



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE MEANING OF SALVATION"

Sunday Morning, March 12, 1961
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Not long ago I entered a hospital room to talk with a desperately ill person. This elderly man had never made a Christian profession, and his family was quite concerned. I had prayed before going that somehow I might reach his inner heart. I had no sooner than opened the issue, however, than I found myself on the defensive. He said emphatically that he wanted no part of a religion that went only "talk deep." He spoke of countless acquaintances who had claimed to be "saved" and joined the church but reflected no difference. "If it does not affect what you are," he said, "there's nothing to it." I tried my best to reinterpret and restate Christian reality, but it was to no avail. He had a definition of Christianity that I could not overcome. As I drove away from the hospital, I was both disappointed and perplexed; disappointed at my own ineffectiveness, and perplexed by this false image of Christianity. I asked myself, "Where does a man get such a caricature, such a misrepresentation of the Faith?" And then I began to think, and the answer was close by—he got it from us—Christians, members of the church, and even preachers who proclaim a Gospel that is detached from life. I realized that any number of people think of salvation as a kind of static position that has no real relationship to life. Thus, there is little wonder that it is getting harder and harder to interest men in Christianity. Our problem is one of basic definition—we are confused about the very nature of Christian experience, and until we get this clear, we can expect little progress and certainly no real revival. Therefore, this morning, because confusion within is causing distortion without, I feel constrained to talk about the basic issue—just what is the nature of Christian experience? Or to state it another way, what is the meaning of salvation?

Let us focus the issue by a series of questions: is salvation a position or a relationship? Is it a mechanical transaction, or is it a dynamic process? Are we to think of it as a static, almost material object that one possesses, or is it a moving spiritual reality that continues to grow? Does it come to us from without, or does it involve inner response and participation?

Now, to many people, salvation corresponds to the former alternatives. It is a static position that exerts little influence on life. One goes through an emotional ritual, and then one is "in" forever. It makes no difference what one is or what one does thereafter; having had one "experience," that is all that matters. As I think back over my own life, I remember two vivid encounters with such a mechanical concept. Back in 1941, when Hitler was the terror of the world and his exploits were publicized far and wide, as a Junior boy, I asked my Sunday school teacher, "Is Hitler a Christian?" I shall never forget her answer. She

said, "Well, he does not appear to be, but we can hope that when he was a little boy he gave his heart to Jesus and thus will be saved." I was just a child, but I thought to myself, "Boy, this Christianity must be weak. If this man who burns Jews and executes people every day is 'saved' by one childhood experience, it must not have much to do with life." Years later, I confronted the same detached concept from an entirely different source. A notoriously wicked man—he was a boot-legger, a convicted murderer, a thief, was living with his fifth wife—came to a country church revival and under the emotion of the service jumped up to testify. He said, speaking of his salvation—"I know when I got it; I know where I got it; I know how I got it. I've treated it rough," he said, "but I've still got it." There was at least one shread of truth in the testimony—whatever "it" was, he had "treated it rough."

Now these experiences illustrate clearly one concept of the Christian life. The grace of God is not a creative force, it is a mechanical "smoke screen." Forgiveness is "a cosmic blotter" that "gets one off" from his sins. Salvation is a "free pass" into heaven, totally unrelated to the quality of the person's life. Have one experience, say a certain formula, go through certain motions, and the whole issue of eternal destiny is decided. Once you are "saved," you can do what you please and not worry about it.

For this concept—exactly the concept that so offended my friend in the hospital—I can find not one shread of Biblical support. I have searched the New Testament through and through and cannot find the slightest justification for such a cheap and easy interpretation. Here is a "tradition of man" parading as "a doctrine of God."

The New Testament always speaks of salvation as a relationship. It is not a once-in-a-lifetime experience; it is a dynamic process which involves the whole person. The invitation of Jesus was not, "Come, have one emotional upheaval, and go on your way." Rather, it was "Come, follow me (Matt. 4:19)." It was an invitation to establish a relationship and begin a pilgrimage that continues through all of life. In His teaching Jesus repeatedly warned against this very kind of detached profession. He says quite clearly that the most important thing is not saying the words, "Lord, Lord," but doing the will of the Father (Matt. 7:21). He warned against putting one's hand to the plough, and then looking back; that is, beginning without the commitment to carry through. And He told a parable about a father who instructed both of his sons to work in the field. One refused, but later changed his mind and put in a day's work. The other agreed, but did not show up in the field. Jesus asked: At the end of the day, who was obedient, "the son of words" or "the son of deeds" (Matt. 21:28-31)? The answer is obvious, and proves that more is involved in Christian discipleship than mere profession. Or look again—in the Gospel of John where Jesus describes salvation as "being born again." Everyone knows that birth is the beginning of a process. It is not the end, but the beginning. Physically speaking, if a baby is born and nothing else happens, we call this a tragic abnormality that denies the whole purpose of birth. If one needs further proof, from the experience of Paul come words of ringing testimony. Close to the end of his ministry, viewing the Christian life from the perspective of age, Paul said this: "Brethern, I count not myself to have apprehended, but this one thing I do: forgetting those things that are behind, and reaching forth for the things which are ahead, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:13-14)." Here is a dynamic process; he does not claim "to have arrived"; he daily experienced forgiveness and hope, and moved toward the goal of humanity—the high calling of God demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

More passages could be presented, but there is no need. The issue is clear in my thinking. Salvation is not a static, detached experience. It is a dynamic relationship that involves the real person. Its purpose is to transform life; to change "sons of Adam" into "sons of God!" The Christian life is a means of "soul creation." The best description of a Christian is "a soul under construction." As we respond to the power of God, the interaction between grace and faith transforms what we are and gives shape to our real selves. The grace of God is not a "free pass" or a "meal ticket." It is a creative force whose aim is to take what we are and make us into what we were meant to be. It is not a means of "getting us off" for our sins, but the opening of new possibilities through forgiveness and growth.

Perhaps the contrast between the two concepts can be seen through this analogy. Let us say that two students apply for admission to college. Both are accepted. One looks on this as the end of the process. He is "in," and that is all that matters. So he spends four years doing as he pleases; he rarely attends class; he never participates in the discipline of the activities. He is totally unconcerned about life at the college. The other man looks on acceptance not as the end but the beginning. He applies himself, he responds to the guidance of the teachers. He participates fully in all that the college offers. Now, honestly, which of the two men understands the purpose of a college? Obviously, the latter. And when the examination is given at the end of four years, the basis will not be on whether or not one was admitted; rather, it will be what one has become in response to this opportunity.

And so with the Christian life. It is "the school for God's children"—begun and sustained by God's grace, but involving the continual response of the real person. For salvation is not "carte blanche" to indulgence, it is the call of God to sonship through the discipline of grace.

If this be the true nature of Christianity, it has direct bearing on our present situation. In two weeks we are to begin our revival. What are we to do? Not bring in people to have a detached experience and then go their way, but to involve them through God's grace into this "process of soul creation." And how can we do this? By recommitting ourselves to that "discipline of grace" which is the essence of Christianity!

We have come to think of "revivals" solely in terms of evangelism. We want through them to win as many people as possible. And in our passion to do this, we have forgotten the spiritual sequence which is implied in the word. The best way to win the lost is to revive the saved. Any other method is artificial and seeks to build where there is no foundation. Perhaps the reason so many revivals are a complete failure is that we have omitted this vital link, and thus go to the world with empty hearts and hollow words.

Therefore, the key person in our big endeavor will not be the man out there who may or may not decide to join. The key person is you and me. If we remind ourselves what Christianity really is, and give ourselves anew to its reality, the logic of good news will compel us to go, and new Christians will follow as the natural outgrowth.

At the time of Queen Victoria's coronation, the ruling prince of a certain colony was quite small, and his guardian selected a beautiful jewel to be sent in behalf of his people. Years later, now grown and an active leader, the prince was in London and had an audience with the Queen. He asked if he might see the stone

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that had been sent for him years before. It was brought, and he held it up to the sunlight and saw its dazzling beauty. Then with deep feeling, he came and knelt before the Queen and said, "Your majesty, allow me to give this to you again, and with it rededicate myself and my people to your majesty's service."

And this is what we Christians need to do: Take all the treasures of spiritual gifts, and come once again to Him who has saved us; and there recommit and rededicate ourselves to the purpose for which He called us. Then, and only then, will come the personal revival that makes "revivals" possible.