



# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"THE BELOVED DISCIPLE"

Sunday Morning, February 4, 1962  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
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Scriptural Reference: John 21:20-24, I John 4:16-19

Franklin Delano Roosevelt will long be remembered for this one sentence: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." These words have become immortal because they speak so directly to human experience. All of us have known and do know the reality of fear. We have sensed that flash of panic; that feeling of dread; that utter horror in the face of the foreboding. I myself have had that experience in countless different ways. I have known physical fear. I stepped up on a porch one day and inadvertently awakened a German Police dog that was lying in the sun. He lunged at my throat and I knew fear. I have known mental anguish. Just last Spring I sat down one morning with a former friend whom I consider to be a modern-day saint. They happened to take my picture, and the next day it came out in the newspaper. A little later I received a crudely scribbled note: "You'd better watch out! When a preacher gets out on the nigger limb, we get him. Beware!" And I experienced fear. And I have known spiritual fear. Several years ago I began to feel pain in my left foot, and as it kept getting worse I went to the doctor. I heard him say "blood poisoning," and I felt the infection spreading over me with lightning speed. I passed in and out of consciousness there in his office, and as he worked feverishly, for the first time in my life death became a live possibility, and I experienced fear. Each of these situations was unique, but there was a common characteristic stamped on them all. They threatened my being, and this is the essence of fear. When we encounter that which is destructive or stand in the presence of an adversary, fear is our natural reaction. I am afraid of the unknown, lest it turn out to be antagonistic. I am afraid of the dark, lest it hide some lurking enemy. In the face of a known threat, I respond with heightened self-concern. Now of course it should be noted that some fears are healthy and helpful. They are natural safeguards against the inherently destructive. Fear of an open fire or walking carelessly on a busy highway is constructive. But when fear reaches the deeper levels of life and becomes a part of one's total outlook, then it becomes a great problem. There are many who conceive of life as basically hostile and who cringe with anxiety at all future events. This is mankind's universal experience, and this kind of fear is something to be feared, and we cry out for a present help to this pressing need. What solution is there in the Gospel to the dragon of fear?

This morning I can point you to a man who claims to have found such a solution. He testifies to that which "casteth out fear" (I John 4:18). Therefore, as I would recommend a doctor in time of illness or a lawyer in time of legal trouble, so I would direct you to this one. But as in the case of all such referrals, I am sure you will want some more information. Just who is this man, and what has happened to him? What is his solution and how does it work? These are pertinent inquiries, and I shall try to answer them.

The person I have in mind is the disciple of Jesus named John. Tradition has it that at least five of the New Testament documents (Gospel of John; I, II, III John; Revelation) should be attributed to him. Some believe that all of them came directly from his hand; others think that some or all of these were written down later by a religious community - like the church in Ephesus, but point back to John's mind and memory. It is not my purpose here to settle this question, although I rather believe the latter possibility is more likely. It is in these documents, written or inspired by John, that the claim is made against fear.

But what kind of man was this and what had he experienced? He is commonly called "the beloved disciple," and the origin of this title is an interesting story. Nowhere in the Fourth Gospel is the author identified by name, but four times there is an allusion to "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23-25; 19:25-27; 20:2; 21:20). This seems to be the way John preferred to identify himself, and for that reason is significant. The way we understand ourselves is often a clue to our natures; why do you suppose John spoke of himself in these terms?

Is this a veiled form of egotism? Is John gloating over the fact that he was the favorite of the Twelve? Does he mean by this that Jesus loved him better than all the rest? Is John ultimately a spiritual egotist? I personally do not think so. Rather, I believe this phrase is a basic testimony. I think John is trying to say: "The most important thing about me is that I was an object of Jesus' love." This was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him. The fact of Jesus' love was the central reality of his life, and he deemed this more significant than anything else. More important than his name or achievement or position was this crucial relationship - he wanted to be known as the recipient of Christ's love. The emphasis was not "the disciple whom Jesus loved"; it was rather "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

But what was it about this experience that was so compelling? Why was this the transforming, illuminating encounter? I imagine John would have countered with a two-fold answer. The first part would have centered on what Jesus did for him.

Now we do not know much about John's early background, and a good bit of this is an imaginative surmise. But it could be that John had never experienced much love before Christ. We know his father was named Zebedee (Matthew 4:21), and that he ran a fishing business big enough to have hired help and a branch office in Jerusalem. It is possible that like many busy, successful fathers, Zebedee never had much time to express concern for John. We know his mother through only one reference, and here she exhibits excessive ambition (Matthew 20:21). She asked Jesus to give her sons the places of honor in His kingdom; in all likelihood she had driven John all his life and constantly set goals for him to achieve. His brother, James, was the natural product of such a home. He was tempestuous and intolerant. He was called "the son of thunder" along with John for wanting to call down fire on an inhospitable village in Samaria. James was probably always belligerent and competitive, ever striving to outdo and excel his brother.

Such a background is quite possible, and thus explains the unique distinctiveness of Christ's love. Here was One who was absolutely different. As He walked along the seashore, He showed a real concern for John. He took time to cultivate him, to demonstrate a sincere interest in this one. What is more, it was an unconditional concern. Jesus did not set goals or demand achievements or apply a lot of pressure. He accepted John as he was, with "no strings attached." And there was nothing competitive or provocative about Jesus. He did not challenge John to a contest or set out

to overcome him. He offered Himself as a friend; it was an invitation to share together, not to struggle against each other. Jesus was a Companion, not a competitor. Here was a totally new kind of relationship; here was a love that did not heighten his fear but released him to be himself. Here was love as John had never known it, and who can blame him for responding? What Jesus did is part of the explanation.

But John soon realized that this was no ordinary man; this unique attitude was not simply another human being. John came to realize that this Man was God Himself. He was the eternal, creative Word made flesh and dwelling among men (John 1:14). To behold Him - to see and hear and touch Him - was to gaze upon Reality itself. John never forgot what Jesus said: "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" (John 14:6), and he remembered Jesus saying over and over again: "I and the Father are one" (John 17:11). What Jesus did had significance far beyond the human; this was an insight into Ultimate Reality. Therefore, who Jesus was gave meaning to what He did. This meant that God is like that, and life at its deepest is what one sees in the face of Christ.

It is this experience that John sets at the center of his life - the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him. And on the basis of this, fear is overcome. Before Christ, John conceived himself as up against a hostile world. The neglect of his father undermined his sense of worth; the ambition of his mother made him feel he had to earn approval; the competitiveness of his brother was a constant challenge to him. On every side he was threatened, and fear was his natural lot. Self-concern was exaggerated, and he felt he was struggling against an ultimate adversary. But Jesus came and changed his whole outlook. Just like being "born again," he started to live in a different thought world - a realm where there was concern, acceptance, support and care. The old fears were gone, and in their place was "the perfect love" of Christ.

And my friend, what John experienced can be yours as well. An encounter with and an understanding of the love of Jesus can speak directly to your fears. Your whole understanding can be transformed by the light that He can give. We are fearful because life appears hostile and threatening. We do not know what the darkness holds, but then comes Jesus, and "to the mystery of life He gives a face, and on that face He puts a smile." All along we feared Reality was against us; now comes One to affirm the very opposite.

I shall never forget an experience I had back in college. It was between semesters, and all of my roommates had gone home. Somehow in the quiet of an empty dorm I seemed to get the jitters, and that night I did something very unusual - I locked the door. About three o'clock in the morning I was awakened by a loud banging on the door. It was pitch black and I could not imagine who it could be. I was frankly terrified; was it someone to rob me or beat me up or what? I cracked the door open with fear and trembling, only to see the face of my very best friend. He had come back unexpectedly and had been locked out of his room. You can imagine what a relief that was!

This is a kind of parable of what I am saying. The room of life is dark, and there is a pounding at the door. And we cringe in fear, not knowing what Reality about us is like. But when we dare open the door, there stands Jesus, not a foe, but a Friend. Look what He does for us - He is concerned absolutely. He accepts us

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unconditionally; He would be our eternal Companion. And do you realize who He is? He is the very God Himself, Ultimate Reality, a true Insight into eternity. He, then, is the answer to fear. Over against all that threatens and frightens and would destroy us stands perfect love; He is able "to cast out fear."

Therefore, I commend to you this man named John. He has found - or been found - by the Solution to our fears. I believe he was exactly right - the greatest thing that can ever happen is for Jesus to love us. I would be willing to accept this identity - deeper than my name or the fact that I am pastor of this church or the graduate of any school is this fact - I am a man whom Jesus loved. This is the victory over fear.

And remember, He loves you too!

"Depart now in the fellowship of God the Father, and as you go, remember: in the goodness of God you were born into this world; by the grace of God you have been kept all the day long, even unto this hour, and by the love of God, fully revealed in the face of Jesus, you are being redeemed. Amen."