

O Lord, our God and our Father
in heaven, we come before you this morning in the name of your
Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the only name under heaven given
amongst men by which we can or must be saved. We ask you, O
Lord, that you would speak to us. Take the thoughts of my heart,
O Lord, the meditations of my soul, the words of my mouth,
O Lord, and may they correctly explain the word of God. May
I speak boldly as they ought to speak. Your word will be like
a mighty rushing wind, a piercing ray of light in this sanctuary,
blowing out the dust, O God, searching the hearts and building
us all up in Christ Jesus as you supply all of our need. for
salvation, restoration, and sanctification through the riches of your Son,
our Savior, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen. Please take your seats. If you
would, turn with me in your copy of the Word of God to John chapter
3. We're gonna get to the end of
three today, God willing, and then next week we'll have a distinct
Easter message and be back again in John for the week afterwards. Pick up our
reading this morning
in John 3, 22, and we'll read down to the end of the passage. This is God's word.
Please take
heed how you hear. After this, Jesus and his disciples
went into the Judean countryside. And he remained there with them
and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Anon
near Salim because water was plentiful there and people were
coming and being baptized. For John had not yet been put
in prison. Now, a discussion arose between
some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And
they came to John and said to him, Rabbi, he who is with you
across the Jordan to whom you bore witness, look, he's baptizing
and all are going to him. John answered him, a person cannot
receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.
You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ,
but I've been sent before him. The one who was the bride is
the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom
who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice.
Therefore, this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase,
but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above
all. He is of the earth, belongs to the earth, and speaks in an
earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears
witness to what he has seen and heard, and yet no one receives
his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony
sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has
sent utters the words of God, for he gives the spirit without
measure. The father loves the son and has given all things
into his hand. Whoever believes in the son has
eternal life. Whoever does not obey the son
shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains or abides upon
him. Well, the question that greets
us this morning in our text is how are you going to respond
when life sends a bad case of the shrinks into your life? when things are shrinking

and
not growing. That's exactly the position that
John the Baptist finds himself in our text this morning. There
was a time when John was the up-and-coming, rising preacher
in the town. Everyone was going to him. When
he was preaching, Jerusalem disgorged itself. Judea, people came from
all over to hear him. But that was then. This is now. A new preacher has come on the

block. It happens to be the Son of God. But John's disciples aren't so
sure of that yet. They haven't figured that out
yet, and they are as mad as a wet hen. They're discussing with
this Jew purification. It's clear they come to John
and said to him, Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan,
to whom you bore witness, look, he's baptizing, and all are going
to him. The purification debate was whose
baptism is better, John's baptism or the baptism of Jesus? And
John's disciples are annoyed because, I mean, John, you gave
Jesus his start in ministry. You retweeted his first tweet,
and everyone's following him now. What are you gonna do about
it? It's a very painful moment in
ministry. It's happened to me in the past
when in earlier church ministry back in Savannah, things were
really growing. For several years we grew from
70 to 100, 120, 140, 200, 220, we burst through the fabled 200 mark and
it was looking as if it was great and going on. Then the 2008 financial crisis hit
And we made a bad hire that brought
division in the congregation. And it was just a really painful
time. our ministry began to shrink
back. We lost some of our best people who looked for better
employment opportunities in Atlanta and Washington and elsewhere,
and they left. And then we struggled with a
discouraging kind of difficulty in the home front. And the growth
that had been growing for two, three years came to a sudden
grinding halt, and it was very discouraging. And you have no
idea as a minister how much you lean on that for your sense of
self-identity and worth until it's taken away. I mean, for
several years, I was going to Presbytery Hall, things going,
oh, the Lord's really blessing, and things are growing, and people
are coming, visiting, it's really encouraging, and you don't realize
how much you lean on that until it's taken away, and then suddenly
you find yourself feeling as if your identity is unraveling
along with your ministry. Now, most of you here are not
ministers, But how do you respond in life when you get the shrinks?
When the things you look to in your life for your own sense
of significance, your job, your business, your appearance, your
fitness, your health, begins to unravel. Maybe that's where
your business is at today. Maybe it's shrinking or maybe
you've had a time of shrinkage and financial loss and you feel
as if your identity as a man or a woman is unraveling a little
bit. You don't realize how much weight

you put on the external badges of success. You don't realize how much weight you put on those until they're kicked out from under you and you find yourself tottering. Or maybe you're shrinking in your marriage, in your home life, and things aren't as good as they used to be. Maybe some of your children are making foolish mistakes, and you're watching your children, your grandchildren, and they're not doing as well as you wished in their business, in their school, in their soul, and you're worried about them, and you see your family's health shrinking. Or maybe it's your own physical health. As we get older and the relentless logic of Adam's choice begins to take hold and we find our health shrinking and we feel as if our best years lie behind us, that can be a discouraging time. Especially if you build your identity on your appearance, how pretty you are, how handsome you are, how strong you are, how fit you are, and you start feeling a little bit tottery in all those areas. Well, John's answer here is we're a master class of theological maturity, because John has learned a lesson that you and I are slow to learn often, in that John doesn't base his identity on all the people who are coming to his ministry, all the success he's been enjoying. When it comes, it's an opportunity to serve God. When it goes, he's not stressed out about it, because he's learned he doesn't base his identity on nickels, noses, and noise. He bases his identity on Christ. Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the rich man boast in his wealth. Let not the mighty man boast in his strength. But let him who boasts boast in this, that he knows and understands me, says the Lord. And that's essentially the essence of the lessons we learn here in John's response to the shrinks. And there's nothing like the shrinks in life, business, wherever. There's nothing like the shrinks to test your theological mettle. And John's going to give you four lessons to remember when God sends the shrinks into your life. Lesson number one, remember your dependence on God's providence. Where did the good times come from? Where did the bad times come from? Why were you so successful in the past? And if you're not successful now, why? Where did that come from? Well, listen to John. The opening words of his mouth, his disciples are stressed out. Everyone's leaving you. They're going after this wandering interloper from Nazareth. What are you gonna do? And John says, verse 27, a person, a man, cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. Literally the Greek says, it is not possible for a man to receive one single thing unless it comes from heaven, given to him. Times of growth, times of retraction, they're given from above. And we need to learn the habit. of not getting caught up in all of the second causes down here. Who said what? Who did what? Who's at blame down here? Why did it all go wrong down here? We lift our eyes up to the King of Heaven. And John

essentially is saying, the Lord has given. And if he gave the success in the first place, well, doesn't he also have the right to take it away in the next? That's what Job said. When the Lord allowed Satan and the Sabaeans and sickness to strip God's servant of his possessions, of his children, and of his wealth and his health, when God took it all away, what did Job say? The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. And one of our greatest problems in life is we get caught up with all the second causes down here. I got delayed yesterday leaving Greensboro. Later than I had planned, long story, I get on the road, and there's a car accident north of Charlotte, and I'm stuck there. I didn't get home here till one o'clock in the morning. And I was sitting there, I was sitting in a drive-in movie, sitting, why is this happening to me? I need to get home to get to bed, and I'm stressing. I'm seeing all of the second causes, but who was the one who stopped the traffic? It wasn't the accident. It was the Lord of Heaven who allowed the accident. And it's amazing how much stress and anxiety you deal with when you take away all of the second causes and say, from him and through him and to him are all things. Turn your Bible quickly to Psalm 66. This is a verse I go back to again and again and again. Bless, verse eight, bless our God, O peoples, and sound his praise abroad, who keeps us in life and does not allow our feet to slip." Now, notice he's going to describe a bewildering series of trials. And notice who's causing all the trials. For you have tried us, O God. You know, if you're in a difficult marriage this morning, Maybe your problem is, my wife is trying me terribly, or my husband is trying me, and if you think like that, that's gonna lead you to bitterness. Set your mind above. The Lord has sent maybe a difficult husband or a difficult wife to teach you a thing or two. It's like when you pray for patience. God puts an invisible, glowing sign on your head. Morons of the world, unite here. For you have tried us, O God. You have refined us as silver is refined. You did this. You brought us into the net where we felt trapped like a fish. You made men ride over our heads. That's painful. We went through fire and through water, yet you brought us out into a place of abundance." Now, there's a lot to say there, but just notice the first cause of the trials and the first cause of the deliverance at the end was the Lord. But remembering that makes all the difference between stress and anxiety and between panic and fear and, oh, all these things are against me. It's Joseph's lesson. God sent me before you. You meant it for evil. God meant it for good. Remember your dependence upon God's providence. Secondly, remember your place in God's plan. Next verse, verse 28. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I'm not the Christ, but I've been sent before him. John's saying to them, guys, I've been telling you for a long time. There is a Christ, but

it's not me. Get your theological tights in a twist when people leave me to follow the Christ, because I'm not the Christ. I'm not the Christ. Those words have been immortalized in my memory by Dr. Ross's exhortation to me on my installation here. I am not the Christ. But it's amazing how you can forget that in ministry. My sermons, my pastoral ministry, my prayers, my wisdom, my leadership, Start thinking about all these things. I'm just one beggar showing other beggars where to find bread, and I haven't got any of that bread of myself. I've got none of the wisdom of myself, none of the power of myself. It's all his. It's all about him. It's not about me. And when you forget that in your home, in your marriage, in your business, when you forget that it's all about him, not about me, God is the one writing my story. If he wants to write good times, praise his name. Bad times, praise his name. It's not about me, it's about him. When you forget that, you become like one of those horrible people who upstage the bride at her own wedding. There's been a craze of that recently. The bride and bridegroom at the reception, and the focus should be upon them in an earthly sense. And then some wandering, person stands up and proposes to his girlfriend and all the eyes turn off the bride and turn on to this person who's stolen the show. And it's a terrible thing to do, but it's happening more and more as our culture becomes more uncouth. And that's exactly the illustration John uses. Verse 29, the one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The bride isn't mine, and I'm not the bridegroom, John's saying. The friend of the bridegroom, that's me, who stands and hears them, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore, this joy of mine is now complete. I'm not the bridegroom. Christ is the bridegroom. And the bride isn't mine. It belongs to Jesus. And he must increase, but I must decrease. More of him, less of me. Now, it's a bit of a stretch to go from ministry to our marriages, but it's not the truth in our marriages. It isn't so much of the problem in our marriages, your marriage and mine, when things are a bit tense, that there's too much of me and not enough of Christ. And when there's too much of me and not enough of Christ in ministry or in marriage, everything's the wrong size. Everything's the wrong shape. I'm too big, and God's too small, and my beloved Catherine has shrunk down to a little tiny grain of sand. How pride gives us each delusions of grandeur. There's a psychologist called Milton Rokic, who wrote a book called The Three Christs of Ypsilanti, and it's a humorous book, but in that book he describes his battle with these patients who had delusions of grandeur. And there were three of them, and they all thought they were the Christ or God or Allah or something. They all had these messianic complexes. And so what he did was, in a genius moment, which was doomed to fail, he took them and he put them together with a bunch of other crazy people who thought

they were Messiah or Moses or Elijah or whatever. They all had these delusions of grandeur. You put them all together in a community in the psychiatric hospital and kind of sat back and watched the show. And he said that some of the conversations were quite interesting. One of the man claimed, I am the Messiah, the son of God. I was sent here to save the earth. How do you know that? I asked, Rokeach asked, God told me, the Messiah said. To which another man said, I told you no such thing. But pride makes us, we're too big for our britches. He must increase, I must decrease. And when we get that back to

front, when we embrace that kind of delusions of grandeur, who are you to speak to me that way, kind of attitude in our homes or in our businesses, we become the theological equivalent of a person who knows all of the facts but can't put any of them together, who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Like this one theological student, I think this is apocryphal, though I hope it's not. It would certainly have relieved the tedium of a presbytery meeting, but this young minister was being interviewed by his first pastorate, and the pulpit committee examined him. And the committee chairman, it was a country church, said to him, son, do you know the Bible pretty good? The young minister said, yeah, pretty good. The chairman asked, which part do you know best? The young man replied, the New Testament. The committee said, well, tell us then the story of the prodigal son. The young man said, fine. There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus who went down to Jericho by night, and he fell among stony ground, and the thorns about choked him half to death. The next morning, Solomon and his wife Gomorrah came by and carried him down to the ark for Moses to take care of. As he was going through the eastern gate into the ark, he caught his hair in a limb and he hung there for 40 days and 40 nights. And afterward, he did hunger. And the ravens came and fed him. The next day, the three wise men came and carried him down to the boot dock and he caught a ship to Nineveh. And when he got there, he found Delilah sitting on the wall. And he said, chunk her down, boys, chunk her down. And they said, how many times shall we chunk her down? Till seven times seven? He said, nay, but 70 times seven. And they chucked her down 490 times. And she burst asunder in their midst. And they picked up 12 baskets of the leftovers. And in the resurrection, whose wife shall she be? The chair of the committee suddenly stopped the man and said, fellows, I think we ought to ask the church to call him as our minister. He's awfully young, but he sure does know his Bible very well. Now, the point is in that story, which is hilarious, I have to confess, is that almost everything the guy said, apart from the ship to Nineveh, everything the guy said was in the Bible. He just didn't know how to connect

them together, and he couldn't make any sense of it. And you could know the Bible as well as a theologian from Reformed Theological Seminary, Erskine, Westminster Seminary. You could have the greatest knowledge of the Bible. But if you don't know who Christ is, that he is Christ, not just in name only, but in action, he's Christ, and you are not, then you haven't begun to begin to put it all together and to learn the lesson of John here in this passage, and you'll never survive the shrinks. You'll never be able to say, Lord, I'm willing to receive what you give, to lack what you withhold, to relinquish what you take, and to be what you require, because you'll forever and always be too big for your britches in the story of your life. So when God sends the shrinks, remember you're dependent upon God's providence. He gives success, He takes it away. Remember your place in God's plan. You are not the Christ. History is not about you. It's about Christ and His glory. And thirdly then, remember the glory of God's Son. Let me just list these points here. No one has ever been more exalted by God than Jesus, no man. Verse 31, he who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. that God has exalted Christ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. He's the heir of all things. He is the meaning and the purpose and the significance behind every atom in the cosmos, every second of time, every event of history, every angel in heaven, every demon in hell, every man, every woman, every boy, every girl. finds their terminus ad quem in Jesus Christ. God is weaving human history in the big and also the small, in the rise and fall of nations and kingdoms, right down to the rise and fall of your life and the beating of your heart. He's working it all together, Paul says in Ephesians 1, into an administration suitable for the fullness of the times. That is the summing up of all things in heaven and on earth. Earth. Have you learned that lesson? That Christ is above all. That's the answer to our pride. Whenever we're puffed up like a big, fat, South American toad trying to appear we're much bigger than we really are in our marriage. How dare you speak to me like that? And vice versa. I'll not submit to you. And Jesus says, it's not about submitting to your husband, it's about first and foremost submitting to me. It's not about leading your wife and your family in your ways, it's about leading your wife and your family in my ways. Which is hard to do, gentlemen, if we hardly ever pray with our wives and our children. God forgive us. No man has ever been so exalted by God as Jesus. No man has ever been more empowered by God as Jesus. Verse 34, or verse 33, sorry, verse 32, I'll get this right yet. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, Jesus does, yet no one receives his testimony. He knows well, too, what it's

like to have the shrinks. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true, for he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the spirit without measure to that man is the essence. that Christ as a human prophet, human mind, human soul, He was as dependent upon God for supernatural strength as Samson was. He was as dependent upon God for supernatural wisdom, insight, and knowledge to minister as I am. He didn't know the day or the hour, because his human mind didn't collapse into his divine mind. They were separate, two distinct natures. And the bridge between the divine mind of God the Son and the human mind of Jesus, God the Son in the flesh, was bridged by the Holy Spirit. And it was the Holy Spirit who fed supernatural knowledge beyond the limits of a normal man, which is what Christ was in his human flesh, yet without sin. It was the Holy Spirit that gave him that access to that information and to that strength. And when the Holy Spirit was taken away, like in Mark 6, it says he could not do any miracle there because of their unbelief. because the Holy Spirit had been grieved and was taken away from him for that time. And so his power, his miraculous power, reduced to that of an ordinary man, which is what Christ was in the flesh without the spirit. He wasn't a superman. He wasn't a mixture of God and man. He was a man. And yet his awesome power as a man came Not from his human nature, but from the divine nature through the spirit into his human nature. But John is saying here, just like this man, Christ, has been exalted like no other man. He's been empowered like no other man. You and I aren't qualified to be the Christ. It's right that everyone follows him and not us. That's the point. We go to him for wisdom in our lives. It's okay, men, if you don't have all the answers in your marriage, because Christ does, and you're not the Christ. And sometimes we get insecure when our wives point out how weak we are, how foolish we are, how often we are. That's okay, because you're not the Christ, but you know Him, and you can channel His wisdom through the Word by the Spirit and become a better man in Christ than you could ever be without Him. And then no man was ever more endeared to God than Jesus. So it's only right that the universe is about him and not about us. Verse 35, the father loves the son and has given all things into his hand. The father loves his son. No father ever loved his son. as God the Father loved Jesus. He was his precious. And God gave him up for you and for you. He gave his everything to the darkness of Golgotha, to hell, outer darkness, for you. If God will give his everything

For you, would you not be willing to let Him take your everything from you, your treasure? If God will give His Son for you, then you can trust Him to hurt you, as sometimes He will. because he knows that

it's very difficult for sinners like me and sinners like you to climb Jacob's ladder with weights around our ankles. And it doesn't matter whether those weights are golden weights, sorry, lead weights or golden weights. They're both weights and they must be cut free if we are to be free. And sometimes we see what we lose when he cuts the golden weights off us. And we think, I've lost all my gold. But we don't see the reason why to help us climb Jacob's ladder unencumbered by the deceitful presence of a little brief prosperity. And that can be fatal for a minister if he begins to believe his own publicity. Everyone's coming here because of me, we can think to ourselves. But it can be fatal too for a businessman or a businesswoman or whatever other area of life. If we start to think the secret of our success is me and we build our identity upon it, Sometimes God's got to come and cut those golden weights away from us to wake us up to who we are and what we have in God and what we would have without God. And then lastly this morning, remember you're dependent upon God's providence. Remember your place in God's plan. Remember the glory of God's Son. Remember the end of all things. Verse 36, it's kind of stuck there awkwardly at the end of the passage. It's like John had this clipping. Oh, this is a good summary of the gospel. Where am I going to put it? I don't know. Hold on a second. I know. We'll stick it at the end of chapter 3, verse 36. Boom. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides upon him. We take that out of context, and it's good out of context as a summary of the gospel, but what's it mean in this context? You think about it, John is saying this. If you don't get the Christ question right, that he is Christ and I am not, if you don't get the Lord question right, that he is Lord and I am not, you will inevitably get every other question wrong in life. And if you do that, you'll find yourself not just on the wrong side of history, and the wrong side of ministry, and the wrong side of business, and the wrong side of marriage, you could end up finding yourself on the wrong side of eternity. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him." Whoever doesn't give Christ his place, I think is what John is saying there. Now, by nature, that is our default posture. We seek ourselves and we don't seek him. We honor ourselves. We don't honor him. That's our default posture. And for the Christian, the best Christian in this place, it's a constant battle. We're like living sacrifices, and the problem with being a living sacrifice is constantly crawling off the altar. We're naturally like Daffy Duck in the cartoon with Bugs Bunny, they're fighting over this huge

treasure that's owned by this genie, Laden's genie in the lamp, and they're kind of fighting over it. And through the whole cartoon, Daffy's going, it's mine, it's mine, it's mine, I'm rich, I'm rich, and so forth. At the end of the cartoon, as is often the case, Daffy falls foul of the genie who and shrinks him down to kind of a little tiny figurine daffy. And later, Bugs is sitting at the beach side sipping, I don't know, a pina colada or something under an umbrella. And he sees this shell on the ground. He picks it up and opens the shell. And there is a pearl inside the shell. And suddenly, this little tiny daffy duck runs across the sand. It's mine. It's mine. It's mine. up Bugs' leg, across his thigh, up his tummy, across his arm, and into the shell. And he grabs this tiny, but to him it's a huge pearl. It's mine, it's mine, it's mine. I'm rich, I'm rich, I'm rich. And Bugs just closes the shell and silences Daffy until the next cartoon. But there's coming a time when Christ will close history and there'll be no next cartoon. And on that day, there'll be two kinds of people, and only two. Those who lived their whole life saying, it's mine, mine. I am the captain of my ship. I am the master of my soul, mine. And there are those who will be saying, it's his. And the shrinks are the best time to find out which one you are. It'll be a struggle. But the Christian, when he's holding on, it's mine, it's mine, it's mine, my ministry, my money, my business, my reputation, and it's mine. I'm holding on to it. And then the Holy Spirit comes on and says, Neil, catch yourself on. It doesn't belong to you, it's his. Unless a man gives up all his possessions, he cannot be my disciple. And I think, oh, that's right, it all belongs to him. What that means is if you're gonna look at a dollar in your wallet and say it's mine in your daffy duck voice, Jesus says that is inconsistent with being my disciple. It's all about him and his, not me and mine. And if you get that question wrong, it'll not just mess up your life, it'll mess up your forever, Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not believe the Son or obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. Jesus says to you this morning, come to me. You all, by nature, have delusions of grandeur, not just Pastor Stewart, but everyone here. And you gotta come to me and see me as the great colossus of history so that I can shrink your ego down to size. And God will be big and you will be small, though very precious to him. Because the reverse, when you are big and God is small, everything will always be the wrong size and the wrong shape in your life. And that'll mess up your life, it'll mess up your business, it'll mess up your marriage, it'll mess up your everything. And Christ is here to rescue you from that. Come to the Savior and submit yourself to him. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you perish in the way when his wrath is kindled but a little. How blessed are

those who take
refuge in him. Let's pray together. Father,
we thank you for your word this morning. It's truth, it's power,
We pray that it will continue to do its work in my heart and
in the heart of every man, woman, boy, and girl in this place till
the day breaks and the shadows flee away. In Christ, amen.