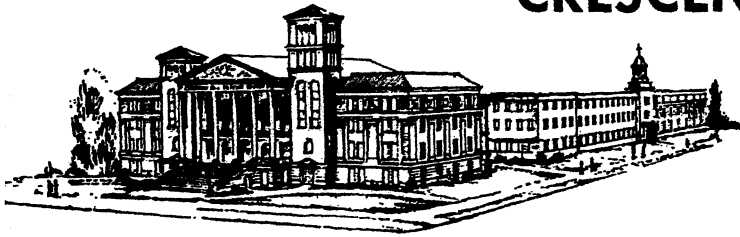


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS



"THE PARADOX OF SALVATION"

Sunday Morning, June 25, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Text: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Matthew 27:39-44

Often times a man is seen more clearly by his enemies than by his friends. The process of conflict is a revealing one, and in the "give-and-take" of actual struggle, the true nature of an opponent is set in bold relief. Thus, the accusations of antagonists are often more incisive than the praise of friends.

This was certainly the case with Jesus of Nazareth. Those who were arrayed against Him were much more perceptive to the realities for which He stood than were His disciples. He was first recognized as "the Son of God," not by His followers, but by a demon-possessed person (Mark 1:24). And the religious hierarchy of that day was quick to sense the implications of His emphases and the threat to themselves that was involved. They reacted against Him more forcefully than His friends responded to Him. Thus, someone has said that a very accurate portrait of Christ could be painted from the accusations that were hurled against Him. They were meant to be degrading slurs, but they actually pointed up facets of truth. The Pharisees called Him "a friend of sinners," a taunt that was ironically an accurate tribute. In derision Pilate designated Him "the King of the Jews," a title that has proved from a spiritual standpoint to be "right" instead of "ridiculous." But perhaps the supreme example of this "ironic truth" is the jeer they hurled at Him on the cross. Literally, "adding insult to injury," they wagged their heads and said: "He saved others, Himself He cannot save" (Matthew 27:34). They meant it as the height of scorn. "Imagine! A fool claiming to do for others what he cannot even do for himself!" Yet back of the voices of ridicule is the Voice of Eternity. What they meant to be a jest was actually a statement of eternal truth. They were right! Precisely because He was saving others, He could not save Himself. This is "the law of redemption" that is rooted in the universe itself. It has always been true that "saving others" and "saving self" are mutually exclusive. He who would save others cannot save himself, and he who would save himself cannot save others. This is as basic as life itself, and can be illustrated a thousand times over.

Several years ago four people stood in the office of the President of the United States and participated in a solemn ceremony. One was a young woman, the second a small boy, the other two a silvery haired couple. They were there to receive the highest military honor this country can give, the Congressional Medal of Honor. It was being awarded to the one who had been their husband, father, and son. As his exploits were read, tears of sadness yet pride welled up in every eye. He had been a young officer, in charge of a frontline party. As one of the men pulled the pin of a grenade and started to throw it into the enemy line, it slipped from his hand and rolled into the midst of his own company. In the split second before it went off, the young officer fell on it and absorbed the full impact in his own body. Here was the time honored principle: "He saved others; himself he

could not save." The price of protecting others was the sacrifice of his own life.

Therefore, what was said in derision was actually a statement of truth. They meant to degrade Him, but in fact they described what was happening and gave unintentional witness to the act of God. This is the paradox at the heart of all salvation; he who would save others cannot save himself.

It would be impossible to understand the God of the Bible apart from this principle. This is a basic reading of His nature. We see Him first as the Creator of heaven and earth. He gives shape and form to "the face of the Deep," and then climaxes His action by making man. To him He gives freedom and power and creativity. He breathes life into his nostrils and man becomes a vital self, a person. Then, as a father setting up his son in business, God sets him down in the beautiful garden to live in the fellowship of the Family. But according to the Bible and most other interpreters of life, man went wrong. He took things in his own hands and set out to do as he pleased. As a result, the meaning of life collapsed, and the world was thrown into utter devastation and corruption. One can find a very modern parallel to this truth. Down at Cape Canaveral, Florida, missiles are tested quite often. The "count down" takes place, the rocket lifts off the pad, but then something goes wrong and it disintegrates in mid-air. So with God's experiment. To put it in modern terms, "Operation Man" began as planned, but soon after it started something went amiss and the whole thing fell apart, leaving God's earth a mass of twisted wreckage.

How would God react to calamity? Would He walk off in disgust and leave His shattered creation to itself? No. Would He destroy the whole business, withdrawing the power of existence and let everything dissolve back into the nothingness from whence it came? No. Would He wring His hands in horror but be powerless to do anything constructive? No. Then there was but one course left to take: to redeem creation for its intended goal. God must pick up the pieces of the wreckage and so rebuild that He still achieves His purpose. The God of the Bible is always the God of redemption; that He set His hand to this task is the presupposition of the whole narrative.

But ends and means are two different things. Once you have set your goals, the real difficulty must be faced. How could He achieve this aim? The very nature of man intensified the problem. Had creation been only a machine, a little external readjustment might have done the trick. Or if man were only a puppet, tied to God by a thousand cosmic strings, the answer would have been simple: coerce man to reform. But creation was not mechanical or deterministic; it was personal, free, voluntary. This was why man fell and why the problem of redemption was so great. God could not coerce or force; to do so would have been to destroy the essence of man. He could only persuade and plead. He had to bring man to a voluntary response. He had to act so that man would react of his own accord. Nothing could be harder - to get a man who had gone wrong to want to change; to try to call back in freedom that which had chosen to depart.

God realized he must bring man to "a moment of truth." He must make man see himself as he was - the depth of his plight, and also as he ought to be. He must reveal to man his present condition and remind him of his eternal destiny. He must get man to "come to himself" - to his actual self in sin and his real self in God's purpose. This truth must break into man's life and revolutionize him.

How could this be done? Here was the paradox of salvation. It could not be done without great cost to God. Because of the depth and nature of the problem, there were no easy short-cuts. Not even God could "push a button" or "send a

memorandum" and solve this condition. To use another modern phrase, it demanded "personal diplomacy." God must go Himself, enter the realm of corruption, and seek by suffering participation to make an impact on man's heart. The only way was to become involved. He could not save His creatures and at the same time spare Himself. So He did just this in Jesus Christ. He came as the embodiment of Ideal Man in a fallen world. And who He was and what happened to Him spoke directly to man's need. Men were reminded of God's purpose by the way He lived; and in seeing Him crushed and mangled they saw their own condition. Here was the revelation and reminder that served as "a spiritual shock treatment." Man's old pattern of complacency and insensitivity was shattered. He saw his need and hope in the saving act of Christ, and it had momentous effect. Through Him redemption was begun; man was called out and back, to walk again the high road of God's purpose. And it all stemmed from God's willingness to seek through innocent suffering a change of heart in man.

Of all redemptive powers, a willing sufferer is still the most potent. In the fifth century there lived a monk by the name of Telemachus. He began a life of asceticism in the desert, seeking contact with God by withdrawal from the world. But he became convinced that this was selfish, and that he must serve God by helping to reclaim men. So he set out for the greatest city of the Empire, Rome. Still in his hermit's robes he arrived and followed the crowds to a great arena where the gladiators fought. Christians were no longer "thrown to the lions," but captured enemies were forced to fight each other to death. Telemachus was appalled at such brutality and the lust of the crowd, and almost without realizing it jumped into the arena and separated the gladiators. At first the crowd was amused, but when he continued to interfere they became aroused and started hurling stones. Finally, at the command of the director, a gladiator took a sword and stabbed Telemachus to death. But suddenly a hush fell over the crowd. Seeing a holy man so brutally murdered had a startling effect. In him they saw a better way, and in what happened to him the evil of their own way. The stands began to empty, and the Roman games were never played again. As the historian Gibbon says: "His death was more useful to mankind than his life." His innocent sacrifice had set in motion the power of redemption. And so with God in Christ; His coming in life and death and resurrection struck man at his most vulnerable point, and by revealing sin and reminding of purpose called man back to Himself.

This "law of redemption" is a commentary on the Christian God. He saved others, because He would not save Himself. And you find this note from the beginning to the end of the Bible. It is embodied in the Old Testament principle that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin." It is seen in the mission of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. It runs clear through the record to visions of heaven in the book of Revelation. There the Seer speaks of the gates to heaven being "made of pearl" (Revelations 21:21). The significance of this symbolism lies in the process by which this lovely stone is formed. It all begins when a grain of sand gets inside the shell of an oyster. The gritty particle cuts the tender membrane, and in reaction the oyster secretes a milky-like substance that solidifies around the sand. This process continues until the oyster dies, and when the shell is opened there stands a pearl - the product of the suffering of something else. The Seer places this stone over the portals of glory to remind all who enter that they do so because of the suffering of Another. For it is true: "He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquity; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4-5).

At the heart of our salvation is a paradox: "He saved others; Himself He could not save." Our God chose to save us rather than Himself. And what does this mean? It means that we must be caught up in the same movement. If God fulfills Himself by

Sunday Morning, June 25, 1961

loving sacrifice, we who would be like Him must do the same. To be "saved" does not mean that we have something we can selfishly enjoy. It means that we have been rescued from self and are now willing to be spent for others. On six different occasions (Matthew 10:37-39; Mark 8:34-37; Luke 9:25-27; 14:25-27; 17:33; John 12:52) Jesus reiterated this theme: "He who findeth his life shall lose it; but he that loseth his life for my sake will find it." The way of Christianity is life through death, getting by giving, finding by losing. This is true of God, true of individual life, and true of institutions. In our willingness to suffer that others might be saved, we fulfill ourselves.

I shall never forget hearing Dr. Jitsuo Morikawa tell of going to the First Baptist Church of Chicago. The call came in the early 1940's, while the second World War was raging. He was a Japanese-American, and thus subject to all the hatred of those war years. He found the church in a section that was rapidly shifting population. Many different racial groups were living nearby and the church had relatively few members. He cautioned them against calling him because of the popular sentiment, but was impressed by what they told him. The church expressed its desire to minister to its immediate area, which meant opening its doors to all people. His nationality, they said, would symbolize this desire. He asked: "Don't you realize the peril of such a course in this world of prejudice?" To which they answered, "Dr. Morikawa, the First Baptist Church is willing to die for Jesus Christ." He went, and out of this spirit grew one of the most vibrant churches in America.

Yes, the paradox is at the heart of our faith. We cannot save others and at the same time save ourselves. It is true of God; therefore, it must be true of individual Christians and Christian institutions: "He saved others; Himself He could not save."