



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT GOD?"

Sunday Morning, April 29, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Acts 17:16-31

Not long ago Dr. Daniel Poling announced his retirement from the headship of the Christian Endeavor movement and also the editorship of the Christian Herald Magazine. With his retirement, an influential career of more than forty years came to an end. In one of his books Dr. Poling recounts a personal experience that took place many years ago. It seems that his youngest son had left for his first year at college. In February of the school term, Dr. Poling received a tersely worded telegram from the boy. It read something like this: "Dear Dad: I must see you at once. It is urgent. I'll be home on the two-twenty train. Signed, Your Son." Naturally the father was quite alarmed at what would necessitate such a trip, and that afternoon as the train pulled in, he was anxiously waiting on the platform. As the young man got off the coach, the father's fears were intensified, for he saw in the tight, drawn lines on his face that something very serious had gone wrong. The two greeted each other and rode downtown in comparative silence. It was only when they had gotten into the privacy of the inner office that the young man laid bare his soul and revealed his problem. Looking at his father with eyes of burning intensity, he said, "Dad, you have got to tell me. What do you know about God?" Dr. Poling writes that even though he had been in the ministry for over thirty years, at that moment he was struck dumb, for here was his own flesh and blood posing for him the most ultimate of all questions. He realized that this was no time for the soft cliché or the canned answer. Here was one in the desperate throes of religious doubt, and the answer his father gave might determine in large measure his spiritual future. This young man was not asking for conjectures or opinions or assumptions; he was asking for certainties: "What do you know about God?"

To me this young man is a striking symbol of our day. For very often, I am faced with this very question. Although usually not as urgently or dramatically, over and over again I encounter a person who wants to come to grips with Ultimate Reality. And very likely this morning, in this group that sits before me now, there may be many who have come with this precise inquiry at the root of their thinking. They are quietly asking in their heart of hearts, "What do you know about God?" And this morning, as best I can, I want to speak directly to that question. What answers can be given to this most ultimate of all questions?

What I want to do is to go back into the history of religious thought and point out three attempted answers that have been offered to this question. Now these are actually more than attempted answers; they are whole approaches to this matter of the Divine-human relationship. And I hope that as we analyze each one, there will emerge in your own mind a clear path as to how a satisfactory answer can be reached. Here are three potential answers to the question: "What do you know about God?"

The first I will call the answer of reason. It begins within the human mind, and it moves out into the world by means of inductive observation. The individual views everything that is going on about him and notes that there is a certain pattern to the natural order. All the parts seem to be unified about a central purpose, so he begins to draw conclusions. "If I find matter so fashioned," he reasons, "then back of all this must be a Mind. Rationality in nature points back ultimately to a Cause or a God who is rational in Himself. The world being what it is, there must be a purposeful Being to explain it."

This is the traditional argument of purpose. Easily the most famous illustration for it was given by a man named Paley. One day, as he was walking through a field, he looked down and found a watch. He picked up the little instrument and saw that it was made up of hundreds of parts, delicately balanced, and all designed for the purpose of measuring time. He said to himself, "This just couldn't have dropped out of the air. These parts did not happen to fall together by accident. Back of this watch there must be a watchmaker." And so goes the argument from reason by induction. We find here a purposeful universe; we induce therefore a purposeful God. Moving from what we see to what must be, we say there is a God because nature demands it.

And pressing on beyond the point of existence, we can describe this God by observing His creation. He must be powerful, purposeful, reliable, resourceful, good, loving, and kind. All these are reflected through what He has made. Therefore, the first answer to the question is this: "Look out at the world about you and induce from this a Cause behind the effect."

But just how satisfying is this answer to a person who is desperately looking for certainty? Is this a sure foundation for an adequate theological faith? As it has been analyzed by the minds of men through history, I think it is fair to say that it has been "weighed in the balance and found wanting." For when you take this and try to build a whole religious faith upon it, you find that instead of being based on rock bottom certainty it involves a tremendous assumption. God cannot be proved simply by pointing to what seems to be purpose and order in nature. This leaves still unanswered the question of ultimate origin. There remains an ineffable mystery that cannot be logically put aside. A Sunday School teacher found this out one morning when he was trying to use this argument on his class of ten-year-old boys. Someone asked the question, "Where did the world come from?" The teacher answered, "Well, it couldn't have just happened. It couldn't be an accident. Look at all of nature and how everything fits together. There is bound to be a God back of a world like this. It had to be made by Someone." There was a moment of silence, and then one of the little boys asked, "But who made God? Did He just happen?" And the teacher realized the fallacy of his argument, for all he was doing was pushing the mystery back one step. There is still the question, "How did it all begin?" Therefore, one has to admit that this argument provides no absolute proof of God's existence; at its foundation is a grand assumption.

Moving on past the point of existence, can one look at nature as we now experience it and be certain of a God as described earlier? To be sure, there are some things in nature that seem to reveal good qualities: the instinct of birds to get back to their nests or a mother's desire to meet the needs of her child. It would seem as you look at these things that nature is loving and purposeful. But in the same nature there are also tornadoes and windstorms; babies are born deformed,

and fathers are struck down by lightning. Things like this in a natural order give no evidence whatsoever that there is good will behind it all. The truth is that there are things in nature that seem to be irrational, just as there are things here that seem to be purposeful. If one's only source of information is simple induction, the exact character of the Maker is by no means obvious. As striking proof of this fact, one day in a college chapel a minister spoke of the glowing revelatory powers of the natural universe. He said, "Nature bears the signature of God. You cannot look at our world and not believe in Him. 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the firmament showeth his handiwork'." That very night in the same chapel, an imminent scientist stood in the same place and in answer to a question said, "As I look out on the natural universe, I see not one shred of evidence for the existence of God - much less that He is good." Here were two men, looking at the evidence of nature and coming to opposite conclusions. This is not to take sides either way, but simply to say that when one starts with himself and proceeds by induction to observe what is about him, he cannot here find an adequate understanding of the truth about God.

The second answer I will call the answer of feeling. It, too, starts with the individual, but instead of looking out by observation, it looks in and examines feelings and sensations. This is the way of introspection - the way of mysticism - the way that looks into the depths of its own being, and then claims to feel that God exists.

Now quite frankly I think I know what the mystics are talking about when they say this, for there have been times in my life when I was overwhelmed with the certainty that "somewhere, some place there is bound to be a God." One afternoon I sat down on a hillside to watch the sun go down in the west. I remember that everything was very quiet, and as I watched the indescribable beauty of that sky, as if a wave of the sea had swept over me, I thought: "Back of that beauty there must be an Artist. Somewhere, some place there is bound to be a God." Or once I was sitting by the seashore, listening to the waves with their regular pounding on the sand, and somehow I felt myself attune to a Power greater than myself. It seemed as if the throbbing of the universe was somehow throbbing within me. And again I had an intuition about God.

Nor am I the only person who has ever had these sensations. An example of something similar is found in the early life of Helen Keller. She is truly one of the most remarkable people of our century. While she was still an infant, she was stricken with a disease, the aftereffects of which were that she lost her capacity to see and to hear. She was completely cut off from the normal channels of communication. The story of how Miss Annie Sullivan came and dedicated her life to penetrating the consciousness of this little girl is one of the heroic epics in the annals of education. She worked under great hardship for many months, but finally, by the grace of God, this teacher was able to break through to the little girl and she uttered her first word which was "water." After the breakthrough, they quickly developed a rapport so that the teacher could communicate and in turn Helen could answer back. After they had reached a certain level, the Kellers, being religious people, invited Phillips Brooks, then the greatest preacher in all America, to come and through this teacher tell this little girl the truth about God. And so he came, and in his magnificent way he spoke to her simply and directly about the existence of a Heavenly Father. When the impact of what Brooks was saying finally dawned in the heart of the little girl, this is what she was reported to have said, "Oh, so you call Him God? You know, I always knew that there was such a Being, but I didn't know what His name was." Here is a kind of proof that deep within we are intuitively aware of the

presence of Another. And I am sure most of you have experienced the same thing at some time in your life. Therefore, this is the second attempted answer: God is recognized by the intuitive awareness of the heart.

But when put to the test of rigorous analysis, is the way of feeling an adequate foundation for belief in God? Again I must say that as men have weighed it in the balance, it, too, has been found wanting. Now why do I say that? First of all, there are some people who claim never to have had this intuitive experience. Perhaps all of us in this room have experienced it, but there are some men who claim to look into the sunset or out on the sea and feel nothing at all about the existence of a Higher Power. Second, even those of us who have had these experiences will have to admit that they did not last. That day when I looked into the sunset, I was very sure that somewhere there was a God. But then what I felt at that moment was not an enduring experience. There have been other times in my life when I felt very much alone and when this intensity was gone altogether. And, third, when all is said and done, what do we really know about a God whom we simply sense as being "somewhere, some place" - a far removed Being? The great weakness of mystical religion is that it says nothing about what God is like - about how He regards us - about what He expects us to do. It evokes no commitment; it creates no relationship; it is but a dim awareness that out in the great Unknown, somewhere, some place, He exists. And this is not enough for a mature faith. At best, it is only a vague sensation. It does not etch in clear terms the truth about God. Therefore, as we did with the first answer, we must reject the answer of feeling.

The third answer I call the answer of encounter. It is fundamentally different from the other two. Both of them begin with man; the hands reaching out for God are human. However, the way of encounter is the exact opposite, for it begins with God, and the hand reaching down is Divine. God takes the initiative and comes to man, instead of man taking the initiative and coming to God. Now, in my opinion, all of the great world religions can be classified under the first two answers; they are appeals either to reason or feeling. They are man's attempt to lay hold of God. Only one religious tradition puts the initiative with God and has God seeking man: that tradition is the Judaic-Christian religion, or better still, the religion of the Bible. If there is one distinction about this faith, it is that God is seeking man, not man seeking God. How does the Biblical revelation begin? By telling that God created the world and man and set him down in the garden. Then man sinned in rebellion and broke this relationship. What happened? Did man in his lostness begin to grope around and cry out, "Where art thou, God? Where art thou?" This is not the Biblical picture. When man fell into sin, it was God who came in search. It was He who asked the question, "Where art thou?" (Genesis 3:9). In the early Genesis picture of a seeking God, you have the distinctive truth of Biblical religion.

I believe by means of a modern parable I can set out for you the essence of the answer of encounter. Let us say that an exploratory party leaves this country and goes to a far distant land to try to discover an ancient mine. They divide up into two parts. The director goes up into a helicopter, looking over the whole country, and from that perspective directs the work of the ground party. They stay in contact by means of a two-way radio - he up above, giving instructions to those below. But one day the ground party gets dissatisfied with his directions and decide that they do better on their own. They take their radio receivers and dash them against a rock and launch out by themselves. Contact is lost, and the director up above realizes

that the men have rebelled. He can now take one of two approaches. He can say, "Just let them go. They are sure to die out there in the jungle by themselves. They can never find the mine. I will just turn around and go home and forget the whole endeavor." Or, on the other hand, he can take the approach of trying to redeem the whole project. This is what he must do: he must come down to the jungle itself; he must seek out the men who have scattered; he must somehow reclaim their loyalties; he must repair their receiving mechanisms. In making the choice to follow the latter course, his action would be a parable of the Biblical revelation. God gave man a place in His task upon the earth, and man rebelled and dashed that relationship to pieces. God could have said, "Let him go to his own destruction," but He did not. God did what had to be done for redemption: He came to this earth; He sought those who had dispersed in rebellion; He reclaimed their loyalties; He repaired their receiving mechanisms. Beginning with one man, Abraham, and his descendants, and working with a covenant people through centuries of inter-activity, God carefully rebuilt a relationship with man. If you will read the pages of the Old Testament, this is precisely what God is doing - seeking, reclaiming, and repairing. And just as an artist paints a picture, act by act He etches in the truth about Himself. But then when "the fulness of time was come," God took all of the truth that He had revealed in the Old Testament and He focused it in one human Being, Jesus Christ. Just as you turn the lense of a projector until the blurred picture comes clear and sharp, so God took all of the truth of Old Testament revelation and focused it in the face of Jesus Christ. God climaxed His coming to man by becoming a Man. He put Himself in a form that men on this earth could understand. He was "the visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) - "the Word made flesh" (John 1:14). He said with His own lips, "He that has seen me hath seen the father" (John 14:9). Therefore, to those who met Him by the sea of Galilee, He was not just a man, He was the manifestation of God Himself. And in Him and what He was and what He did was the answer to the question: "What is God like?" To the Christian fellowship, it was simply this: "God is like Jesus." And it came through encounter - not through reason - not through feeling but at God's initiative.

One day Paul stood on the Areopagus and spoke to the learned Athenians (Acts 17: 22-31). He noted that they were very religious, had sought God in many ways. But he also pointed out the end of all their search - an altar inscribed "To an Unknown God." Over against this background he proclaimed the essence of Christianity: "The God whom you have sought and not found has come to you. The Crucified One, even Jesus of Nazareth, is the truth about God. You cannot find Him, but He has found you."

Which brings us back to the original question: "What do you know about God?" My answer is this: All that I know about God comes not through my reason or feeling but through Jesus Christ. You see, in Him, I have not found God, but God has found me...and you as well!