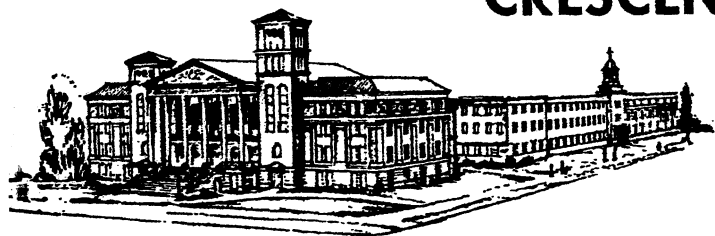


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"I SAT WHERE HE SAT"



Sunday Morning, November 26, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Ezekiel 3: 12-15; Hebrew 4:14-16

The prophet Ezekiel is often called "the father of Judaism." There would be no way to estimate his influence, either on his own contemporaries at the time of the Exile or on those who were to come after him. He is an intriguing figure, and many attempts have been made to analyze his unique power. Some attribute it to the ecstatic quality of his ministry. He was a mystic who saw visions and heard sounds and spoke in poetic analogies. Others point out the dramatic nature of his work. He developed the use of "prophetic symbolism" to its height. He did not rely solely on words. Often he would act out his message, like the time he shaved his head and scattered the hairs to illustrate the dispersion of the Jews in the Exile. In this way he dramatized that which he wanted to communicate. Certainly these factors were significant, and many others could be recognized. But I have my own theory on this matter. It is based on these words in the middle of the third chapter: "I came to them of the captivity at Tel-a-bib, that dwell by the river Chebar, and I sat where they sat, and I was there overwhelmed among them for seven days" (Ezekiel 3:15). Here was the secret: having been commissioned by God, he identified himself with the people to whom he was to speak. He put himself alongside them; he subjected himself to the same situation; he experienced what they experienced. And it was because of this, I think, that his message had such a creative effect.

Now this whole process of identification is of great interest to me. Today we find ourselves in much the same position as were those prophets of old; we want to be the effective instruments of God's purpose. But often the practical knowledge of how to do this is not as great as the desire. Thus, we could learn much from Ezekiel's approach to the task. This morning I want us to consider this matter of "sitting where others sit" - to indulge in a little "spiritual geography" - and try to discover the unique opportunities of this particular place. What is there about "sitting where another sits" that is so significant? I would suggest three answers.

First of all, this is the place of true understanding. If you are really concerned for factual knowledge, there is no substitute for direct experience. Every schoolboy knows the difference between second-hand hearsay and first-hand certainty. There is quite a contrast between "knowing about" something and "knowing" something. One of the earliest distinctions in philosophic thought was between "appearance" and "essence." A thing as it is in itself might be quite different from what it looks like from without. And so it is with all true understanding; you must get on the inside, must see it from the perspective of the actual, if you are to discern the real nature of the case.

This is one of the first laws of scientific diagnosis. To discover why certain conditions exist, one must try to comprehend a situation just as it is. I

Sunday Morning, November 26, 1961

heard once of a train engineer who had "blackout spells" every time he came to a certain turn in his run. This greatly affected his working ability, and he went to a diagnostician to find out what was wrong. No physical cause could be located, and finally as a last resort, the doctor rode with him on a typical day's run. Sure enough, at the same place, the engineer passed out, but the alert eye of the doctor spotted the cause. The engineer always wore a stiff collar, and when he would lean out to manipulate the curve, the collar would press against a vein in his neck and cut off circulation. A solution was found - how? Not by sitting detached in an office, but by the doctor putting himself alongside the actual situation.

This is the best way to authentic knowledge, and if our ministry is to be based on fact, we must start right here. How often we misjudge a condition or jump to a wrong conclusion because we deal only in appearances! Much of the ineffectiveness of our work may root back to this very point: we do not put ourselves in another's shoes, and thus we do not discover all the facts. I can recall so many times when I was completely "wide of the mark" because I structured my opinions only on what appeared to be. There was a seminary contemporary of mine who would walk right by you in the hall and never speak. I concluded he was an arrogant snob, and structured my relationship to him accordingly. Then I happened to preach in his home church and was with him for a week. During this time I learned he had a stigmatism that prevented him from seeing clearly things that were close at hand. He did not speak because he could not recognize anyone; he was actually a most humble, personable sort. But I did not sense this until "I sat where he sat" and learned all the facts. Or again, I remember going to a subdivision meeting in Decatur where a county commissioner was to speak. When introduced, he remained seated and delivered his talk in that position. I was in the back and could not see very well, and I recall being quite provoked that he would take such a liberty. After the meeting had ended, I was startled to see a Negro man roll in a wheel chair and only then realized that the commissioner had no legs - he was a double amputee veteran of World War II. My resentment was based on only part of the facts. You could probably recall similar incidents in your experience, where judgments were pronounced before you really understood everything that was involved. We would be far better off to hold our tongues until all the evidence is in. We too quickly condemn what we too little understand. The old cliché is true: "The things we are 'down on' are often the very things we are not 'up on'." I would not go so far as to say "to know all is to forgive all," for this denies any personal responsibility. But I would say to know all would change many of our opinions, and give us a better basis to be used of God. And the way to such knowledge is "to sit where others sit." This is the place of true understanding.

A second description is this: it is the place of redemptive possibility. Now I need not belabor the fact that shared experience creates unique rapport. It is a commonplace of knowledge to realize that bridges of relationship spring up between those who have walked the same way. You somehow feel closer and more open to another if you sense that he understands your particular situation. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick had a nervous breakdown while he was in divinity school. In his autobiography he depicts the horror of this experience, but then goes on to say that it had been a tremendous help in his later ministry. For people would come to him in this condition, and to their utter amazement he would begin to describe their sleepless nights and the ever-working mind and the depression and the utter lack of control. Immediately new possibilities of help would develop between these two, for here was one "who had sat where they sat." This is the finest conceivable opening, for people are most responsive to those whom they feel can understand.

Sunday Morning, November 26, 1961

Certainly the success of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and Recovery, Incorporated, are a testimony to the power of mutuality.

But such redemptive possibility is not limited to actual experience. We have the power to empathize, to project ourselves into a situation with understanding, and this, too, is an approach that offers hope. Just as we often fail in not getting all the facts, so also we fail in attempting a "remote redemption." Too often the church has contented herself in handing down advice or heaping condemnation on the evildoer. The trouble here is that we are "over against" and not "alongside of." No doctor ever sets a broken leg by standing across the street and saying: "You should not have done that; follow my instructions and set the leg yourself." And so the church will have little effect if she remains aloof and detached. In changing a life, a whisper is much more effective than a shout. If you are so far away you have to shout, the effect of your words will be dissipated before they reach their goal. But if you are close enough to whisper, they can have great effect. Men never confess to their critics. If they sense that your only interest in them is to impose your ideas upon them, they will quickly erect a defense. But if they see you there by their side, and sense that you are present in love to lift them, then they may heed your words.

Was not this a major difference in John the Baptist and the One who came after him? John was a fierce and righteous prophet. He confronted men with their sin and need of repentance. Had he met the woman of Samaria at the well of Jacob, he would probably have described her as what she was, and driven her further away into misery. Now Jesus was no less interested in righteousness, but His approach was quite different. He looked on her with real concern. He saw her, first of all, not with eyes of condemnation, but with eyes of understanding. Here was one who had been loved by many but knew herself unloved. Here was one who had given herself to loving but had never truly loved. She had been intimate with many but close to none. And so He began to talk to her about her greatest need. Here was One who was not trying to use her, who was not lashing out in bitter denunciation, and in the warmth of such understanding her defenses fell. New life poured in, and she rushed back to Sychar to tell her friends. How did she describe it? "He told me all the things I ever did" (John 4:39). What she really meant was: He understood me! He took the trouble to sit where she sat, and it opened the way to rebuild a life that was in ruins. Yes, the second thing to be said is that this is the place of redemptive possibility.

But there is one other aspect: this is the place where the uniqueness of the Christian God can be seen. The longer I study the religion of Christ, the more aware I become of its radical distinctiveness. If you do not try to get specific, you can rest in the easy relativism that says "one religion is as good as another." But if you take seriously what can be found in one that is absent everywhere else, then the matter of uniqueness becomes apparent. And at no point does Christianity stand out in such bold relief as right here: we have a God who in Christ came and "sat where we sit." I challenge you to find such a concept in other religion. In the great religions of the East, like Buddhism or Hinduism, God is conceived in impersonal terms. He is the Absolute that is above all human feeling or earthly involvement. If God felt, they argue, He would be controlled by those who cause such feeling, and thus not be the Ultimate. He is literally "the Unmoved Mover," utterly detached from the affairs of men. A similar chasm is found in the religions of the West. The Greek heritage is to conceive God as lost in contemplation of the Eternal and blissfully unaware of the movements in the realm of change. Even the Hebrews picture God in terms of otherness. He is preeminently "the holy One of

Sunday Morning, November 26, 1961

Israel," and holiness literally means "to be separated," different, distinct. He thunders from Sinai and no one could bear to look upon His Presence.

You see, these are the gods of the world's religions, but nowhere do they approximate the daring Christian idea. Only here is the God who is "one-with-us," taking our lot unto Himself, and making us His own through direct experience. All that has been said for this process of identification can be said about God in Christ. He has placed Himself at the heart of our existence, and thus He understands our plight and is present to save. You cannot say: "Oh, God would not understand!" Listen: "He was tempted at all points like as we are" (Hebrew 4:15). There is no point in human experience where God cannot say: "I have been there." In fact, He knows more fully than we can ever know the depth of evil. He experienced everything that sin can do. We have succumbed to only a part. Just as a prizefighter who goes the full fifteen rounds and absorbs the assaults of the opponent knows more about them than the fighter who gets knocked out in the first round, so God in Christ experienced more of evil than we could ever know. He was tempted like every man, but no man was ever tempted like He was. Yes, He knows fully what life is like, and through His identification we can receive from Him salvation. The way is open for Him to redeem us; He does not shout or denounce. He simply comes where we are, touches us on the shoulder, and whispers: "Follow me." Like a rescuing guide, who can lead us out of a cave in which we are lost, he comes to us where we are and leads us to where we ought to be. Here, as nowhere else, can you appreciate God in Christ for what He is.

So there you have the process of identification: "I sat where they sat." What is it? Good epistemology - yes, the best way to achieve true understanding. Good psychology - yes, the best way to affect a person redemptively. But most of all, it is good theology, for this is a description of our God - He sat where we sit. And this becomes both the salvation and the challenge of the Church. We are to do as He has done - go and identify ourselves in love with the unredeemed.

Here we are; there is the needy person. Over there, Church, please.....be seated!