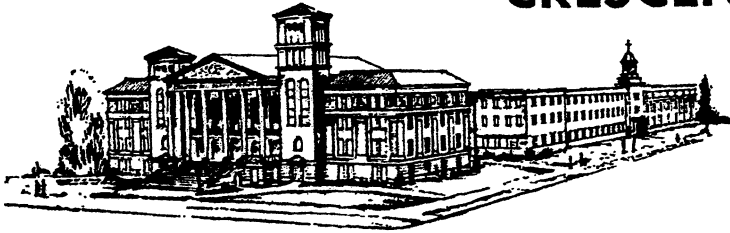


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"WE KNOW IN PART"



Sunday Morning, September 10, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: I Corinthians 13:8-13

Several years ago I heard of a minister who went to visit in the home of one of his members. As he stepped up on the porch, he saw a little face peering out the window and heard a childish voice exclaim: "Come quick, Mother, come quick! Here comes Mr. God." Now of course from a literal standpoint this was a case of mistaken identity, for no minister, no matter how effective, should ever be confused with Deity. And yet in a more practical sense, what the child said possessed real insight; namely, that by his very function the minister is called on to interpret God in times of crisis. Over and over again people have looked up from the depths of despair and asked me why God acted or failed to act in a certain way. For all of his many ministerial duties, none is more central than that of interpreting God's ways with men.

One afternoon about three years ago I drove out into the country from the little town in Tennessee where I served. I went into a simple farm home, and sat down with an elderly couple whose whole lives had been devastated by the events of the last three days. They had one son, their pride and joy, and through the years he had become the main-spring of their existence. He had never married, and thus had assumed full responsibility for all the affairs of the household. Three nights before, he had gotten up from the supper table, stepped out in the yard, put a gun to his temple, and blown his brains out. And there we sat in the silence - the excitement was over, the funeral was a thing of the past, the crowds were gone - and these two stunned people were slowly beginning to realize the implications of what had happened. The mother began to cry softly, and the old man kept shaking his head. And long before the words were formed I knew what they were going to ask. "Why, Brother John, why?", they said. "Where was God last Tuesday night? What have we done to deserve this? What are we going to do? Why, why, oh why...?" There, face to face with unrelieved tragedy, I was called on to interpret God to those people.

What do you say at a time like that? When life knocks you to the ground and the whole structure of life suddenly collapses around you, how do you explain it to people? It was not easy then, and it never is easy, but as I sat there praying for a means whereby I could mediate hope, I thought of four words in the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians - "we know in part." Somehow these took shape in my mind, and as I began to talk a sense of calm seemed to settle in that room. I honestly believe the Holy Comforter found His way into their hearts that day by means of those words. And because they were meaningful to them, it occurred to me they might be meaningful to some of you. I have no idea what all of you have experienced, are experiencing, or will experience. Undoubtedly, however, "the dark days" are not altogether foreign; therefore, I want to try to interpret God to you this morning by means of these four words: "We know in part."

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It appears to me that in these words Paul is setting forth two assertions. First of all he says: we do not know everything. Our knowledge is limited; our understanding is fragmentary; there is a mystery enshrouding events that we cannot fathom. There are times in life that we have to confess our ignorance and simply admit that we have no clear explanation. Now sometimes when I do this in all honesty, I detect a slight note of disappointment in those I am trying to help. Somehow people have the notion that a preacher has all the answers and that he can give a convincing and obvious explanation to every situation. They look to us as "spiritual magicians" who by some esoteric "mumbo-jumbo" can make all problems evaporate in thin air. But we are not so able; ministers are men with feet of clay and insight that is partial. We too often stand before a mystery that strikes dumb any effort to explain away. The truth is: we do not know everything; "we know in part and we prophecy in part." Many of God's dealings with us are hidden by the clouds of mystery.

Now while this admission may be somewhat disappointing, I am confident it is more helpful than a cheap and easy answer that betrays no understanding of the problem. I think oftentimes as Christians our pride has hindered our effectiveness in this area. We feel so constrained "to say something" and to maintain the adequacy of our religion that we fail to comprehend fully the depth of another's plight. I well remember an experience in college when I was having a terrific struggle with religious doubt. I shared this with a friend and he slapped me on the back and said: "Don't worry about it. Only believe, only believe!" I can testify that those words were of no help at all; in fact, they hurt, for I realized that the person had not even begun to recognize the nature of my difficulty. And herein is a warning to all would-be comforters: we can cut ourselves off from those we are trying to help if our solutions reflect no perception of the problem. A person in desperate straits is not helped by an answer that minimizes the need. You just do not walk up to a mother whose child is dying with leukemia and say: "Cheer up, everything is going to be all right." Or you do not go to a man whose wife has just left him and his three children and say: "Buck up, old chap, the best is yet to be." If you cannot give real help, the least you can do is recognize the problem. And I firmly believe that in the end to admit we do not know is better than a superficial answer that really is subtle mockery.

And many, many times this is all that we can do. We cannot explain, we cannot rationalize, we cannot divert attention; we simply have to acknowledge the darkness, and go and stand with our brother in silence. I heard once of a man whose wagon got stuck in a ditch. He waited and waited and finally a stranger came along who offered to help. They worked together, and after about an hour got the wagon back up on the road. The man who had been stuck was deeply grateful and said to his helper: "I want you to know that if I ever come up on you and you're stuck, I'll stop and help you all I can. And if I can't help you, I'll climb up and sit beside you till help does come." And at times that is all we can do, for "we know in part." The first point to be made is an honest confession: we simply cannot comprehend all that happens in life. On every side there is a mystery we cannot dispel.

But Paul says a second thing in these words. Alongside his admission that we do not know everything is the assertion that we do know something. Now it is one thing to say: "We do not know everything"; it is something else to say: "We do not know anything." For all his honesty, Paul was not "an agnostic in despair." He did have some knowledge that was of real value in life. And what did Paul know? The question can be answered in one word: Christ. By his own admission

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this was the center of his faith; he says flatly: "For me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21). To use a long theological term, Paul's thinking was "Christological" through and through; that is, it was based on Him and derived from Him exclusively. The coming of Christ was an event of definitive religious significance for Paul. But precisely what about this Christ-event is so meaningful? Paul would probably have begun with the earliest confession about Christ: the facts that He lived, died, and arose again. This is the heart of "the kerygma," the first proclamation about Jesus, and it contains real truth for our problem. Let us ponder these facts more carefully.

First of all, Christ lived. What does this mean for us? When you realize who Paul thought Christ was - namely "the visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) - then the significance is obvious. For it means that God Himself took the pains to visit this earth in human form; that He who could have stayed in the tranquillity of heaven chose to descend into this "vale of suffering." Why did He do it? There can be but one answer - He was concerned about the fate of this world. One of the living legends of our day is Dr. Albert Schweitzer of the Lambarene. The story of his life is by now well-known. At thirty years of age, he turned from promising careers in both theology and music to study medicine and go to Equatorial Africa as a jungle doctor. When he first announced his decision, his friends and family were aghast, and accused him of all kinds of motives. They suggested professional disappointment or romantic reverses and even some hidden crime. But through it all he steadfastly pointed to the real explanation - his concern for the people of that neglected area. This and this alone accounts for these fifty years of humane service. And once the identity of Christ is accepted, the only conclusion one can reach about His coming is that what happens to us makes a difference to God. Christ lived, and because of this we know of God's concern.

Second, Christ died. The implications of this event are too numerous for me to exhaust, but let me point to one obvious truth. For Christ to die means that God has taken the orbit of human tragedy and made it His own through first-hand experience. This is a side of the Incarnation that our suffering age is just beginning to discover. The life of Christ was not an idyllic "bed of roses"; He experienced the jagged edge of evil as much as anyone who ever lived upon this earth. Do you think your lot in life is difficult? Then observe the nature of His pilgrimage. Were you born into this world amid swirling rumors of suspicion? Was your mother a peasant girl from a family of no standing? Did you come into a conquered land that was regarded as "the backside of Nowhere"? Did you have to beat out a living by the work of your hands? Did you ever live a peasant's existence on the edge of starvation? Did your mother and brothers ever look on you as a demented fanatic? Did you ever try to teach and no one understand? Did you ever heal and feed folk and then watch them turn away one by one? Were you ever betrayed by a close friend for thirty pieces of silver? Did you ever know the agony of doubt and cry out from a slow death on the Cross - "My God, my God, why...?" Pathetic as all this sounds, remember - this was the experience of God-as-man. And this means that He is now bound to us by the intimate bond of shared experience. This is the way we feel closest to each other - by having traveled the same road. All human groups are based on a common experience - family, co-workers, school-mates, army-buddies and the like. And to say Christ died brings God into intimate contact with life as we know it. He is not aloof or removed; He is "one-with-us," He understands, because by first-hand experience He knows what it is like to live and die upon this earth.

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There is one more fact: Christ arose from the grave. This is the keystone that completes the arch of hope. If God only cared and understood but had no power to accomplish His purpose, then in the end our plight is hopeless. But if in the context of creation He could demonstrate His victorious ability, then hope would be real. And this is precisely what happened in the resurrection of Christ. In the face of all that evil could do - even the blow of death - Christ stood in the door of the empty tomb, the obvious Victor over all. I heard once of an inventor who worked out a magnificent machine. He sold the idea to a company and it was put into operation. But it kept breaking down. The inventor sent several assistants but they were ineffective. Finally he came himself and located the point where the trouble always occurred. The president of the company stated the issue plainly: either he must demonstrate a way to overcome the breakdown, or the machine as it stood must be judged a failure. With this challenge the inventor went to work, discovered a solution, and thus established the success of his invention. Does this analogy say anything about God? Yes, for He once created a world, and set it into motion. But it kept breaking down, always at the point of man's freedom. Evil became so strong that the challenge before God was ultimate: either demonstrate that evil could be overcome or write off the whole creation as a failure. So within the very circumstance of life, in the context of human freedom and demonic evil, God came as a Man and proved His supremacy. And if God could do this, it means that this world is redeemable, that even in the face of tragedy God can effect His purpose. The resurrection of Christ is a clue to God's power and the basis of human hope.

These three facts comprised what Paul knew. There was mystery, to be sure, but there was also knowledge. And this is what I offered to that grieving couple in Tennessee. I confessed that I did not understand it all; there was much before which I had to stand in silence. But I did know that God was concerned for them, that He understood the bitterness of their tragedy, and that He had the power to make some good of even the worst circumstances.

And this is my message to you this morning. "We know in part": this means that we do not know everything, but we do know something. And because of Christ, what we do know is enough!