

Main Idea: What is it about Jesus Christ that makes Him worthy of our faith, worthy of being exalted? John 3:31-36 gives us three answers to that question.

The bottom line: When a person has John 3:16 faith, there will be a desire to exalt Christ.

- I. Christ is worthy of being exalted because of His credentials (31).
  - A. He comes from above.
  - B. He is above all.
    1. Christ alone can take us where we need to go.
    2. Nothing can stand in His way.
- II. Christ is worthy of being exalted because of His communication (32-34).
  - A. He speaks on the basis of personal experience (32-33).
  - B. He speaks with divine authority (34).
    1. God sent Him.
    2. God speaks through Him.
    3. God gives His Spirit because of Him.
- III. Christ is worthy of being exalted because of His connections (35-36).
  - A. He has exclusive ties with the Father (35).
    1. The Father loves Him.
    2. The Father has put everything in His hand.
  - B. He has exclusive ties with eternal life (36).
    1. He alone can grant it.
    2. He alone can rescue a person from God’s wrath.

Response: What must we do in light of what we have learned from John 3?

1. Ponder the relationship between believing and being born again.
2. Ponder the relationship between believing and obedience.
3. Ponder the relationship between believing and exalting Christ.

“Why does God want us to glorify Him, and why does He tell us to do so in His Word? It seems kind of self-seeking. Why does God want glory?”

It’s been several years now, but I still remember when Steve asked me the question, and it caught me off guard. We were sitting at his dining room table, as we’d done many times, doing a Bible study. Steve had just recently become a believer in Christ and had all sorts of questions. This was one of them. *Why does God want glory?*

How would you answer Steve’s question? Why does God want glory? If I told you right now to stand up and sing a song about my accomplishments, you’d rightly say, “This guy has an ego problem.” But God tells us to do that, to sing about what He has done, and more than that, to do everything we do in our lives for His glory.

Is God being an egomaniac when He commands us to give Him glory? Certainly not. So then what’s the difference? Why is it appropriate for God to command us to give Him glory, while it’s totally inappropriate for me to do the same?

We’ll find the answer to that question as we turn our attention to the end of John 3. We’ve been learning about the new birth in our study of John 3 in recent weeks. What have we seen?

For starters, Jesus emphasized the necessity of the new birth in His conversation with Nicodemus in verses 1-3 (“No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again”). Then He explained the nature of it in verses 4-8, that it’s the work of God the Holy Spirit. After a bewildered response by Nicodemus, Jesus presented the evidence of the new birth in verses 9-15.

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

What is the evidence that a person has been born again? Jesus said the evidence is that the born again person now *believes in the Son of God*. He exhibits a genuine faith that works top-down (meaning it came from God to him) and inside-out (meaning it starts in the person's heart and shows up in the person's life).

And what's the extent of this evidence? It's worldwide according to what Jesus said in verses 16-21. "For God so loved *the world*." Who is on God's heart? The whole world is. And what did His love for the world prompt Him to do? "That He gave His one and only Son." What's the outcome of this amazing gift? It's a world-wide offer. "That *whoever believes* in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." So the new birth is evidenced by faith, and God's intent is for saving faith to be seen all over the world.

But what does saving faith look like in practical terms? That's a critical question in a day when we're told that faith is personal. Will just any old faith take a person to heaven?

As we began last week I gave you the bottom line at the beginning of the message, and then took you to the text to substantiate it. I'd like to do the same in this message.

Here's the bottom line. **When a person has John 3:16 faith, there will be a desire to exalt Christ.**

That point is illustrated vividly by the example of John the Baptist, as we saw in our last study together. We watched as John faced *the test of faith* (verses 22-26) and then listened as he shared *the testimony of faith* (verses 27-30). In his testimony John shared what he believed about God (27), about himself (28-29), and about Christ (30). Concerning Christ he said in verse 30, "He must become greater; I must become less."

Did you catch that? John the Baptist said, "He [speaking of Christ] must become greater; I must become less." What is it about Jesus Christ that makes it essential that He become greater? What makes Him worthy of being exalted?

Here's the answer. In John 3:31-36 we're given three reasons why Christ deserves exaltation (and to make it personal, why we should want to exalt Him more than we want to breathe our next breath).

By the way, before we look at the reasons, a word about who gave them. If you have a contemporary translation, your notice quotation marks in your Bible. For instance, I see quotation marks in my NIV at the beginning of verse 31, "The one who comes from above is above all." The quotation marks indicate someone is speaking. Please realize the New Testament writers didn't use quotation marks. They've been inserted by the translators. I'm not saying that someone isn't speaking here, for someone is. The question is *who*?

Some say that verses 31-36 are a closing commentary inserted by John the apostle. Others say Jesus spoke them. Still others conclude they are a continuation of John the Baptist's testimony which began in verse 27.

The question is, where does John the Baptist stop talking? We know he began talking in verse 27 which states, "To this John replied." So John the Baptist is talking in verses 27-30. Where does his recorded testimony end? The KJV and ASV don't have quotation marks. The ESV closes out the quotation at the end of verse 30.<sup>1</sup> The NIV, NKJV, and NAS put the end quotes after verse 36.

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<sup>1</sup> So does the NRSV.

I tend to conclude that John the Baptist's testimony continues through the end of the chapter. That means that he's the one who is giving us the three reasons for exalting Christ that we're about to consider.

### I. Christ is worthy of being exalted because of His credentials (31).

Listen to verse 31, "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all."

What are Christ's credentials? Here are two of them which explain why He deserves for us to exalt Him.

**A. He comes from above.** The phrase "from above" comes from the same word Jesus used back in 3:3, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (*from above*)," and in 3:7, "You must be born again (*from above*)."

Chew on that for a moment. Jesus Christ did not begin to exist when He was born in that stable in Bethlehem. He merely changed locations and came "from above" to earth. Twice in this verse John emphasizes Jesus' unique background. He is "the one who comes from above," and "the one who comes from heaven." Later Jesus Himself put it this way when He said in John 8:23, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world."

Here's a second credential that makes Him worthy of being exalted. Not only has He come from above, but...

**B. He is above all.** He is not like "the one who is from the earth" (probably referring to John the Baptist, but by extension to every other human being). The one who is from the earth "speaks as one from the earth" (in other words, that person speaks authoritatively only about what he has experienced here on earth, *earthly* things). But Christ, who has come *from above*, is indeed *above all*.

Ponder that word *above* for it can communicate a variety of things. To be *above* is to be *more important*, to be *greater than*, to be *placed over* and thus *in control*. That's true of Christ. He is *above all*.

Romans 9:5, speaking of Christ, says, "...Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen." Likewise, Ephesians 1:21 declares concerning Christ, that He is "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

Why is that important? Let me give you two implications of these credentials.

1. *Christ alone can take us where we need to go.* Do you want to go to heaven when you die? Then make sure you know someone who's been there and knows the way. That narrows the options to one. Jesus Christ alone has come from above.

But, says the skeptic, maybe that's not enough. Maybe Christ is like a scout who took a trip from heaven to earth. Sure, He knows the way, but can He take us there? After all, there are forces in this universe that war against our souls. We need more than a scout, don't we?"

But Jesus isn't a scout. He's a king, indeed He is the king who is *above all*. Which means...

2. *Nothing can stand in His way.* If all means *all*, if Christ is truly *above all*, then nothing can stop Him from taking you and me back home with Him to heaven.

You say, “I want assurance that I’m going to live forever with God in heaven.” You can have it. How? Make sure you are trusting in the one who alone has the credentials to give it to you, the one who knows the way and can overcome any potential threat to it.

By the way, that’s why He *came from above* in the first place. We were *not* on our way to heaven. We were born lost in our sins. But He came from above to rescue us, and His trip took Him ultimately to a Roman cross where He died to set us free from our sin chains. Then He rose from the dead in triumph and returned back to His home above.

That’s why He is worthy of our faith, of our making much of Him. Reason number one, because of His *credentials*.

## II. Christ is worthy of being exalted because of His communication (32-34).

Notice how verse 32 begins, “He testifies.” The One who came from above to earth gave verbal testimony while on earth. In fact, He is still speaking (the verb is present tense; “He *testifies*”). What’s true of what He says? John highlights two characteristics of Christ’s speech for us.

**A. He speaks on the basis of personal experience (32-33).** “He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.”

As a pastor I do a lot of speaking. Every Lord’s Day I stand before you and give you a message. I talk to you about God, and what He is like, and heaven, and how to get there. But I’m not talking on the basis of personal experience. I have never seen heaven. I’ve never walked on streets of gold, or heard angel choirs singing.

But He has. “He testifies to what He has *seen and heard*,” says John. When you read the gospel accounts, my friend, and hear Jesus say things like, “No one comes to the Father except through Me,” please realize this. He’s speaking from personal experience. He’s *been there*. He knows the Father personally. He has heard His voice and seen His face.

Yet sadly, says our text, no one accepts His testimony. In the words of John 1:11, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.” I take “no one” to mean “no one apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit,” for the verse next verse says, “The man who has accepted it [referring to John the Baptist].”

So born again people accept it, but apart from the new birth, no one else does. Again, the problem isn’t the message. The problem is that the natural man lacks the capacity to believe the message.

Let me show you an example. Look at John 8. In John 8 we find Jesus being attacked by the people who knew the Bible better than anyone else in that day, the Pharisees. Listen to what Jesus told them in John 8:40, “As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God.”

Where did Jesus say He got His message? *From God*. I am declaring to you truth *that I heard from God*. He says He is speaking on the basis of firsthand, personal experience. And yet His hearers wanted to kill Him.

What about the person who does accept His message? That person, says verse 33, holding up John the Baptist as “exhibit A”, has “certified that God is truthful.”

That’s an interesting word there, *certified*. In the first century world, seals were used to identity the truthfulness of documents, in part because so many people were illiterate and could not read for themselves. But they could recognize a seal. And so a person

would put a seal on a document to authenticate it and to express his agreement with its contents.

“The man who has accepted it has *certified* [he has ‘put his seal on this’] that God is truthful.” To accept Jesus is to assert that God is true.

But there’s something else you need to know about Christ’s communication. Because He speaks on the basis of personal experience, know this...

**B. He speaks with divine authority (34).** That’s verse 34, “For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.”

Unpack those phrases one by one and you’ll discover three things about Christ.

1. *God sent Him.* He is the one “whom God has sent.” There’s a Trinitarian mystery here that’s breathtaking. Why did the Son of God come into the world? He came because His Father *sent Him*.

“Son,” He said. “I want you to do something.”

“What’s that, Father?” He asked. Actually, He didn’t ask, for He is the omniscient Son of God who knows all things.

“I want you to become a human being,” said the Father. “I am sending you into the world on a mission.”

“Yes, Father,” replied the Son. “I will gladly do whatever You tell me to do.”

And so God *sent Him* into the world. If you want to know more about this amazing, pre-time, inner-Trinitarian conversation, read John 17:1-5. For time constraints, let’s move to the next phrase in our text where we learn not only that God sent Him, but that...

2. *God speaks through Him.* “For the one whom God has sent *speaks the words of God.*” Where did Christ get His message? He not only did the work His Father gave Him to do, but He spoke the words His Father gave Him to speak. He speaks “the *words* (plural) of God,” says our text.

That’s why, after He finished preaching His famous sermon on the mount, “the crowds were amazed at his teaching,” says Matthew 7:28-29, “because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road?” confessed the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:32.

But there’s more. Not only did God send Him and speak through Him, but thirdly...

3. *God gives His Spirit because of Him.* Let me read again the whole verse so we’ll hear the third phrase in its context. Verse 34—“For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, *for God gives the Spirit without limit.*” Literally, it reads, “for not by measure does God give the Spirit.”

What’s John saying? *Not by measure* [Greek *ek metrou*]. *Metrou* is a term of measurement (we get metric from it). That’s something God doesn’t do when He gives His Spirit. Not by measure—He doesn’t measure. The idea is that He doesn’t give the Holy Spirit sparingly. Rather, He gives the Spirit “without measure” (says the ESV), “without limit” (says the NIV).

The question is, to whom? To whom does the Father give the Spirit in fullness? The Bible says He gives His Spirit to two parties. Both gifts are related, and I think both are in John’s mind here.

First and foremost, the Father gave the Spirit in fullness to His Son. He did so just like He predicted through the prophet Isaiah, nearly eight hundred years prior...

Isaiah 11:2 “*The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him*— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.”

Isaiah 42:1 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; *I will put my Spirit on him* and he will bring justice to the nations.”

Isaiah 61:1 “*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me*, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”

And so it happened. Of course, John the Baptist witnessed the event firsthand at Jesus’ baptism, and gave testimony about it in John 1:32, “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.”

That’s interesting. Where did the Son come from? From heaven. Where did the Spirit come from? From heaven. Do you see the Trinity here? God is one God, yet He exists as three persons, each with distinct yet relates roles and functions. The Father designed the plan and sent the Son to accomplish it. Then the Spirit came upon the Son to authenticate the Son’s identity and assist Him in the mission.

So the Father gave the Spirit to His Son, and He did so “without measure.” But only to His Son? No. Those who know the Son also receive the Spirit, and also “without measure.” John knew that because He heard God the Father declare it to be so at Jesus’ baptism.

Listen to John the Baptist’s conclusion in John 1:33-34, “I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”

How did John know that Jesus was the Son of God? Because He saw the Holy Spirit come down on Him, just like the prophets foretold. And what did the voice tell him that the One who received the Holy Spirit that day was going to do? He will *baptize with the Holy Spirit*.

And that’s what He did. After returning to heaven in Acts 1, the Risen Christ sent His Spirit in Acts 2 to authenticate and assist His followers in fulfilling the mission He gave them to do.

Why should we exalt Christ? He’s worthy, first of all, because of His credentials. He comes from above and is above all. Secondly, because of His communication. He speaks on the basis of personal experience and divine authority. But there’s more.

### III. Christ is worthy of being exalted because of His connections (35-36).

Yesterday, Sherry and I got to watch a Buckeye football game in the Horseshoe, thanks to my father who’s an OSU alumnus. It’s another reminder of the fact that so often it’s not *what* you know, but *who* you know, right? Thanks dad!

Connections. That’s the third reason John gives us as why Christ is worthy of being exalted. Jesus Christ has connections, two that are mentioned here.

**A. He has exclusive ties with the Father (35).** “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.” What’s true of the Father’s relationship with the Son? T

1. *The Father loves Him.* Some people have the notion that God created the universe because He was lonely. Nothing could be further from the truth. For starters,

God didn't create the universe because He lacked something, for all things are from Him, through Him, and to Him (Rom. 11:36). He is totally self-sufficient.

What's more, He was already enjoying the closest of bonds even before He created the first living creature. *The Father loves the Son*, says John. There's an intimate affection between these two persons that's existed since eternity past.

Jesus talked about this pre-creation love when He prayed in John 17:24, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me *because you loved me before the creation of the world.*"

The Father loves the Son. Even at Jesus' baptism, the Father announced in Mark 1:11, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

But how did He show it? Remember, agape love involves action. For God so loved the world that He *gave*. So how did the Father show His Son that He loves Him? He gave Him something too. According to the end of verse 35...

2. *The Father has put everything in His hand.* The text uses the singular, "He has placed everything in His *hand*."

That's what I call *connections*. The Father has entrusted everything that exists to the care and control of His Son. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," said Jesus in Matthew 28:18.

Talk about exclusive ties! The Father has given all authority to Christ. And lest we miss the point, John spells out the implications in the final verse. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

**B. He has exclusive ties with eternal life (36).** Which means, first of all...

1. *He alone can grant it.* "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." Where must we go to obtain eternal life? From the Son, for He alone can grant it. That's what *exclusive* means. Furthermore...

2. *He alone can rescue a person from God's wrath.* "Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."<sup>2</sup>

Some people today want to water down statements about God's wrath in the Bible, but as Leon Morris points out, "Unless we are saved from real peril there is no meaning in salvation."<sup>3</sup>

God's wrath is real, my friend. In contrast with "anger," which is a quick outburst resulting from displeasure, wrath is settled indignation.<sup>4</sup> "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men," says Romans 1:18. "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient," says Ephesians 5:6. But Jesus "rescues us from the coming wrath," says 1 Thessalonians 1:10.

Please note from our text that there's a difference between everlasting life and going to heaven. Everlasting life is something a person who believes in Christ possesses *now*.

But likewise, a person doesn't have to die and go to hell to be under God's wrath, for whoever is outside the Son is already an object of God's wrath. Jesus declared back in

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<sup>2</sup> Here's the only mention of wrath in John's gospel. John doesn't use the word "wrath" in his epistles either, although he uses it six times in Revelation.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> See Hendriksen, p. 151.

verse 18, “Whoever does not believe stands condemned already.”<sup>5</sup> As Wiersbe explains, “The verdict has already been given, but the sentence has not yet been executed.”<sup>6</sup>

And why the delay in the execution? In a word, *mercy*. 2 Peter 3:9 explains, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Earlier I asked the question, “Is God being an egomaniac when He commands us to give Him glory?” The answer is certainly not, and here we see why. For God to call us to exalt His Son is actually a tangible expression of His love for us and therefore is *for our benefit*. How so? His Son alone is the source of eternal life and if He denied that reality, it would not be humility but brute selfishness.

If Jesus Christ said, “Ah shucks, I’m just one option on the shelf, along with Mohammed and Buddha and the others. Believe in me if you want, but there are other ways to heaven,” that wouldn’t be loving. That pseudo-humility would result in our condemnation. Why? Because the truth is, He *is* the sole source of eternal life, and He alone can rescue us from God’s wrath. So when God commands us to believe in and exalt His Son, He’s telling us to do not only what His Son deserves, but also what’s in our best interest. It’s the most loving thing He could ever do *for us* to command us to exalt *Him*.

I’m indebted to our brother, John Piper, and for how the Lord has used him in recent years to help me understand this important truth. Listen to Pastor John:

Why does the Bible reveal God’s love as a way of calling attention to his own glory? The answer is that if God didn’t do it this way, we would be even more likely to turn the love of God into a subtle means of self-exaltation. We would use his love to make ourselves the deepest foundation of our joy. God would become a servant to our slavery to self. We would take our preciousness to God and make that very preciousness our god.

But God loves us so much—we are so precious to him—that he will not let that happen to his people. We are so precious to God that God, in great mercy, will not let our preciousness to him become our god. God will make sure that God remains our God—that our supreme treasure is not ourselves but God.<sup>7</sup>

He’s worthy, my friend. Consider His credentials—He’s worthy. Consider His communication—He’s worthy. Consider His connections—He’s worthy. So concludes John’s testimony of faith.

### Response: What must we do in light of what we have learned from John 3?

As I look back at this chapter, I believe it beckons us to ponder three things.

1. *Ponder the relationship between believing and being born again.* Who believes in the Son? Those who have been born again do. Believing is the tangible evidence that that the new birth has occurred. When the Spirit produces life, a person believes in the Son.

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<sup>5</sup> MacArthur points out, “Just as eternal life is the present possession of believers, so also is condemnation the present condition of unbelievers.” MacArthur, p.133.

<sup>6</sup> Wiersbe, p. 298.

<sup>7</sup> Taken from a message preached by John Piper on the love of God, April 25, 2010, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/consider-your-calling>



That's why prayer is critical. We cannot produce the new birth. Only God can. So as we witness to our friends, let's ask the Spirit to do what He alone can do. And let's give Him time to do it.

2. *Ponder the relationship between believing and obedience.* "Whoever *believes* has eternal life," says John 3:16. That's God's promise, but what does God mean when He uses that word "believe"?

I'm convinced we've got a language breakdown at this point. We do not define our English word "believe" the same way God does in John 3:16. For instance, I went to *Dictionary.com*, looked up "believe," and found six definitions. Here they are...

1. to have confidence in the truth, the existence, or the reliability of something, although without absolute proof that one is right in doing so: *Only if one believes in something can one act purposefully.*
2. to have confidence or faith in the truth of (a positive assertion, story, etc.); give credence to.
3. to have confidence in the assertions of (a person).
4. to have a conviction that (a person or thing) is, has been, or will be engaged in a given action or involved in a given situation: *The fugitive is believed to be headed for the Mexican border.*
5. to suppose or assume; understand (usually fol. by a noun clause): *I believe that he has left town.*
6. to believe in, a) to be persuaded of the truth or existence of: *to believe in Zoroastrianism; to believe in ghosts.* b) to have faith in the reliability, honesty, benevolence, etc., of: *I can help only if you believe in me.*

Now notice something. Notice that all of those definitions have to do with mental activity, and that's all. Is that true of "believe" in the Bible?

Look at verse 36 again. Here's how the *KJV* reads, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life." The word "believe" is there twice, right? Actually, it's not. There's a different word in the second clause and it sheds valuable light on what "believe" actually means in the first clause.

It's the Greek word *apeithon*. It means "to disobey." Which is why the *ESV* reads, "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." And the *Darby Bible* reads, "He that is *not subject to* the Son shall not see life."<sup>8</sup>

When defined biblically, there's actually a very close relationship between *believing* and *obedience*. True faith includes a willingness to obey. We understand this connection. If I told you that there was a boa constrictor loose in the foyer, and suggested that you believe through the side door, your actions would prove whether you believed me, right? If you said you believed me and yet went ahead and started walking right into the path of that deadly creature, your supposed faith would be suspect.

The point is, believing involves more than mental assent. I like Hendriksen's remark when he points out that everlasting life isn't for *thrill-seekers* (who believe in Jesus as a worker of miracles, as in 2:23), but for *trusters*.<sup>9</sup>

3. *Ponder the relationship between believing and exalting Christ.* They go hand in hand. When a person truly believes in Christ, he truly can say with John, "He must become greater; I must become less." That's John 3:16 faith. Is it yours?

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<sup>8</sup> The ASV: "He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him."

<sup>9</sup> Hendriksen, p. 151.