

“Everything in His Hands”

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

“He must increase; I must decrease.” (John the Baptist)

John 3:22-36

January 30, 2022

Paul Cummings (John 3:31-36)

Pastor Paul preached first. You can hear his sermon at corinthtoday.org/live.

Video script

(The following is Pastor Bob’s script for the video update.)

It’s been almost three decades since Linda and I began our ministry at Corinth. For 25 of those years, Linda has also been on staff at the church. She plans to retire in November of this year, and I won’t be too far behind.

A question I am frequently asked is why we’re moving ahead with these plans when the church is healthy and strong. My answer is that a season of vitality and health is the right time for a transition. If either the church or I were to face an unexpected crisis, moving forward would only become more complicated.

I’ve heard all my adult life that the years following a long pastorate can be extremely perilous for a church. For that reason, Corinth’s elders and I have been talking about the transition for almost a decade. We want to do this right, and we have learned there are some key factors that increase the chances of a healthy transition after a long pastorate.

First, the outgoing pastor. It can be hard to let go, but Linda and I are both determined to step aside at the right time, God helping us, and let someone else lead. To answer a common question, we plan to move away from Hickory after we both retire

in order to be closer to other family members and in order to allow the church to bond with your new pastor.

Second, the search team. It's vital to have a small group of local church leaders who are deeply invested in the life of the church to own the search process. They need to love the Lord and love this church, and they need to be well-respected in the church and community. If you're a member or regular attender at Corinth, you'll receive an email later today with details about the Pastor Search Team. I have deep appreciation for and confidence in the team the Consistory has appointed.

Third, outside consultation. A long pastorate makes it hard for the church to know its own strengths and vulnerabilities. We have hired Vanderbloemen Search Group of Houston, Texas, to help us. William Vanderbloemen is an ordained Presbyterian pastor originally from Lenoir. He attended Hickory Choral Society concerts at Corinth growing up. Working with William on our search will be Jay Mitchell, who has helped more than 300 churches with their executive searches.

Fourth, the right candidate. Every church is unique, but the Vanderbloemen team says we're really unusual for several reasons. Our team is very committed to finding a new pastor who will fit our special situation. In my opinion, Corinth has so much to offer a pastor – including an active and unified congregation, an effective and experienced staff, a beautiful campus that is debt-free, and strong missions support and partnerships. You're going to have an amazing new pastor and a bright future.

Fifth, an overlap. The new pastor is likely to join the team sometime in 2023. For a short period of time, Corinth will probably have two lead pastors. How long the overlap will be is one of many questions no one can answer yet, but I am very enthusiastic about being able to share with my successor what I've learned in thirty years about this wonderful church family.

Finally, communication. It probably goes without saying that some aspects of the search need to be confidential. But we are committed to updating you as often as we can with as much as we can. That's because your prayers and support are just as critical as any other aspect of this process.

It has been the great privilege of our lives for Linda and me to serve this church and raise our family at Corinth and in Hickory. There will be grieving for us and for you and we'll plan for that too. We both believe it's time, and we will join you in trusting God and the community he has called to Corinth to continue and deepen the work he has started here.

This is Jesus' church, and he will never leave you or forsake you. We love you, will pray with you and for you, and look forward to all God will do among you.

Bob Thompson (John 3:22-30)

I've been wondering this week what the mood would be like in the room after the video. I didn't really expect applause. If everyone clapped, would the message be, "Yay! Bob's almost gone"?

For some of you, there's little new in the video except perhaps this: It's getting real. We've been intentionally vague in the past, but the message is no longer that "this might happen in the next few years." The time is soon, and the process is underway. Yesterday, the Pastor Search Team met with Jay Mitchell for three hours, and he is worshiping with us this morning.

There are moments in life that test whether you really believe what you say you believe. The part of the text that Pastor Paul focused on includes statements like, "The one who comes from heaven is above *all*" (31). "God gives the Spirit *without limit*" (34). "The Father has placed *everything* in his hands" (35).

John, the writer of this gospel, makes statements like that because he believes them, and he wants his readers to believe that is true. Most of you believe it too, most of the time. But there are moments for all of us where that faith is tested.

The tests of faith can happen during either success or adversity. Both are illustrated in the life of John the Baptist. (I'm going to call him "J.B." to distinguish him from the John who wrote the gospel, who I presume to be John the Apostle – one of Jesus' original twelve disciples.)

Success is the more subtle test. When you get a promotion or fall in love, as a believer you may still *say*, "It's because Jesus has everything in his hands," but you're *thinking*, "I had a lot to do with this."

We first met J.B. in chapter 1 of John's gospel. John tells us J.B. is critical to the story. John says that God sent a light, the Word. He tells us that J.B. was not the light. J.B. "came only as a witness to the light" (8).

J.B. emerges from almost nowhere as a compelling and charismatic figure in chapter 1. He draws so much attention that the delegates from Jerusalem find him in the wilderness east of the Jordan River and demand to know if he thinks he's the Messiah.

J.B. passes the success test. At the height of his public admiration, he tells both skeptics and disciples, "I am not the Messiah!" He pinpoints Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

More overtly adversity will test your faith. You lost your job or your spouse had an affair. That's a test whether you really believe everything is in his hands.

In chapter 3, J.B. faces a calamity test to his faith, surprisingly from Jesus himself, who has now moved to the Judean countryside, not far from where J.B. had been drawing crowds for baptism and teaching. Jesus is doing the same things in the same area.

The way John unfolds the story, Jesus has been drawing both positive attention (because of his first sign-miracle at Cana in Galilee when he turned the water into wine) and negative (in Jerusalem, when he challenged the money changers in the temple). Now it seems as if Jesus has deliberately encroached on J.B.'s territory. The other gospels tell us about Jesus' early popularity in Galilee. John seems to filling in details they had omitted. He's not correcting them; he's adding to their story.

That he's familiar with the other gospels – and thinks his readers probably are – is indicated by verse 24. It's a parenthesis in the NIV – “This was before John was put in prison.” John's gospel never mentions J.B. in prison except here, and he certainly doesn't mention the beheading. That's a crisis J.B. will experience later – and by the way, he doesn't handle it so well. He was among those who apparently believed Jesus as Messiah would change everything.

When Jesus didn't, J.B. sent messengers from prison to ask, “Are you the Messiah or are we still expecting someone else?” This question from the one who had seen the Spirit descending on him like a dove, had heard the Father's voice, “You are my beloved Son,” and had said, “Look! He's the Lamb of God.”

J.B.'s success and popularity are eroding quickly. What was before theoretical is now really happening. J.B. wasn't a superhuman. He had the same adrenaline rush that every person has when people are thronging to you and praising you.

So don't think J.B. is immune from a crisis of faith over adversity. In this case, it's his disciples who state it. What prompts their comment is an argument (or “discussion” in some translations) between John's disciples and “a certain Jew” (25). It's about “ceremonial washing.” This is the second time that phrase has been used in John. The stone jars full of water that Jesus turned into wine were for “ceremonial washing.”

Some things never change. The role and meaning of water was debated. How important is the water? What effect does the water have? Notice that neither John nor J.B. have a lot of interest in the details of the debate. I have the same view about baptism today. To get into a long discussion or argument about baptism misses the point.

For J.B.'s disciples, the point is the evaporation of attention J.B. had enjoyed. “Rabbi,” they call him (it's just a term of respect) – “that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan – the one you testified about – look, he is baptizing and everyone is going to him” (26). They are reacting in crisis mode. What will J.B. do?

J.B.'s answer is applied theology. The underlying theology matches that of Moses and David and Isaiah, and later, Jesus and Peter and Paul: "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven" (27). Do you believe that? Do you believe it in times of success? Adversity?

The theology is simple: there is a God. By definition, if there is a God, he's in charge of everything. He's the Source of all that exists, and if he has that kind of sovereignty, he can intervene wherever he wants to. The balance of God's sovereignty and human responsibility we love to debate, but if God is not able to step in when he chooses to, he's not God. Does J.B. believe in the God of Moses and Jesus and Paul or doesn't he? Do you?

For J.B., in this moment of crisis, the answer is a resounding "Yes!" He reminds his disciples that he was ready for this moment. Shining the spotlight on Jesus was his intent from the beginning. "You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but sent ahead of him'" (28).

I love J.B.'s analogy in verse 29, because it's about as cross-cultural as an analogy can be. A wedding today is all about the bride. You never expect the maid of honor to say, "Why isn't everyone paying more attention to me?"

In first century Jewish culture, it was more about the bridegroom, but it's the same point. The best man doesn't whine on the wedding day, "Why does the bridegroom have all the fun?" That was his intention from the beginning. He's "full of joy" when the wedding day comes (29). "That's the case with me," J.B. says. "I've done my work, and I'm not only OK with it – I'm thrilled that Jesus is here and everyone's coming to him."

I remember exactly when and where I remember reading – or at least paying attention to – verse 30. It was my first day at Columbia Bible College in August of 1974. I was sitting on my dorm room bed. Freshmen arrived before their assigned upper class roommates. At age 17, I was entering into preparation for a life of ministry. I opened my Bible and was gripped by this line: "He must increase, and I must decrease."

That was almost fifty years ago, and that life ambition is about to be tested again for me. I'm not saying it's going to be easy, but I want with all of my heart to finish well at Corinth. I want to gracefully decrease so that my human successor can increase. I want Jesus to be bigger in my life, in your next pastor's life, and in your life.

I didn't choose this text to line up with today's video or announcement. Kevin Watkins put together our sermon series in John, and he had no idea of the timing of our search process when he did. It's a God-thing.

It's perfect for today! I should probably clarify that not everything is parallel. I'm not John the Baptist and my successor will not be Jesus. Also, I'm not planning on

that whole prison thing or beheading for my retirement. But this text does help us know what to expect in the next year or two.

First, expect change. William Vanderbloemen's most memorable quote is just six words: "Every pastor is an interim pastor." John the Baptist was an interim voice, and he knew it from the beginning. Jesus' physical presence on the earth was an interim strategy for God, and he had to do a lot of preparation for his disciples.

When people ask, "Why now?" my response is, "If not now, when?" J.B. doesn't know he's going to prison soon – but John is reminding his readers that it's a good idea to plan for the handover before you don't have any choice. We've been blessed not to have a change of pastor in 30 years – but no pastorate lasts forever.

What I love about this particular text is that what William Barclay wrote in his commentary: this passage "shows us the ministry of (J.B.) and the ministry of Jesus overlapping." Ha! Overlap is a Jesus-strategy.

Second, expect anxiety. Nobody really likes change once you're comfortable. It's not a sin to experience anxiety – it's what you do with it. It's not surprising that the anxiety for J.B.'s disciples produces an argument with "a certain Jew" – unless you prefer "discussion" – and questions for J.B. He had lived with this expectation for all his life.

Nobody's promising this is all going to be easy, smooth, or even predictable. It's OK to name our anxieties, to talk about them with each other, and especially to bring them to Jesus. He's not threatened by any of this.

Finally, expect heaven. I know in this passage "heaven" is a figure of speech that really means "God," like when J.B. says, "A person can receive only what is given to them from heaven."

I like the metonymy. Heaven will break through in surprising ways – I know it. Don't forget that tests come in both adversity and success. Those are the moments of our greatest spiritual risk, but also potentially our greatest growth.

I don't know if this church family will be tested more by adversity or success in the near future. I just know that heaven will break through because heaven always does. As John writes, "God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands." Amen.