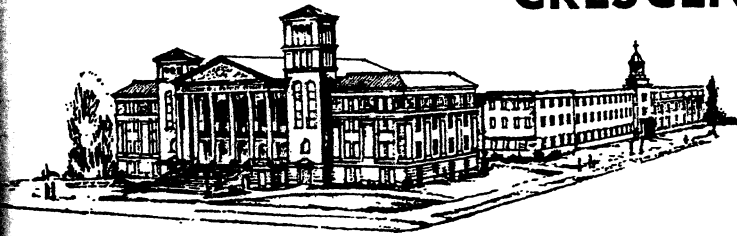


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"PEACE OF MIND"

Sunday Morning, June 11, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
John R. Claypool

Several years ago a young rabbinical student set out to catalogue the acknowledged "goods" in life. He listed many of the realities that you would expect - love, beauty, power, riches, fame - and then submitted it to his spiritual advisor. The old man studied it carefully, and replied, "You have omitted the most important element of all." And then, as if to emphasize his point, he marked through all the items and wrote across them three words: "peace of mind." "This," he said, "is the gift that God reserves for His special proteges."

That assertion has echoed down the years, and its truth has been abundantly confirmed. The young rabbi never forgot it, and in 1946, on the basis of twenty-five years experience, he published a ringing affirmation in a book with those three words as a title. Nor did he stand alone, for its reception was unprecedented, thus revealing the deep modern hunger for inward serenity. Since that time, the phrase "peace of mind" has become a familiar household symbol, and books by the hundreds have followed with its achievement as their aim. And I am sure that the desire for it today is just as intense as it was in 1946 or in any other era. It is undoubtedly true that in this "age of anxiety," so short of breath and weak of nerve, nothing is desired more than the inward serenity we call "peace of mind."

What does the Gospel say about this much sought-after goal? It is certainly no stranger to the Christ-event. Someone has said that peace is "the parenthesis" around the life of Christ. It was prophesied that He would be "the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). On the night of His birth the angelic chorus sang: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace...." (Luke 2:14). In His teaching He repeatedly talked of peace against the background of worry and anxiety (Matthew 6:25-34). And as He brought His ministry to a close, He said to His disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you" (John 14:27). Thus, the message of Christ is saturated with a concern for peace, and is as relevant to the desire of our day as the writings of Norman Vincent Peale.

We must look closely at this Christian concept of peace. Jesus drives a clear distinction between His peace and the peace that the world is seeking: "Not as the world giveth, give I unto you" (John 14:27). What is this distinction? The peace of the world is basically escape and indulgence. People want to be relieved of all tension and separated from all the conflicts and disharmonies of life. They are seeking a state of utter tranquillity that is devoid of pain and filled with pleasure. On the negative side it is the absence of discord and on the positive side the presence of satisfying realities. It is interesting to note that Irene, the Greek goddess of peace, is always associated with the boy god, Pluto, who stands for riches and prosperity. Peace, thus conceived, is the possession of everything one wants. It exists when "everything's going my way" and where every desire is satiated.

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Now unless I am completely out of touch with life, this is the kind of peace our day is seeking. We are intent on material and physical satisfaction, and at the same time anxious to run from all hardship. Alongside our mounting possessions are the alcohol and tranquillizers we consume to evade our problems. Modern man seeks absolute, unmixed bliss by means of escape and indulgence.

Now let me emphasize the fact that Jesus has nothing to say to this kind of desire. The peace about which He speaks is not remotely related to escape or evasion from suffering. On the contrary, His peace involves suffering, yea, even entails suffering in its fulfillment. If you will look at His life there is no absence of conflict or exemption from pain. Tragedy was His constant companion; rejection was His earthly lot; a splintery cross was His final destiny. And His followers were to be no better than their Master. He warned that they too could expect the same treatment. They would be persecuted, reviled, and spitefully used. Jesus made it abundantly clear that the narrow way leading upward was far harder than the broad way leading down. And yet, in the face of all this, He continued to use the word "peace." Little wonder that Paul spoke of it as "the peace that passes understanding" (Philippians 4:7). This peace in the midst of pain; this tranquillity in face of tragedy; it so defies the accepted definition that it appears to be a contradiction. How could Jesus endure such pathos and still talk about "peace"?

This is a significant question, for it forces us to examine the nature of this concept. Just what is peace? As Jesus understood it, it is not an isolated possession but a matter of relationship. The basic Biblical word for peace is "shalom." It means wholeness or completeness. It refers to the state of well-being that is produced by a harmony of parts. Now this is a far-reaching implication, for it means that peace is not an individual achievement or something that can be attained on one's own, but rather is based on unity with the Whole. I do not find peace by "going my own way" and "doing exactly as I please." On the contrary, I find it by bringing myself into harmony with reality. This follows logically from the fact that we are creatures. This world is not of our own making, neither are we sufficient in ourselves. We are dependent by our very natures, and can only find peace when we are united with the Purpose back of life. Peace of mind is not through willful escape or arbitrary self-indulgence. It is being "at one" with the Power that made us; being "in step" with the universe; being "in accord" with the will of God. To seek peace in isolation or to pursue it along selfish lines is to destroy the only possible basis. I have serenity not when I have my own way, but when my person is united with my purpose, when what I am is in one-to-one relation with what I am supposed to be. The structure of Reality is far more important than assertion of self. In yielding myself to "the-God-of-things-as-they-are," I find the wholeness and completeness that the Bible calls "peace."

Once it is established that peace is a relationship with God and not a detached condition, then the apparent contradiction is resolved. The God with whom we are united is a God who suffers. And if peace is "at-oneness" with Him, then suffering is not a contradiction but a mark of authentication.

This supports perfectly the experience of Jesus. He and the Father were "one," and He bore every evidence of perfect peace. Yet He also suffered as intently as any man. He drank the cup of human sin down to its bitterest dregs.

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He experienced evil in all its tragic dimensions. Why? Because the mode of God's purpose is suffering love; the way He is seeking to redeem His creation is vicarious sacrifice. God loves His world but hates what has happened to it. He wants to perfect it, but because it is personal He must use persuasion and not power. To destroy sin by sheer force would mean destroying the sinner, and this He does not want to do. So He seeks by suffering participation to turn back the hearts that have turned away from Him. Jesus knew this was God's method and knew Himself to be God's instrument. At His baptism, the voice of God told Him who He was - the Messiah of God, and how He was to act - like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. And so He accepted that lot and moved out into the deep waters. At no point did He "side-step" or evade. Even at the last, as He hung on the Cross, He refused the wine that would have drugged His senses. He met suffering with open-eyed awareness, never flinching or turning back.

What sustained Him through it all? Two beliefs, I think. One was a faith in the creative power of God. No matter what happened to Him, Jesus believed that God could bring about some good. He could pick up the wreckage of human sin and make something from the pieces. God was never completely outdone or utterly defeated. Out of the blackest night could come some light; out of the deepest void some form. No good was ever a total loss; God could somehow turn it to His purpose. And so Jesus grounded His suffering in the ultimate resourcefulness of God. In the face of death and apparent defeat, He could say: "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). And as He hung on the Cross, with disciples gone and life ebbing away, He cried: "It is finished!" Finished? It looked like nothing had been started, but Jesus believed in God, and so His audacious faith. He had peace in His suffering through His faith in a creative God.

He was also nourished by the belief that the goal was worth it. The "end-in-view" was the redemptive purpose of God, the reconciliation of everything so God could be "all in all." So overwhelming was this goal and so precious were men that no sacrifice was deemed too great for its attainment. There was nothing in the world He was unwilling to do to reclaim man for God. They jeered at Him on the Cross: "Come down, King Jesus. If you are what you claim to be, prove it." But He would not, for to have done so would have been to limit His love. It would have meant there was one thing God was unwilling to do. He stayed, and with Him that limitless love. The goal was so great that anything was "worth it." Abraham Lincoln once wrote to a mother, who lost five sons in the Civil War, and spoke of "the solemn joy that must be yours for laying so costly a sacrifice on the altar of freedom." This was the experience of Jesus - the "solemn joy" of having a part in so great an endeavor.

Thus, the peace which Jesus called His own is rooted in union with God and is nourished by faith in His invincible creativity and in the worthiness of redemption. And this is the kind of peace He offers to us today. Not worldly peace that is selfish in intention and seeks escape and indulgence. Not a guarantee of material success or absolute tranquillity or power over others. No, this peace will more likely get you a cross than a Cadillac; it will involve you rather than release you; it will mean risks instead of security. But in the face of inevitable suffering, it offers three things: fellowship, hope, and purpose; fellowship with "the God-of-things-as-they-are"; hope in the ultimate issues of life, and purpose in having accomplished something eternally worthwhile. Suffering, yes; but something more. And when you really get down to it, this is the only peace there is. In this kind of world absolute tranquillity is an illusion.

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There is "no exit" from pain and evil. The alternates are not peace or suffering; they are suffering in emptiness and hopelessness and despair, or suffering in fellowship and hope and purpose.

So you want peace of mind? May I suggest you come to One who was crucified? His is the only real peace there is in this kind of world.