendous appeal to Christ-redeemed and sanctified hearts. All the glory and all the power in the Church in all these long years have come from men and women who have been ready to decrease in order that He might increase. The pages of the New Testament are their story. The pages of church history are their biography.

*They are the  
king and peace  
before God. They have  
decreased in order that  
He might increase.*

(The Great Necessity)  
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The pages of the Book of Life are theirs and theirs alone.

Consider for a moment the opening sentences of St. Paul's great letter to his young friend Titus. On his last journey Paul had left Titus in Crete to carry on missionwork there. -- "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting --."

~~And now~~ one word more and I have done. Today there is often among those who love their Church a deep note of pessimism and sadness over the coldness and indifference of so many within her walls. That need not be. God's cause is still safe in God's hands. His work will not tarry for want of men. *He buries His workmen.* ~~Some workmen drop out,~~ but the work goes on. My Savior will neither fail nor be discouraged. He will give us again the men and women who will decrease in order that He might increase. Almost two thousand years ago, on a little island in the Aegean Sea an old man sat before a cave with a bit of parchment in his hand. As he gazed out over the waves which were beating against the shore with monotonous thundering, a sad, infinitely weary look came into his old eyes. He was the last of that first great generation that had nailed the screaming eagles of Rome to the cross of Christ. He was alone. ~~All~~ the rest had gone home. He was wondering what would happen now to the infant Church. And then he lifted up his eyes, ~~and~~ and in the last rays of the dying sun St. John the Beloved saw the eternal city standing in the everlasting sunshine of the mercy of God. ~~And~~ ~~In~~ that city he saw twelve gates, ~~and~~ three on the North, three on the South, three on the East, and three on the

West. And suddenly and triumphantly John turned to his parchment and wrote his vision down -- his great inspired commentary on the words of his Master: "Come unto me <sup>all ye that labor</sup> ---."

Suddenly John knew that those twelve gates would always be necessary; Suddenly he knew that until the end of time men and women, sinweary and sinblinded, would come from the four ends of the earth to the eternal city of God; Suddenly he knew that there would always be men and women in the world who would labor and work and pray and sacrifice in order that these twelve gates might be filled with the songs of those who had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. There would always be men and women who would decrease in order that Christ might increase. ~~and~~ That was enough for him. ~~and~~ <sup>also</sup> It is enough for you and for me.