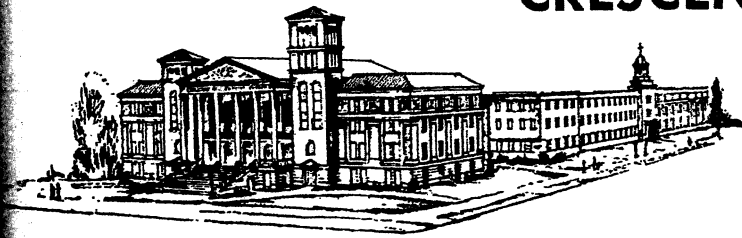


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF DEATH"

Sunday Morning, May 28, 1961
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Text: Romans 8:31-39

The modern attitude toward death has the surface appearance of contradiction. On the one hand our contemporaries seem to have little interest in the subject of life after death. Unlike bygone generations, they show no relish for other-worldly speculation, and pass over with a yawn the very issues that would have excited their ancestors. However, alongside this disinterest in "the life beyond" is a heightened fear of death itself. I said this might appear to be a contradiction, but actually it is not. For it follows rather naturally that when one shifts all interest to the concerns of this life, death takes on an enlarged significance. It is no longer a dividing line or movement from one level of existence to another. To the thorough-going humanist, who grounds life in the physical and material, death is the absolute end—the separation from all he values, the devastation of all his achievements, the thwarting of all his hopes and dreams. To one for whom "this life is the only life," death is the final annihilation of everything. This explains, I think, the immense fear of death that characterizes our day. Although it may be unconscious, much that we do is powered by this phobia. We spend fortunes at beauty shops and massage parlors trying to reverse the effects of age. We keep a frenzied pace and the constant companionship of noise so we shall never have to think about it. We try to escape it by ignoring it, and hope that "out of sight" will continue to keep it "out of mind." But for all our defenses, it is still there, and Nicolas Berdyaev is right in saying that the basis of all fear is the fear of death. This is the ultimate threat, and although I am sure some of you would prefer another subject, I know I am relevant in speaking to this issue. We all have fear of "the great Unknown," and need to come to grips with this problem in the light of the Christian gospel. And what more appropriate time could there be than this Sunday before Memorial Day?

What does the Bible say about death? There are two answers I would give. First, it speaks of death as "the enemy" of God (I Corinthians 15:26). It is the opposite of life and creation, the thwarting of God's purpose for the world. We are never told that death is a natural part of God's creation. It is rather the end result of evil, what Paul calls "the wages of sin" (Romans 6:23). It epitomizes the destruction that evil has brought into the world. When God's intention is perverted, the whole creation is thrown into chaos, and the consequence of this is what the Bible calls "death." It stands over against creation as its antithesis, and seeks to tear down what God has made.

But this is only one part of the answer. The Bible goes on to say that what has been caused by sin can be overcome by God. While it does not underestimate the significance of death nor attempt to evade it, neither does the Bible "give up" to the power of death. Alongside the admittance of its strength is the hope that death has been defeated.

Now there has been great confusion as to the basis of this Christian hope. Ask the average church member about the grounds for his belief in a life after death, and he will probably answer: "the immortality of the soul." This is a familiar phrase among us, and undoubtedly many think of it as a sterling Christian doctrine. The truth is that the phrase is never found in the New Testament, and embodies a view that is at variance with the Gospel. The idea of natural immortality is Greek, not Christian, and is set forth by Plato and not by Paul. According to this tenet, the soul is intrinsically eternal; that is, it has properties all its own that enable it to survive the shock of death. Therefore, survival is made possible by what one is; each person has the power inherent in himself to live forever.

If you will read the New Testament carefully, you will find that the word "immortality" is ascribed only to God. In fact, the writer of I Timothy makes this explicit: "The King of King and Lord of Lord, who alone has immortality." (6:15-16) In the famous passage in I Corinthians 15, Paul speaks of immortality as something we humans must "put on" (verse 53); that is, it is given from without and is not a part of our inherent natures. This means that God alone possesses the power of everlasting life, and thus is the only true basis of hope for human survival. This is why the New Testament says much more about "the resurrection of the body" than "the immortality of the soul." The one concept posits the power within the person himself; the other depends solely on God to call back into existence that which has died.

Now this may seem like an academic distinction, for both result in a continued existence after death. But the difference is profound. The source of hope is grounded in two utterly different powers. For the Christian, the only avenue of possibility is God. Death is overcome, not by the power of man, but by the power of God.

Once you have established the fact that God alone can give everlasting life, then you face the question: "How do you know God can or will perpetuate human life?" In answer to this, John Baillie, the Scottish theologian, sets forth what he calls "the logic of hope." Involved here are two premises that support an inevitable conclusion. The major premise is this: God is a Being of omnipotent Love who creates and conserves value. Add to this the minor premise: Human personality is the highest of all values. Therefore, the conclusion follows: Man will live forever. You must realize that this is solely a theological argument. It sets forth certain characteristics of God, and uses them as the basis of victory over death. Broken down, it says four things about God: That He is love, that He cares for men, that He has a purpose, and that He can accomplish His will. All of this is good, but how can we know it is true? How can we substantiate these assertions about God? Is this faith "manufacturing" hope, projecting wishful thoughts against the background of despair?

The answer to these questions must be found in the Christ-event. It is under the impact of His teachings and experience that this hope is established. As Christians we believe that Jesus was the revelation of God Himself, and that what was true of Him is true of God. In light of this, let us test these four assertions. First, it is obvious from Jesus Christ that God is love. The very fact that He came and the way He conducted Himself makes that manifestly clear. God as seen in Christ is pure outgoing love; as someone has said: "God is the great Extrovert." Second, God cares for individuals. All that He did was directly personal. It is amazing that He showed so little interest in "things." Jesus did

not try to amass wealth or become absorbed in purely aesthetic pursuits. His concern was profoundly personal; people were the thing that interested Him most. And this concern was never selfish or utilitarian, for, third: He had a purpose for men. He did not come to get something from them or to profess a sentimental affection. Rather, His purpose was "that they might have life and have it more abundantly." As a Physician coming to the diseased, He came to make men whole. Therefore, the first three characteristics are clear: God as seen in Christ is loving, concerned for people, and purposeful. The really crucial question is one of power: Is God able to accomplish His purpose in this fallen world? Granted He wants to do these things, does He possess the strength to fulfill them? Because the power of evil had perverted every man that God had created, this was a real question.

As a dramatic answer, God submitted to the "acid test." He came Himself under the strictures of human existence to "have it out" once and for all with evil. Being fully human, the God-man was vulnerable to every conceivable assault, and even death was thrown into the fray. In the rough and tumble of life at its worst, God's ability was put to the test. And the verdict of this ultimate struggle was announced on Easter morning. In the resurrection of Christ, God recorded a decisive fact about Himself. He had matched the "evil one" power for power, and demonstrated that He could achieve His will. Thus, the fourth characteristic is secured, and with it the validity of "the logic of hope." The life of Christ reveals His love and purpose for men; His death and resurrection reveal His ability to carry this through to completion. Thus, in the face of death stands the figure of God—wanting to overcome death and able to do so.

This, then, is the Christian view of death. It is caused by sin and overcome by God. Man has no power in himself to survive the shock of death, but can only look to God. And He who made man in the beginning has revealed His power to raise him up from the effects of death.

All of this means that for the Christian the fear of death is removed. The sting and uncertainty of "the great Beyond" is replaced by a victorious confidence in God. What death can do to us is not enough to defeat God. After death has emptied its arsenal upon us, God is able to raise us up as He did Christ Jesus. Thus, the hope of the Christian is that God is greater than death, that death cannot sweep us so far or damage us so much that He cannot resurrect. Thus, Paul can say triumphantly: "not even death.....can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:39). Its power is not enough; it is overshadowed by the power of God.

This confidence born of Christ plants faith in the place of fear. Realizing we are held by an absolutely competent God, we can look on death, not as a movement out of God's presence, but simply as a change of surroundings. Jesus spoke of God's creation as "my Father's house in which there are many rooms" (John 14:2). He spoke of going ahead of us, preparing a place, and coming again to escort us personally to that abode. Am I violating the New Testament teaching if I say that death to the Christian is simply moving from one room in God's house to another? I think not, for life that is rooted and grounded in God is not separated from His presence by death. Though the surroundings are altered, the basic relationship is indestructible.

Dr. Peter Marshall told of a family in his congregation whose little son was found with an incurable disease. In the last waning months the broken-hearted parents did everything possible to make his days comfortable and happy. One afternoon as the mother was reading about King Arthur's roundtable and all the gallant knights, the little boy startled his mother with the question: "What is it like to die, Mother? Does it hurt?" Tears rushed to her eyes, and she ran from the room. As she sobbed in the kitchen, she prayed for guidance, for she knew the question was significant and demanded an answer. And there by the refrigerator, the answer came. She dried her tears, went back into the room and said: "Kenneth, do you remember how you used to play so hard that you would fall asleep in the den before you even put on your pajamas? That wasn't your room, and the next morning you would be so surprised to wake up in your own bed in your own room. You did not realize it, but while you were asleep, strong arms that loved you very much picked you up and took you there. Well, Kenneth, death is like that; you go to sleep in one room of God's house and wake up in another."

That is it—moving from one room to another in God's house. Therefore, the Christian view of death is one of realism and hope. Death is caused by sin but overcome by God. He is the basis of hope. The Christian answer is not natural immortality, but divine resurrection. It is through and through theological. Thus, the familiar words of Jesus are right to the point; the answer to fear is faith: "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God." (John 14:1)