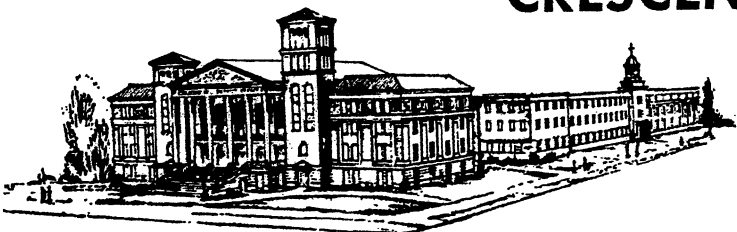


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE LIFE OF THE SOUL"



Sunday Morning, September 17, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Isaiah 6:1-8

The questions of an inquiring child can be the occasion for learning as well as teaching. Not long ago a mother was telling me about her little son's first experience attending a church service. The mother confessed that it was hard to pay attention because of the incessant stream of questions. The little boy wanted to know everything - who the preacher was, why the people shut their eyes, why the folks in the front wore robes, and what happened to the money they collected. Nor did this process end when the service was over; all week long he kept up this bombardment of curiosity. What interested me most was the mother's reaction to all this. She admitted that it was a most revealing experience within her own self. For under this pressure she realized how much she was taking for granted and how unthinking her worship routine had become. She concluded with insight: "It is veritably true that 'a little child shall lead them!' It took his curiosity to bring meaning back to my worship."

This mother had put her finger on one of the perennial problems and continuing needs of our religion. The problem is that of forms losing their content, getting so familiar with the same old routine that it becomes an empty exercise. The need is to reaffirm constantly the basic nature and purpose of what we are doing, that it may stay alive with freshness. This morning I want us to do just that for the very activity in which we are now engaged. I want us to stop, look around, and ask with child-like curiosity: what are we doing? This is a regular morning worship service: why are we here? What do we hope to accomplish? Why do we always act in this particular way? In short, what is the meaning of worship?

The best place to begin is with definitions. If we can settle the nature of the central reality, then many of the other questions will fall in place. The best definition of worship I know came to me quite by surprise some thirteen years ago. I rounded a curve of a dusty mountain road in North Carolina and there sat a beautiful little church in a shaded glen. On its sign were written these words: "Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, founded 1821" and this four word inscription: "Where Men Meet God." As I drove away I could not think of a better way to describe what should be happening in a church. For worship is essentially "a meeting." It is the encounter of personal spirits, the meaningful contact between a gracious Creator and responding creatures. It is the coming together of two spirits in such a way that mutuality is experienced and fellowship born. Worship is "a rendezvous with Mystery," a relationship within time with the Timeless and Eternal One.

The effect of the experience is more than mere sensation. As the worshiper comes in contact with God Himself, he is given a glimpse into the nature of reality. The very structure of life is laid open, and man sees those values that are eternal and abiding. To put it very bluntly, as the worshiper sees more of God he also sees more of life. A standard of values is created which permeates all of existence. In an experience of personal fellowship, man realizes that reality itself is profoundly personal. The highest value is not to be found in abstract ideas or material substance; it resides in that mysterious entity called personality, the ability to relate and to communicate and have fellowship. This is what is paramount in life - one's relationship to God and secondarily to his fellow creatures. When the writer of John's Gospel says: "This is eternal life - to know the only true God and Him who He hath sent" (John 17:3), he is stating the truth that is learned in worship. Here we come in contact with "things-as-they-are," and out of this we derive a sense of companionship with God and an appreciation of the structure of Reality.

That insight that comes through worship is powerfully confirmed in life. If we stop to think about it, all of the real meaning of our lives is bound up with people. What satisfaction would all the knowledge of the world really be if there were no one with whom to share it? Or what material object could really bring much joy if we lived a solitary existence? We are so made that we fulfill ourselves only in relation to and in fellowship with the Person - God - and other personalities. It is this fundamental insight that comes through worship. In the personal encounter of God and man, the heart of existence is made known.

With this concept clearly in our minds, we can now move on to answer the several questions that may arise. When one asks: "Why should we worship?" we answer that relationships must be nourished and enriched if they survive. Since both God and man are dynamic beings, the relationship is an ever-moving thing. It requires careful thought and first attention. Meaningful growth does not happen automatically; it comes as a result of concentrated effort. We know from our human relationships that neglect leads to deterioration. Many times couples come to me in the straits of marital difficulty, and when we begin to explore, it comes out that somewhere along the way they have failed to cultivate the tie between them. They stop giving each other creative attention, being so concerned with other pursuits that only the "leftovers" of time and energy remain for the marriage. Under this kind of treatment the relationship is bound to suffer. And so it is with our bond to the Eternal. If you never speak to God or think about Him or give anything to Him, you cannot grow spiritually. Because life is moving and we are personal, we have to give specific attention to our relationship to Him.

Another question that might be asked is this: "Why do we worship on Sunday and in a group? Could we worship anytime and anywhere without this paraphernalia?" The answer is that such is possible, but very difficult. The experience of man has demonstrated that we can best meet our needs through a stated schedule and in the company of others. Take the matter of eating for example. You could feed your body whenever it struck you and in absolute solitude. But most men have found it is better to establish certain times and become habituated to this tempo. They come nearer eating as they should three times a day than in a haphazard pattern. And who does not realize the advantage of eating with others? All the time I hear people who live alone say that it is so hard to eat properly when you are always by yourself. Now the same reasoning applies to public worship. We are encouraged to grow in this area when at certain times we are confronted with this need, and we find "the going" much more pleasant because others are doing the same thing. The best evidence for the value of public worship is to examine what you do on the Sundays

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you fail to go to church. Honestly now, do you praise God, pray, read the Bible and reflect upon His truth when you are on your own? Of course you could, but the truth is we do not. I testify personally to the radical difference that stated services make in my spiritual activity, and this is the best argument for them. Human nature being what it is, we need the stimulation of appointed hours and human comradeship.

Another question that will inevitably arise is: "Why do we follow this particular order? What is the purpose of all the ritual with which we go through?" My answer here is that each part is a stimulant to enriching the central Relationship. Everything we do here is aimed at creating a conductive atmosphere for individual worship. Like matches set to a fuse, these acts seek to set in motion your own personal fellowship with God. Take our sequence this morning for example. Visualize that we are here to have a visit with the King. We are to hear Him speak and are to communicate with Him; every part has some reference to Him. As we gather during the prelude, there should be anticipation and meditation. The call to worship signals His arrival. The hour is struck, a word is spoken to call our attention, a prayer of invitation is offered, and then as if He suddenly appears we break forth in a glad salutation: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Next we join in singing a hymn, using the whole range of intellectual and emotional powers to express our adoration to God. Then the scripture is read - the word of the King to us, and again we respond: "Glory be to the Father..." Then we pray; the minister leads, but his words simply evoke prayers of our own as we converse with Him. Next we bring Him an offering; then the choir testifies in a way that enriches as well as informs, and then the spokesman of the King comes with a message from Him to His people. Do you see how it all points to the Relationship? Every facet is designed to develop and enhance this experience.

But is this dramatic audience with the King what you have experienced this morning? I hope so, but I fear not. For many the ritual is a remote performance, something they observe as detached spectators but not something in which they participate with personal involvement. I am constrained to make an honest confession at this point. I was raised in the church and knew its forms by rote, but it was not until I decided to be a minister and was almost through college that I woke up to the meaning of a whole worship service. I was worshipping in a church in Texas, going through a real period of spiritual depression, and we were singing the last stanza of "How Firm a Foundation." I was familiar with its tune and knew its words by memory, but for the first time that morning I saw the message it contained:

"That soul who on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to
shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!"

This was a word straight to me, precisely to my need. I sat down and read the other verses and realized all that I had been missing these years as the words passed in and out of my mind with no significance. I also remember the first time a public prayer moved me to pray. I had always known to bow my head and close my eyes, but I either let my mind wander or simply listened to another person talk. This night the prayer that was offered called forth a plea within me; as he expressed himself it stimulated me to pour out my heart to God. And only then did I realize why the preacher used to say: "Let us all pray" or called on someone "to lead" in prayer.

I imagine that my experience is not too uncommon, for in my opinion this is the most obvious weakness of our denomination. We have excelled in evangelism and perfected our program of activities, but in terms of real worship we are still "babes in Christ." There is little sense of involvement or participation on the part of the worshiper. We are spectators; we come to listen and to watch but do not get caught up in the process.

But this we must learn to do, for it is at the very heart of our religion. If God is personal and we are persons, and if the whole thing is summed in Him, "whom to know aright is life everlasting," then worship is no optional exercise alongside others; it is the most important thing we do. I almost get frightened when I read Jesus' words: "Depart from Me, I never knew you!" (Matthew 7:23). For here it seems that the quality of relation that we have allowed Him to build is the real hinge for eternity. If through failure to worship we have not come to know and be known by Him, we are cut off from our only Source of eternal hope. Nor can I forget that picture in John 10 where Jesus depicts Himself as the Good Shepherd and His sheep as those who "know" His voice. They tell me that still today Palestinian shepherds let their flocks mingle together when they find some fertile valley. But then at evening, the shepherd steps up on the hillside, lifts his melodious voice, and there is a shivering among the flock as one by one each group falls in step behind their own. Having learned to recognize his voice, they are bound to him.

And someday, when this earth's sun is about to set over all the mass of earthly humanity, God in Christ will lift His call, and those who through worship have learned to recognize His tones will follow Him into "the far Country" of everlasting life. And the others, who have spent their three score and ten doing things that do not really matter and therefore have developed no capacity to hear, will find themselves cut off - lost - separated - forever. Why? They do not possess what only worship can create - a relationship to God.

Therefore, let me affirm that worship is central. What we are doing right now is of the first order, for the very essence of our purpose here on earth is "to know Him" and "to know aright." And how can we know? Worship, my friend, worship!