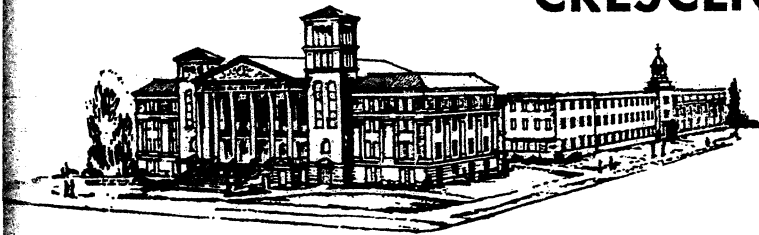


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"WHAT ON EARTH IS WRONG?"



Sunday Morning, April 23, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Around the turn of the twentieth century, an American industrialist built a magnificent structure in Switzerland and called it "The Crystal Palace." It was dedicated to the cause of peace and brotherhood, and open to any group that was working to these ends. As it stood majestically beside that Swiss lake, it symbolized the hopeful optimism of the new century. Many hailed this as "the golden age" to which man had always looked. Because of the great advance in science and industry, it appeared that through his own ingenuity man had at last solved his basic problems. The old enemies of disease and poverty and ignorance were retreating in the face of modern technology, and men actually believed that the long-dreamed-of Utopia was just around the corner.

But one night in 1914 the Crystal Palace caught fire and burned to the ground. And looking back on it now, this, too, was symbolic. For what fire did to that building, the events of the twentieth century have done to the hope for which it stood. The optimistic prophecy has hardly been fulfilled. These six decades have not been a "paradise regained," but the occasion of history's most horrible atrocities. Add up the score: two world wars; revolutions in Russia and Germany and China and Africa; the advent of mass annihilation at Nagasaki and Hiroshima; the brutality of Stalin, the insanity of Hitler, the savagery of the Congo. On and on we could go, but the point is clear: Man has not solved all his problems. The advances of science and industry have not been enough. In the midst of all of our progress, we have been made painfully aware that something is still wrong. Our dreams have been smashed, our hopes shattered, and the events of this century demand a literal answer to the proverbial question: "What on earth is wrong?" There is something deadly amiss in our world. Right here, on this earth, what is wrong?

Interesting enough, many centuries ago an inspired writer pondered the same question. His times were more primitive, his questions more simple, his curiosity directed toward different goals. He wondered why men had to toil for their survival by the sweat of their brow; why women suffered such anguish in childbirth; why the snake crawled on its belly and was universally disliked. The questions were different, but the quest was the same. He realized something was wrong in his world; that there was discord at the heart of existence. So, beginning with his own experience, he set out under God to diagnose the human predicament. And the story he wrote has endured through the centuries. Here is eternal truth in primitive form. Here is the profoundest insight I know as to what is the matter in our world. Strange as it seems, we are driven back to an ancient Hebrew for the answer to our current question: "What on earth is wrong?"

Of course, you realize I am referring to the Genesis narrative (Chapter 3) of the Garden of Eden. I feel we have never taken this passage seriously. Its plot is familiar and its characters are the occasion of endless jokes. We laugh about Adam's rib, the fig leaves, and say this is the beginning of the age-old practice of a woman "eating her husband out of house and home." In all this we miss the fact that this is an incisive parable, a telling description of mankind's basic malady. Therefore, think of Adam as Everyman; think of Eden as Everyplace; and think of this as a spiritual analogy of what happens in every human experience.

The setting of the story is familiar. It is God's world, created by His word and structured by His will. As it comes from God's hand it is described as "good." To crown His handiwork God makes man, and places him at the juncture of matter and spirit. He is akin to nature, for his body comes from the earth. Yet he is akin to God, for he is made in His image and possesses the capacity to think and reflect and choose. This dual alignment of man is clearly seen in God's first instruction. Man is given a certain freedom in the Garden; he can name the animals and partake of the fruit. Yet it is not absolute freedom. A tree is placed in the center and a prohibition is put on its fruit. This is to remind man that he is still a creature; that this is God's world; and that there are limits beyond which he cannot go. Thus, man is both a creature and a creator; he is free and yet also restricted; this is his world, and yet in a higher sense it is not his alone, but God's.

Into this unique situation steps the Tempter. We are not told where he comes from or how he came to his position. There is no speculation here on the origin of evil. There is mystery here, just as there is mystery about God. All we know is that a power outside man comes and suggests to man that he do what the Tempter has already done—rebel against God. He lays before man an alternate to divine obedience. He questions God's integrity and motives, and suggests that man become "like God." He whispers: "Why not ignore the limits God has set? You take from all the trees, take from that tree as well. Forget God; be your own man; bow the knee to no one; do as you please; take life in your own hands and have your own way. Break the shackles, destroy the chains, assert yourself, be subservient to no one!"

Here were two clear cut alternates: God's way of restriction, the Tempter's way of freedom. Would man continue a creature, or would he assume the role of creator? As you all know, first Eve, then Adam, followed the Tempter, and took the fruit that was forbidden. This was more than petty larceny; this means rebellion. This spiritual mutiny, the usurpation of the creature against the Creator. The tenant rises against the Owner, the mechanic takes over from the Inventor. In God's world, man determines to have his own way. In a world not his own making, man decides to do as he pleases.

In the mind of the writer, this is exactly what has gone wrong in our world. There has been an insurrection, and the whole sphere has fallen under the sway of an alien power. This did not just happen once, it has been going on since the beginning of time. It has happened in my life, in your life, in us all.

Notice two things: this explains the reality of suffering — why men have to toil, and why women have to suffer. Since man has taken over, a tragic distortion has been given to life. The once beautiful garden becomes a ghastly waste, and what used to be like heaven is now a living hell. This accounts for the anguish and suffering and pain of our life. And we should not be surprised, for life always

becomes destructive chaos when the working principle is ignored. What happens when you walk into a woodworking shop and arrogantly disregard the rules of operation? You put your finger where you will, you operate the machines to suit yourself, you put wood in "any old way." In a few minutes you could ruin the machines, cut off your hand, put out your eye and leave the shop in shambles. How? By doing things your own way! Or what would happen if you dismantled the engine of your car, and then with no regard for its blueprint began to throw in the parts under the hood? Would that car ever again approximate its intended purpose? No! And this is exactly what man has done to God's world. We have arrogantly stepped in and tried "to go it alone." We have taken life apart and tried to rebuild it our own way. We have taken the good things of God and so misused them that they have become bad. A constructive instrument becomes a destructive weapon in the hands of a rebel. And thus, it is no great surprise that our world is in shambles; no mystery why tragedy and heartache are the hallmarks of human existence. Whenever you live in God's world contrary to God's way, suffering is bound to result. This rebellious willfulness, this arrogant misuse - this accounts for the world as it is.

But notice a more fundamental thing: the basic problem is an inner condition. The root of it all is not evil acts but an evil attitude. Back of overt deeds is a perverted disposition. This is the distinction between "sin" and "sins." One is the cause, the other the effect. "Sins" grow out of "sin"; it is the seed bed that produces every conceivable form of evil. Thus the issue is not a matter of externals. You cannot manipulate outward factors and solve the problem. Our basic difficulty is not the maldistribution of wealth or poverty or ignorance; it is the human will. In a literal sense, our world has "heart trouble." In God's world, we are trying to be "self-made men"; our sickness is in the depth of human personality.

This is very significant, for it means we must widen our definition of sin. We respectable folk like to relegate this to physical excesses that are remote to us. Sin is drinking, adultery, gambling, killing. Yes, but it is more. The "sin attitude" exists in many highly respectable places. Anywhere men put their own wills above everything else, be it in a church or country club or business or where, this is evil. And this can come out in a thousand "acceptable" patterns. This attitude is seen in all walks of life and in every realm. The member of the Teamsters Union who said, "I do not care what Jimmy Hoffa does - as long as I get a raise," is expressing the "sin attitude" in business. The commander at Cherry Point, who said he had been believing the Marines fought in Tripoli for thirty years and was going to keep on believing it no matter what, was expressing the "sin attitude" in the intellectual realm. The socially prominent bachelor, who boasts about getting the best looking woman possible for the least investment, is expressing the "sin attitude" in the physical realm. One cannot take refuge in man-made standards; anytime you are determined to have your own way, you are part of what is wrong with our world.

Which brings us back to our original question: "What on earth is wrong?" The answer: self-made men in a God-made world. The problem is as old as the ages; it is within and not without. What can be done about it? There is one thing for sure: we cannot straighten it out alone. In the beginning man surrendered to a power greater than himself, and having joined that army, there is no voluntary release. Having sinned, man lost the power not to sin. Having walked in the cell, the door has swung shut. We cannot undo what we have done. We cannot rebuild what we have wrecked. Having sinned, we are the slaves of sin.

There is only one hope - that a Power greater than the power to which we have succumbed will set us free. Our hope is not in education or material reform - it

must be spiritual redemption. It is our hearts that have gone wrong; it is our hearts that must be changed. And only the One who made them can do that. If any help comes, it cannot be from us.

Remember Archimedes - the mathematician who discovered the principle of the lever? He learned to lift unbelievable weights by manipulating these little pieces of metal. One day he gave a demonstration before the king, and he was so carried away with the possibilities that he said: "King, if I just had some place to stand, outside the earth, I believe I could lift the whole world on my shoulders". Without realizing, he was preaching my sermon this morning. For it is true: if the world is ever going to be lifted, the power must come from outside.

And according to the Gospel, that Power has come! Evil has met its master and the shackles have been broken. From a twisted cross of suffering love, Power streams out to the human heart, calling it back to obedience and fellowship. What man has done, God will undo. What man has wrecked, God will rebuild.

Thus the Bible holds a low estimate of man, but a high estimate of God. Alongside our arrogant rebellion is placed His transforming forgiveness. Here is the diagnosis and the cure.

Thus the sermon resolves itself into three questions and answers: What on earth is wrong? - Us! What on earth can we do? - Nothing! What hope then is there? - HIM!