



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE DESIRE OF ALL NATIONS"

Sunday Morning, December 24, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Isaiah 9:1-7

One of the most influential literary figures of this generation is the late French writer, Albert Camus. In 1948 he was invited to address a group of priests at a Dominican Monastery, and his introductory remarks were quite illuminating. He first of all stated what they already knew - that he himself was not a Christian believer. And then in one telling sentence he gave the reason: "I share with you the same revulsion from evil. I do not share your hope."

I find these words to be quite significant for two reasons. First of all, they accurately reflect the mood of our day. We live in an era of abundance, but there is still a great scarcity of one commodity, and that is human hope. Quite openly in Europe and increasingly in our country, disillusionment and despair are the order of the day. Modern man looks at events of this century - the world wars, the gas chambers, the atomic bombs - and casts a vote of "No Confidence" in life or the universe. The shrill cries of pessimism resound from every quarter. The politicians are disconcerted; just this week Adlai Stevenson warned that the United Nations may have taken the first step toward its destruction. The scientists are also alarmed, especially those who have had a part in perfecting nuclear weapons. They have become evangelists for disarmament, although some think it is already too late. And certainly the interpreters of life in modern literature and drama share in this foreboding outlook. The absurd and irrational character of existence is more and more finding its way into this medium, and in reviewing the field of significant contemporary writers, Time magazine could only find one (J. D. Salinger) who holds any hope. More and more man regards himself as "a meaningless speck of dust on a, roving planet in the sky," and human existence as "the treadmill to oblivion." Therefore, Camus' rejection of hope is a mirror of the spiritual atmosphere of our time.

The second thing that impressed me was his association of hope with Christianity. Here was an outsider defining the issue that sets the Church apart from the world. In so many words he was implying that hope is the Church's unique possession. At other points the Christian and non-Christian position overlap; but here there is fullness over against emptiness. Christianity has something that others do not have.

Now I believe with all my heart that this is true, and that belief behooves the Church to consider carefully the reality of hope. If it is the great lack of our day and the distinctive possession of our faith, then we must understand it for what it is and be zealous to share it in the vacuum of our modern age. And what more appropriate time could there be for such a consideration than the Christmas season? Every aspect of it is colored with hope; the prophecies of it, the annunciation by the angels, the event itself - all are "the glad tidings of great joy,"

and the end result is hope. In this best of days at the worst of times, let us examine the whole concept of Christian hope. Upon what foundation does it rest?

As the chief cornerstone of this undergirding, let me set forth this belief: the Creator wants to complete what He has begun. If there is one quality that is evident in the Biblical story, it is this - God is absolutely determined to see through to fulfillment the goals He established in eternity. The rebellion of man and the distortion of the world through sin have certainly interfered with His actions, but they have not altered His will. To paraphrase Paul's belief, "the unfaithfulness of men has not destroyed the faithfulness of God" (Romans 3:5). His face is still set in the same direction, and His resolve is unmoved by all that has gone wrong. The prophet Jeremiah found a perfect picture of this truth in his visit to the potter's house (Jeremiah 18:1-11). There he saw a craftsman trying to mold a perfect vessel. Again and again the wheel would turn, but when it stopped some imperfection in the clay would have marred the work. However, instead of quitting in disgust and throwing the material away, the potter would patiently remove the obstacle and try again. So God is the great Potter who tirelessly makes and remakes His creatures. This is the story of the Old Testament from the very first - man's failure but God's faithfulness. Over and over again He never abandons hope, but picks up the pieces and tries again. Is not this the great truth in the stories of Adam and Noah and Abraham? God punished Adam for what he had done, but He did not destroy him or the world he had perverted. In Noah's time God eliminated most of the population, but He did not abandon all creation. With men and animals of the same nature and the same created order, God started again. And was not the call of Abraham a fresh beginning for the determined Deity? Like Adam, all men had followed their own desires into disobedience, but here was a different kind of man: Abraham obeyed God and set out from his home in Ur of the Chaldees, and out of this kind of person God resolved to make a new race. On and on this relenting pattern continued. The failure of one attempt only led to another. When the nation as a whole failed, then a remnant was sought; when the remnant failed, then one Person, the Messiah resulted. The point is that God wills the fulfillment of His purpose. The Old Testament is filled with mountains and valleys, and times without number the good intentions of God were shattered by human evil. But God never gave up! He kept finding new avenues through the wreckage. And this is the pillar of hope - the undaunted, relentless, indefatigable desire of God.

But how will He finally achieve His goal? To what method will He turn to bring to pass His victory? By His own nature and the nature of His creation, He will not do this by sheer force. For you see, what God wants to destroy has penetrated what He wants to save. Evil is intermingled with human personality, and a destructive act of power would obliterate the very object of concern. Just as killing the patient is not a satisfactory means of overcoming disease, so God cannot overtly annihilate evil and still achieve His ultimate goal. The method cannot be sheer power; it must be inherently personal, for this is the structure of both God and man.

The prophet Isaiah perceived this truth in the eighth century B.C., and set it forth in one of the best loved portions of the Bible (9:2-7): "A child would be born," ... "a son would be given," and "the government would be upon his shoulder." This means that God would act through a Person, and it would be the responsibility of this One to fulfill the eternal intention. By virtue of what He is and does, four great titles will be ascribed to Him. He shall be called "Wonderful Counselor," "Mighty God," "Everlasting Father," and "Prince of Peace." These are undoubtedly enthronement titles that were used by the kings of the ancient Near East, and all

kinds of interpretation have been read into them. Some think that the prophet had a full-blown concept of the Incarnation. We cannot state absolutely what was in his mind, but at least Isaiah is saying this much: the basic needs of man will be finally answered in this Coming One. What man has lost in sin and lacks by virtue of his evil will be present in this One. If you reflect on the needs of humanity for a moment and then look at these titles, the correspondence between the two is exact.

What are humanity's basic needs? First, we need wisdom; knowledge of this world, insight into the first principles, awareness of the real values in life. We are as confused as a situation I heard about recently. It seems some Halloween tricksters broke into a department store and spent several hours changing the price tags. The next morning bedlam resulted, as refrigerators were marked ten cents and hairpins two hundred and fifty dollars. So is humanity's confusion about Ultimate Reality. We are like people groping in darkness without a sense of direction. Our first need is for wisdom of the eternal verities of life.

Secondly, we need strength. We are woefully inadequate to meet the demands that are made of us. There is a wide chasm between aspiration and ability. Paul speaks for us all when he confesses: "That which I would I do not, and that which I would not, that I do" (Romans 7:15). On every hand there is someone whose desires overreach their strength. Not long ago an alcoholic sat in my office and vowed that he was through with liquor forever. And I knew he sincerely meant it at that moment. But at midnight of the same day my phone rang and it was the same voice, tongue-thick, lamenting his plight. He would be the first to confess: we need strength.

A third pressing necessity is for love. These structures we call personalities are built with windows and doors that open out. We natively crave the fellowship and interest of others, and only feel secure when we know that the outside world is for us and not against us. We long for that warmth that radiates only from the hearth of genuine concern. Some American airmen visited a British orphanage one Christmas day during the second World War. Here were the little ones that tragedy had left alone. When one soldier asked a little boy what he wanted for Christmas, tears came to his eyes when the little fellow replied: "Sir, I want somebody to love me." The voice of the ages and of all mankind is in those words.

Fourth, we need peace. A character in a recent novel was described as "a walking civil war," and this is characteristic of most of us. We are torn by guilt, by conflicting desires, by hatred and bitterness toward others. Our lives lack a single point of allegiance that unites and harmonizes the warring factors. The confusion that is going on outside us is but the effect of the fact that within there is no peace.

With this analysis in mind, look now at the prophecy of Isaiah. To our need for wisdom will come a "Wonderful Counselor"; to our need for strength will come a "Mighty God"; to our need for love will come an "Everlasting Father"; to our hostile lives will come "the Prince of Peace." We cannot know all that was in the mind of Isaiah, but at least he anticipated a Divine Answer that met real human need.

And on this side of history we can go beyond the prophet, and say this has occurred. This is the heart of the Christmas story - that at last the Promised One has come. He was in Himself both the Fulfillment and the Fulfiller of God's purpose. In Him perfect obedience was demonstrated, and through His work others are led to

fulfillment. And down through the centuries of Christian history those who have allowed themselves to fall under His sway unite in a common testimony that He is sufficient.

He brings wisdom to earth. As Paul puts it: He brings "life...to light" (II Timothy 1:10); just as the sunrise makes apparent what was hidden in the darkness, so Christ illuminates the terrain of reality. Even outside Christianity He is regarded as a great Teacher, and this is true because He was "the Wisdom of God" (I Corinthians 1:24). Anyone who lives in this world can profit from the light in the face of Jesus Christ.

Then, too, Christ brings strength. He overcame the world and all the power of darkness, and He bids men "to abide in Him" (John 15:4) and participate in His victory. His final earthly promise was: "Ye shall have power" (Acts 1:8), and many are the men whose fortunes have done "an-about-face" since the "Captain of Salvation" has come to fight alongside. The same Paul who cried out: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24) could also say: "Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (I Corinthians 15:57).

And of course, Christ made love the surest quality of the Eternal. To the mysteries of life, Jesus gave a face, and on that face He put a smile. How does the universe regard man? What is the attitude of Him who inhabits the heavens? "Friend," answers Jesus; "a Father who knows about and cares for His children." This heart of love is the only ground for real security; since He is "for us," what difference does it make who or what is against us? Jesus planted love at the heart of life.

And in Him there is peace. Here is the Reconciler, the One who sets straight all the crooked lines of life. He sets us at peace with God, with each other, with ourselves, and unites all into one supreme allegiance. There is a difference in the cutting power of a knife and a lump of lead. In one all the particles have been honed to a keen edge; in the other they are unformed. And so Christ puts "the cutting edge" on life by giving it a central thrust.

Which brings us back to the original point: what is Christian hope? It is rooted in a determined God, and what He has done and is doing in Christ. That He wants to finish what He has begun - of this we can be sure. For proof of it, just read the Old Testament. That He knows our need, and both has met it and can meet it in Christ - of this we can be sure. For proof of it, read the New Testament and Church history. On this basis rests our distinct possession - hope. And because of this, I can in full sincerity wish for you a "merry Christmas."