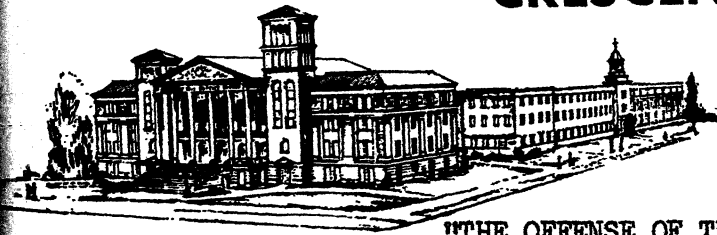


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS



"THE OFFENSE OF THE CROSS"  
Sunday Morning, March 25, 1962  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
Mahan Siler, Jr.

Scriptural Reference: I Corinthians 1:18-25

Today in Jerusalem there is a route through the city called the Via Dolorosa, meaning the Way of Sorrows. It is an effort to retrace the steps of Jesus when He bore His cross to the place of His crucifixion. Yet the modern Way of Sorrows is quite different than it must have been when Jesus actually made His way to Calvary. The pathway today is surfaced and is approximately twelve feet higher than it was two thousand years ago. Today the route is marked conveniently for the many tourists and pilgrims and is stationed by native guides who will provide a mixture of fact and fiction for a nominal fee. At the end of the Via Dolorosa, there is an ancient church which is supposedly built over the actual place of our Lord's crucifixion. As I walked along this way two years ago, I tried in vain to recapture the atmosphere of our Lord's crucifixion. I discovered the source of my frustration - today in Jerusalem there is the conscious effort to make the way of the cross easy to follow and as attractive as possible, when actually the original pathway to the cross was unattractive, disturbing, and offensive.

The Easter season is upon us. Soon you and I will once again pass in memory along the Way of Sorrows, journey beneath the cross of Calvary, and make our way to the light of the Easter morning. But I have the fear that we too will try to make the way of the cross so attractive that we will conveniently miss its disturbing challenge and its cutting edge. In order to miss facing the crucifixion as it was, we will be tempted to build another road to Calvary, more convenient to follow and less disturbing. So I fear during this Easter season we will see the cross but never confront it. We might hear about the cross but never listen to its message. We will sing about the wondrous cross but might not go beyond a sentimental affection for it. In many ways I look forward to the Easter season, but in one way I dread to see it come. Quite honestly there is that part of me that hesitates to face the real cross of our Lord. I know that during this holiday I will have to face that cross again, and the One crucified will offend me - disturb me - and desire to change me. Therefore, this morning I am taking just one ray of truth that shines from Calvary by speaking to you concerning the offense of the cross.

From the beginning the cross was offensive to people. It was to Jesus. Our Lord did not learn of the cross one day while playing, seeing the shadows of His outstretched arms on the ground before Him, as one legend would have us to believe. No, the first cross that Jesus witnessed was not so easy and attractive. More likely Jesus' first acquaintance with a cross was at the age of eleven or twelve. Only four miles away in Sepphoris, a revolt against Rome was

led by Judas the Galilean. Judas and his zealous patriots seized the king's armory in Sepphoris, only to be later defeated by the Romans under Darius. Sepphoris was burned; many inhabitants were sold to slavery; and later hundreds of men were crucified for having any part in the rebellion. Is it not possible that Joseph, a carpenter in nearby Nazareth, was forced to make some of these crosses? Again it is likely that Jesus knew some of the men from Nazareth who had some part in the rebellion and watched them die such a tortured death. At least our Lord saw the cross for what it was - a degrading death reserved for the worst of criminals. Yes, the cross was offensive from the beginning.

Do you recall the reaction the prospective cross drew from the disciples? Whenever Jesus mentioned His own suffering death on the cross, the disciples, especially Peter, were deeply offended, repulsed, disturbed. It cut directly across their expectations.

Do you also recall the reaction the first century world had to the early Christian message of the cross? "We preach Christ crucified," exclaimed Paul (I Corinthians 1:23). Was this immediately attractive, appealing? No, quite the contrary! It was the worst possible offense. The cross was a stumbling block to the Jew. To tell a Jew that their Messiah, the Son of God, died was hard enough, but to say that He died on a cross was outrageous. It was an insult. The cross then was a stumbling block to the Jew, but it was sheer foolishness to the Greeks. To confront their proud intellect with the Jew of Palestine who died a criminal's death on their behalf would call forth more laughter than repentance. Most people stumbled over the cross; it was ugly; it was foolishness; it was an offense to them.

A similar reaction is presented in a modern play by William Butler Yeats. The scene is a country cottage in Ireland. A little girl dressed in bright green comes into the cottage singing a song, obviously without a care or worry in the world. Then suddenly her eyes fall upon the crucifix on the wall. Her countenance changes; she stops singing and hides her face. Then she cries out: "Take down that ugly thing." The cross offended her.

If you enter this Easter season with openness to the decisive message of the cross, expect to hear an inner voice say: "Take it away - cover it up! It is ugly - it offends - it challenges me - it wants to change me!"

Assuming that you too have felt uncomfortable standing before the Crucified, allow me to venture farther and ask: why does this cross offend us? Why do we want to keep our distance and not become too involved? Why do we tend to shrink from its cutting edge? I offer two suggestions.

First, you and I are offended by the cross because it is revealing. The events around our Lord's death reveal to us who we are. Who among us enjoys facing the truth about ourselves? Yet as we confront this event, it points out some things about us that we do not like to face.

Notice with me how the event of the cross penetrates the world of "let's pretend." The cross forces man out from behind his artificial masks and shows him as he is. There was Caiaphas and his religious friends. They pretended to be defending the truth against this layman, this carpenter Jesus, who claimed to be God. Yet the cross shows them not open to new truth, but desperately acting out of

self-interest. Then there were the business men in the Temple who no doubt said they were defending God's house; yet they helped to crucify Christ because they did not want their profitable business traffic in the Temple disturbed. The disloyalty of Judas was revealed for all to see. The disciples under pressure sought only to defend themselves from danger. Then there was Pilate, who pretended to yield graciously to the will of the people, when actually he was ruled by fear. The crowd no doubt went away convinced they had obeyed the will of God as interpreted by their religious leaders, but they actually were moved by emotion. One thief on the cross suggested that Jesus use His power to save Himself, but actually he cared only about being set free. With only a few exceptions we see men and women revealed as they are - not what they pretend to be. The cross, like a searchlight, shines through these appearances and facades.

When you and I journey to Calvary, we do not only see the One crucified but we see ourselves. It is not like going to a side show where the abnormal people are displayed. We do not see abnormal sins at the cross. It is more like going to a house of mirrors, for at every turn we see our reflection. The cross was the product of everyday, familiar sins like pride, cowardice, indifference, and self-seeking. When we are honest, we know we are blood brothers to those who participated in the original crucifixion. We know what it is like to pretend to be religious and unselfish but be motivated out of self-interest. We become Pilate when pressure mounts and forces us into compromise, and yet we cleverly lay the blame elsewhere. Many times we have prayed to God but act as God. We have crucified Him with our ambition, our self-seeking. In short, the cross confronts us with our true selves and lights up our constant temptation toward egotism. When seen rightly, it leaves us stripped of all pretense of righteousness and self-justification and brings us to our knees in repentance.

Secondly, the cross offends us because it is demanding. We naturally shrink back from its call to total commitment.

The cross is not just an event in history; it is a way of life. It was an outward act some two thousand years ago, but also must become an inward experience by faith. "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps" (I Peter 2:21). Did not Jesus command us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him (Mark 9:34)? How is this cross demanding? What does it mean to take up our cross and follow Him?

I am not sure what it means. I have spent so much time dodging the cutting edge of such demands that I have only a glimpse. But I know it means at least two things: death and suffering love. As Dietrick Bonhoeffer says: "When Christ calls a man, He bids him to come and die." This is not referring to physical death, but something harder - the death of self. This is a daily warfare. The cross invites us to be buried with Christ, that we may be reborn in Him. Can we honestly say with Paul: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

This means we are a Christian first, a follower of Christ before we are Bill Jones with a family; a Christian before a Republican or a Democrat; a Christian before we see ourselves as doctor, laborer, or minister. Such labels and loyalties are crucified and reborn in the light of our supreme allegiance to Him.

Also the cross means at least suffering love. The cross for Jesus meant loving those who did not want that love; loving the unlovely; bearing other people's burdens; offering forgiveness when condemnation was deserved. This kind of love will also mean sacrifice and suffering. In what specific way it will mean suffering for you in everyday life, I do not know. I do know that this kind of love is dynamite, radical, costly!

During this past week how much suffering and sacrifice has our Christian service cost us? Are we less concerned about ourselves and more concerned about Christ than we were last Sunday? Are we truly willing to die so that Christ can live within us? I do not like these questions - they disturb and offend. Yet this is the challenge of the cross.

So I think you can see why in one sense I dread Easter. I know my set patterns will be disturbed. I will have to confront that Man on the cross, and He will reveal what I do not want to see and demand what I do not want to give.

Yet there is a strange attraction about the cross. It does offend, but at the same time it seems to possess some magnetic power drawing us to it. The amazing fact is that for the same reasons the cross is offensive, it also attracts us.

The cross draws us because it is revealing - not only revealing us as we are but God as He is. We see in that same cross the love of God that will not let us go. There we find God who does not turn His back upon our plight; there He returns love for hatred, even when it means crucifixion; there He absorbs the worst from man and still loves. It is a love that suffers, pursues, knocks until we yield to it. In this ugly deed we see:

"Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

The cross not only pulls us because it reveals such a God, but does so because it is demanding. This may surprise you. Down deep I believe you and I want to be committed. We want a Master who demands sacrifice. We desire a purpose for living larger than selfish aims.

Have we done an injustice to the way of the cross by watering down its claims until they become meaningless? Have we made the cross so artificially attractive that many have never been challenged by its message? Let it be known that the way of the cross is the way of denial, life through death, and personal commitment. Such demands will anger some - will insult others - but many will realize this to be good news and kneel in homage at His feet.

Standing before such a cross, are you angry...are you insulted...or are you kneeling?