

CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"THE NATURE OF FAITH"

Sunday Morning, January 15, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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About eighteen months ago a young lady came to my office, ostensibly just to talk. I knew her more by reputation than by personal contact. She had just graduated from college and was soon to leave to do graduate work in an eastern university. I knew her to be a highly intelligent person, a member of one of the finest families, and one who while in high school had been quite active in the church. As she began to talk, I quickly sensed that her tense smile and nervous chatter were a disguise for some deep-lurking problem. And sure enough, we had not talked too long until she got to the point. I shall never forget the look in her eyes—a strange mixture of defiance and guilt and confusion—and yet the words were firm: "Dr. Claypool, I no longer have any religious faith. The certainty of my childhood, the beliefs of my parents and my church—I now find these unacceptable. I cannot, I do not, believe the claims of Christianity." As I sat there and listened to her, I saw two things: first of all, the not uncommon sight of an individual struggling for religious certainty. But there was more: etched in her face was the symbol of our time. She is not the first young person who has come to me with words to that effect, and I find that in increasing numbers the problem of religious doubt is one of the great difficulties of today. More and more of our young people who have been grounded in the heritage of the church and who have come to accept this as part of their life, go away, and as a result of their disciplined education, come back with no certainty or real sense of conviction. Now what has always been a problem has become an acute crisis because of the peculiar character of our times. In the day when a man was born and lived and died in the same place and never came in contact in all his life with but one set of ideas, this matter of faith was relatively easy. A man who was never challenged had no occasion to question the things he had always been taught. But this is no longer the situation in which we live. Our young people are steeped in an educational process which trains them to be critical and skeptical of every precept. And today, because of the increased proximity of the world, we have an inter-penetration of different cultures to a degree that was never before known. Today's temper is one of skepticism and there are more alternates to belief than ever before. When you put these two together, the situation of 1961 makes it far harder than ever to believe. And the church is going to have to face this problem of radical doubt with radical seriousness. It will do no good to wring our hands or to look back nostalgically to simpler days. Today's young person is educated to question and has more knowledge at his fingertips than ever before; this constitutes the real crisis that was embodied in that young woman who sat before me. And we have got to face it or we are doomed for the next generation. How can we, in an age of science, interpret the meaning of faith? In a day when verification and proof is the first law of learning, how do we establish religious certainty? Can a person accept the claims of faith and still be intellectually honest? To a growing number, these are questions of crucial significance, and therefore it is to the problem I am constrained to speak. In a day of doubt, what can be said about the nature of faith?

I think the problem is fairly obvious. In the realm of science we deal with that which you can prove and measure and demonstrate. Any kind of assertion that

is made in the realm of science can be put to the test and on the basis of that, can be accepted or rejected. Therefore scientific certainty is a matter of proof that is accessible to other minds. However, the realm of Faith has to do with that segment of knowledge that cannot be tested or tangibly proved. If I say to you that 2 plus 2 is 4, you can put that to the test and decide for yourself; but if I say to you, "There is a God" I have made a statement of a radically different nature. You cannot bring that statement down and put it under a microscope or count it out on a table and therefore decide for yourself. You see, faith points to a realm of knowledge which cannot be proved or measured; and this is precisely the problem for the young scientific mind. If I do not have the safeguard of verification, how do I know that what I believe by faith is true? In the realm of science I am protected from falsehood by the ability to demonstrate. What is the protection in the realm of faith that will keep me from believing the most absurd falsehood that ever existed? This is the crux of the issue: I am guided by proof in the realm of science; what is my guide in the realm of faith that keeps it from being arbitrary willfulness or wishful thinking?

There are many ways to come at this problem. However, this morning, I would like to approach the matter by giving you the broad outline of my own spiritual pilgrimage. I do this, not because I have had an unusual or better experience than anyone else; rather, I can best describe the nature of faith by sharing with you my own quest for certainty.

As I look back in my life, there were four very definite plateaus, or different bases on which I sought to plant my faith. The first plateau was childish naivete. Like any other child, I believed everything that I was told. It made no difference if it was hard to prove or seemed to be unbelievable; I simply accepted that which was handed to me without question or doubt. Yet I had not gotten to be too old until I realized that our world is full of both falsehood and truth. Our world has unreal things in it as well as reality. Therefore, if I blindly accepted everything that was handed to me, I would be in the real danger of believing as true that which was really false. I realized that faith has to have some better basis than just "believing the unbelievable."

And so, as a child, I did a very natural thing: realizing that I had to have some basis for my faith, I picked out human beings; more specifically, my parents, and said, "I will believe what they believe. I will trust their judgment. They believe the church, so I will believe the church. They believe that there is a God, so I will believe there is a God." Thus, I grounded my faith in individuals. And this went along very well for awhile. Then one day I began to have the same doubt that I had had before--there are many people in this world, people who believe diametrically opposed things. How do you know that you have placed your faith in the right person? This all came to a climax when a new boy moved on our street. He was by far the most colorful contemporary I had ever known. His father had been in the service; he had lived in England and in Asia and the Far East and had done things that I had never even dreamed of doing. I was quite impressed with my new friend. I remember one Sunday afternoon we had been playing together and my mother called me to come in. He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I am going to church." He said, "To church? Why do you do that? My father says that anybody who believes there is a God is just stupid." This made me furious. I said, "Well, I certainly believe there is One and my father does too. I think your father is the one that is stupid." I remember stomping inside to go to church. But you know, the idea began working on me--"Here is a boy who believes what his father believes. I believe what my father believes. We believe for exactly the same reason, yet hold exactly opposite conclusions. How do I know that my father is right and his father is wrong?"

The third plateau was reached through the influence of an evangelist who came to our church to preach a revival. I remember that he gave a vigorous defense of the Bible as "the inerrant word of God." He told in very dramatic form that one night he began to have doubts about the Bible and to wonder if it were true. So he laid it out on the floor, knelt down before it, and said, "I cannot understand. I cannot answer the criticisms that are being raised, but I choose by faith to believe that this is absolute truth and I give myself to it." This made a deep impression on me, and I said: "I shall no longer base my faith on other people. This Book, which everyone I know believes, which is a Book of antiquity and authority—I shall accept it as absolute truth." I remember studying the Bible with a great deal of zest, thinking that at last I had found the kind of certainty that was going to give me what I wanted and enable me to know that what I believed was true.

This went along for many years, until one day I met a Moslem, one who was as zealous in his faith as any Christian I have ever known. We became good friends. In the course of our friendship, I screwed up as much courage as I could and said, "My friend, do you believe in Jesus as your Saviour?" He said, "No. Why should I?" I said, "Because He is the Son of God and He died for your sins." He said, "How do you know?" And I said, "Why, the Bible says so." I reached for my Bible and began to turn to a verse. But he said, "Wait a minute. I don't believe the Bible. To me it is another book of religion and I won't accept what it says as final authority." I was stopped cold in my tracks. For the first time I had met a person who did not accept that to which I had tied my faith. Then he turned the tables on me. He said, "Do you believe that Allah is the only God and Mohammed is his prophet?" And I said, "No, Why should I?" And then he said, "The Koran says so." He reached and brought out his holy book and laid it beside my Bible. And there we were—two men with our religious faiths tied to two books. And here came the same question, "How do you know that you are right and he is wrong?"

This set off what was to be the most serious period of doubt and depression in my religious life. I met there an obstacle that I could not overcome, and as one who had moved from simply believing the unbelievable to believing in people to believing in a book, I found now that I had no real certainty within myself that what I believed was true for all men everywhere. There are two things that I remember about that period. I remember that I was very uncertain as to what I should base my faith upon, but I also had a passionate concern to know the truth about God. Instead of becoming embittered and saying, "There is no way to know truth," my "curiosity for the Ultimate" increased and I became more zealous in search for the true basis. For a period of several years I remember making a careful study of other world religions and searching in honest openness wherever I felt truth might be found. And one day the crossroads came. I was sitting alone in my room reading a book by J. B. Phillips called Your God Is Too Small. He made continued reference to the first chapter of the gospel of John. And so I remember laying aside the book and picking up the Bible; I began reading those words—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And on down it said, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." At this point I find it hard to describe exactly what happened. As if a cloud had overshadowed me, as if a Hand had reached out and laid hold of my shoulder, as if a Voice had spoken or as if light had suddenly flooded on in a room of darkness—I was literally overwhelmed with the conviction—This is true. This is the truth about God—and because this was the kind of certainty for which I had been searching for years, I eagerly received it. This was a door that was suddenly opened and I walked through it. Here was a light that was suddenly turned on and I reached out for its illumination. God "spoke" to me with the touch of certainty and I responded with human faith. Let me say that what the Damascus road was for Paul, what the Tower experience was for Luther, what Alder's Gate was for Wesley, sitting alone in my room with the

gospel of John came to be in my spiritual life. A certainty was born that day which has remained until this moment. Out of this experience came the inner conviction that in Jesus Christ, God has made Himself known.

Now, out of this pilgrimage, what can we say about the meaning of faith? First of all, let me emphasize that faith is not "believing the unbelievable." It is not committing intellectual suicide. It is not accepting every absurdity that is thrust at you. It is not a leap into the dark for no reason at all. Faith is the response of man to the inthrust of God. This is a highly personal thing. It arises out of personal encounter and is the human response to divine initiative. Now, the certainty for which I was searching can never be found in unexamined life or in people or even in books or institutions. The certainty I was looking for can only be given by God Himself. Only God—from without—can touch our lives with certainty, but when that certainty is given we must receive it and respond to it. And this is exactly the function of faith. Faith is not a leap into the dark. It is laying hold of the hand which has laid hold of you. It is responding to the God who has first of all touched you with Himself. Now understand that the conclusions of faith are guided by the certainty of God. We do not believe just anything we want to believe; it is not an arbitrary willfulness. We are guided by the certainty which God gives in the realm of faith. If you would ask the average person, they would say that the difference between science and faith is that one relies on evidence and the other does not. Well now, this is not true. Faith is moved by external evidence just as much as science. The difference between science and faith is not that one uses evidence and the other does not—it is in the different kind of evidence to which each appeals. The Book of Hebrews says that "faith is the evidence of things not seen. (11:1)" In other words, it is real evidence, but it is not the kind which can be logically demonstrated or tangibly proved. I can prove to you that 2 plus 2 is 4. I can only testify to you that Jesus is the Son of God. But what does the Book of Acts say? It does not say that the disciples went out and proved the gospel. It says they went out and preached the gospel. For you see, we communicate faith simply by bearing witness and praying that the God who has given us certainty will take our witness and create the same certainty in the hearts of the hearers. Therefore, faith is based on evidence, but evidence that is personal and spiritual. It is real, though it cannot be proved, any more than you can "prove" the beauty of a rose. The French mathematician and philosopher Pascal struggled far more profoundly than did I for some kind of religious faith. And one night he met "the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob," and knew in his heart that this was true. Out of that experience has come the finest statement of faith that I have ever encountered: "The heart has its reasons that Reason knows not of." I believe 2 plus 2 is 4 because I can prove it. I believe that Jesus is the Son of God because I was touched with certainty from beyond myself and I responded to it with everything that I had.

You see, faith and reason, rightly understood, are not at war with each other. You are not asked to believe something that can be proved to be false. Faith simply goes beyond reason and gives you access to an area of knowledge that you can never know by proof. Faith points beyond reason to the certainty which only God can give. Why do I believe? "The heart has its reasons that Reason knows not of."

I know this leaves one big question in your minds. If faith is not arbitrarily believing against evidence, if faith is controlled by God just as science is controlled by external evidence, how can you find that certainty? Well, it must be fairly obvious from what I have said that you cannot "work it up" on your own. If faith is more than a subjective exercise, it takes One other than you to effect it. Therefore the certainty of which I speak is something that only God can give, and I want to make that very clear. But there are two things that you can do to prepare yourself and to make the atmosphere conducive to this kind of "faith encounter."

The first thing is to be absolutely honest. If you do not believe, if you cannot believe, if you find no basis for belief, be honest enough to say so. But also be honest enough that if certainty comes, you will be willing to accept it and to move with it. I have known many people who first of all used doubt as a tool for separating truth from falsehood. Then it became a way of life. They were no longer looking for conclusions; they were simply destroying evidence. They no longer wanted to know the truth, they simply wanted to find fault with every possibility. This is not true honesty. If you are predisposed to disbelieve, you are just as bigoted as the fundamentalist who is prejudiced in what he does believe. Therefore, first, you must be absolutely honest and open if certainty comes. And the second thing: be passionately concerned to know the truth about God. You know, Jesus said that "to those who ask, it will be given; to those who seek, they shall find; to those who knock, the door shall be opened." The truth is, the soul who honestly wants to know God is going to be rewarded, for "God is and is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." If you are passionately concerned to know the truth about God, I make you the promise that in His good time this will come about. It may not happen exactly when you want it; it may not come just as you have expected it; but if you are open and honestly questing, that certainty will come.

As I think of this, I am reminded of Simon Peter. He was full of imperfections, but there were two shining qualities: he was absolutely honest, sometime to the point of appearing unstable, and he wanted to know the truth. For two and a half years he lived with Christ, and then one day on the coast of Caesarea Phillipi, "it" happened. Jesus asked a simple question: "Who do you say that I am?" Suddenly the scales fell from his eyes and he recognized for the first time the true identity of our Lord. "Why, Jesus," he exclaimed, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered: "Peter, this is something you have not 'worked up'—flesh and blood have not revealed this unto you—but the Father who is in heaven. You have not found certainty as much as certainty has found you."

And my friend, if God will give Himself to a man like Peter or a person like me, He will certainly touch your life. And when He does, I pray you will respond. How? By faith!

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