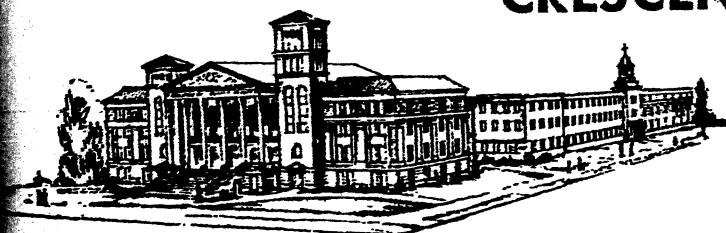


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"WHO CAN SEPARATE US?"



Sunday Morning, March 4, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Romans 8:31-39

One cold November night I sat in a hospital waiting room with a sobbing, distraught man. A few minutes before he had learned his only child had leukemia and would live only a few weeks. Very little was being said, for in times like that words are virtually useless. After a long period of silence, I recall he turned toward me, wiped his eyes, and began speaking slowly: "You know, it is not always evident that God is love." I listened closely, and I could detect no bitterness or cynicism. He was not shouting angrily or shaking his fist at heaven. Here was a man speaking honestly out of the depths of his own experience.

I have been reminded of those words quite often since then. When I pick up the paper and read where a landslide has buried a whole town; when I see little children suffer and die; when planes crash and floodwaters drive people from their homes - then that statement reverberates through my mind: it is not always evident that God is love. And who of you this morning has not faced the same dilemma? We turn from what Keats called "the giant agony of life," wipe our eyes, and wonder how it all fits together. I am aware that this is no academic question we are posing. I confront it about as often as any one thing: how can God be love and the world be like it is? How do we harmonize Christian belief and actual experience? How can we reconcile what we say with what we see? This is as crucial a religious issue as there is. I have stood here in this pulpit and struggled with it before, and I must again this morning, because so many of you are struggling at this very point.

Where shall we begin? Perhaps it would be well to ask ourselves what we mean by the statement: "God is love." Just what kind of treatment do we expect from a Being so described? The popular answer to this is: "If God is love, then we ought to be blessed with prosperity and shielded from difficulty." Now this interpretation is deeply rooted in the mind of humanity. Primitive man thought that his earthly condition reflected the attitude of the gods. There was a kind of mechanical equation here: human prosperity meant divine affection; human suffering meant divine hostility. Thus, in every age men have tended to restrict God's love to only one form: a state of perfect serenity where there is the absence of pain and the presence of pleasure. If anything contrary to this occurs, it is not considered to be of love.

Now I believe we can find the root of our problem right here. An idea has been taken from one source, but given an entirely different meaning than was originally intended. Where did the idea that "God is love" originate, anyway? This answer is: from the Biblical witness. Now, of course, there are allusions to "the love of God" in other religions, but this is always just one quality among others. Only in the Hebraic-Christian tradition is love conceived as the essential reality. And how is

this Divine love defined in its original context? It is certainly not the one-sided indulgence of the popular image. At no point in the Scripture is God's love equated absolutely with mere surface or temporal prosperity. Here is the crucial point: Divine love as seen in the Bible has always had a mysterious character. Even in the Old Testament, God's actions were viewed as paradoxical. "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform...." As high as the heavens are above the earth, so are His thoughts above our thoughts...His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9,8). Here is the realization that God does not always act on the level of the obvious. In the modern phrase: "There is more going on than meets the naked eye." God is at work in ways of which men are not even conscious. Outward appearance can be very deceptive; what "looks like" one thing on the surface could well be another. Therefore, one can witness the enlarging concept of God's love in the Old Testament as men rise above the primitive equation of love meaning prosperity. When the Psalmist sees the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering and still places his trust in God, he is bearing witness to the mystery of Divine love. When the prophets can conceive of pagan enemies like Assyria or Babylon as being "servants of Jehovah," used somehow by Him to work His purpose - they bear witness to the mystery of Divine love. When Job can look out on his inexplicable calamities and say: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15), here again is a witness to the mystery of Divine love. And what gradually emerged in the Old Testament comes to full expression in the New Testament paradox: "In the world ye have tribulation, but be of good cheer...." (John 16:33).

Here, then, is the Biblical understanding of the statement "God is love." It is something involved and complex, a mysterious and confounding reality. It is never obvious or easily explained. It is rather this courageous faith: that in every circumstance and at all times the creative Spirit is at work for good. Instead of being restricted to certain places and times, God's love is all-pervasive and ever-active. It is not manifest only on good occasions and absent everywhere else; it is in the midst of the evil as well as the good, at work in shadows as well as sunshine. To affirm that God is love is not a guarantee against suffering; it is the confidence that in every situation God is present and can work some good purpose through the circumstances. His wisdom and power are such that He can take any combination of events - no matter how bad - and redeem some good from them. From the broken pieces of any wreckage, He can forge some tools for constructive progress. Divine love does not eliminate suffering; it finds ways in and through suffering to overcome it.

What is the basis for this hopeful understanding of love? It is a magnificent assertion, but is it rooted in Reality and not just "a beautiful dream?" The answer is found in events of "salvation history" as seen through the eyes of faith. There are many examples of this mysterious love at work in the Old Testament, but the clearest picture of all is Jesus Christ. Here was the love of God manifest in its fullest form. If you want to know its unique, invincible power, look at the way it was operative in Christ. He came as the Instrument of God. As He stood at the close of His ministry and looked over Jerusalem and said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. How I would have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chicks!", He stated His purpose for coming to this world. He came to draw men back to God. But how did men respond to His offer? As you well know, at every point Jesus was rejected and thwarted. The people would not listen to Him; "He came unto His own and His own received Him not." The powers of evil did everything they could to block His path, and finally, as the greatest insult, the Son of God was taken and killed by crucifixion. Was there any evidence of love at work in Calvary? Because of what happened to Christ, is there

any reason to believe in anything but evil? Yes, I say there is. For God in His infinite wisdom took that very Cross and made it His instrument of salvation. Like removing a sword from its scabbard, He took that Cross from the hillside and made it His weapon of advance. Think of it. What men did to destroy the purpose of God, God transmuted into an instrument for destroying evil. The worst that men could do became a means of God's best. He took that which appeared to be destruction and out of the wreckage He forged a way to accomplish His purpose. This is the basis of belief in invincible love at work for good. What God was able to do in Christ is the clue to His real nature.

In this light it is clear that God's love and suffering are not contradictory, creating problems each for the other. The one is actually the solution of the other. Divine love does not explain suffering as much as it redeems suffering.

This understanding of God's love is what Paul sets forth in the climax of the magnificent eighth chapter of Romans. He sets God's love right where you least expect it - in the midst of all kinds of difficulty. He says it is at work in the worst of places. Nothing can separate us, cut us off, seal us up from this love. It is everywhere and at all times at work for good; nothing can thwart its activity.

Paul makes two assertions about the relation of the love and suffering that are exceedingly important. First, he says that through the love of Christ we can be strengthened by adversity. Instead of driving us from God, these experiences of "tribulation or anguish or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword" can result in our becoming "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37, 38). Here is the positive possibility of "calamity-interpreted-by-love." Now we instinctively run from pain and difficulty, but we also know it can be a profound teacher of truth. Sorrow is an expositor of insight that joy leaves unexamined. We can see some things - like the stars - only when it is dark. Certainly no one should seek out adversity, but when it comes it can make a positive contribution. We should remember that "the Son of God was made perfect through suffering." Sometimes the only road to the heights is through the depths. The American Indians believed that when a warrior killed an enemy, the strength of the victim entered the victor. And so it is, Paul says, with the overcoming of calamity through Christ. It does not subtract from us, it adds to us. We are "more than" because of our recognition of love's work in the darkness.

I have seen this truth demonstrated countless times in my own experience. I recall a man in my home church who was only a nominal Christian. One day on his job he suffered a stroke, and was told he would remain a paralyzed invalid the rest of his life. It looked like the worst thing that could have happened to him. But in this situation something very creative began to work. This man's spiritual nature began to flower. He developed insight and sensitivity that he had not possessed before. His bedside became the fountainhead of inspiration to a whole church. The last time I ever saw him he made an incredible assertion: "The best thing that ever happened to me was the day I had my stroke." This illustrates Paul's first point: love at work can strengthen us even in adversity. We need to enlarge our understanding of how God's love can be expressed.

The second assertion is that love is more powerful than all that would destroy us. Paul lived in a fear-ridden age. In this passage he calmly points to four great adversaries and says: "These cannot cut you off from God and He will not forsake you." One fear was the extreme change between "life and death." This greatest of all human shocks can do much to us, but it cannot sever us from love. Death is

Sunday Morning, March 4, 1962

relocation in God's house - not expulsion. The second fear was of the supernatural creatures - "angels, principalities, powers." These half-known entities were a great menace to people of Paul's day. The angels reputedly had resented the creation of men, and were jealous; the demons possessed men to destroy them. But strong as these creatures may be, they cannot interrupt the working of God's love. The third fear was of the future. Things could be present now or revealed in the days to come that would be very frightening. But Paul counsels that even the future is in the hands of love. The last fear is that of "height or depth." This is the power of the stars. At certain positions the lunar bodies were supposed to wield great influence on men. The earliest explanation of mental disorders was this power: thus our word "lunatic." But again Paul limits their sway; whatever the stars can do, they cannot separate us from God.

Here is a moving hope - that no external force can come between us and God's love. They can greatly affect us, but their power is not ultimate. The clouds can hide the sun, but they cannot put it out. Winter's freeze can make barren the vegetation and change bubbling streams into silent threads, but it cannot destroy the vital life of nature that brings resurrection in the springtime. So all of these forces fall short of destroying our relationship to God. And what cannot be broken from without will not be repudiated from within. God will not be driven away from us, nor will He turn away on His own. The last stanza of "How Firm A Foundation" expresses this truth:

"The soul that 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!"

We can have hope in Him.

This is the way I spoke to my friend in the hospital waiting room. It is not always evident that God is love. This is true. But we must not let appearances be the limit of this reality. This love is a mystery; not always obvious, but always at work for good, even there in that situation.

John Short of Toronto tells of a young man who came to a cathedral every day at ten minutes after twelve o'clock. He bowed at the altar for only a short time, and then slipped out. The priest became impressed with his regularity and stopped him one day to get acquainted. The young man said he used part of his lunch hour each day to have fellowship with Christ. When asked how he prayed, the boy answered: "Oh, quite simply. I begin by saying: 'Jesus, it's Jimmie,' and then tell him what I will." Not long after, the priest was walking down the street and witnessed an accident in which a man had been run over. When he rushed to him, it turned out to be this very young man. The priest rode in the ambulance with the critically injured one. Suddenly the boy raised up, smiled broadly, and then sank back in death. And the priest was sure he heard a Voice saying: "Jimmie, it's Jesus."

In the midst of tragedy, God's love is there, at work for good. This is a mystery, but it is true.

"Let not your heart be troubled; believe...!"