



# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"IF IN THIS LIFE ONLY"

Sunday Morning, May 27, 1962  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
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Scriptural Reference: I Corinthians 15:12-28

In the spring of 1846, a young lawyer named Abraham Lincoln was a candidate for a seat in the Congress of the United States. His opponent in this election was Peter Cartwright, the Methodist circuit-rider who was famous for his hell-fire preaching. During the campaign, Mr. Lincoln attended a frontier revival that Cartwright was conducting. At the close of the sermon, Cartwright asked all who wanted to go to heaven to stand, and many did. Then he asked all who did not want to go to hell to stand, and all did except Lincoln. Noting this fact, Cartwright assumed his most serious voice and said: "Mr. Lincoln, you have not responded to either invitation. May I inquire where you want to go?" The story is that Lincoln rose to his feet and replied: "Brother Cartwright, I want to go to Congress."

This rejoinder can be pointed to as a typical example of Lincoln's quick wit. However, I see in it something else that is quite significant - an attitude that was budding then and is now in full flower. What I have reference to is the scale of values that is implied. Here time takes precedent over eternity; the concerns of the present overshadow a concern for the hereafter. Running for Congress was more important than the issues of heaven and hell. Now we should not make too much of this statement, for it was playfully spoken. But it does foreshadow the modern mood. Unless I am badly mistaken, Lincoln's set of mind precisely depicts the thinking of most of our contemporaries.

There was a time when just the opposite was true. Men were steeped in an "other-worldliness"; everything pointed to the future and this life was regarded only as a prelude. But all that began to change with the coming of The Renaissance. Here, for the first time, men began to discover the goodness of the present life, and interest gradually shifted. The locus of attention moved from eternal life to earthly life, and today, with our obsession for science and sex and material things, we are the logical product of the movement. With the increase of "this-worldliness" has come a corresponding decrease in its opposite. So now there is little interest in "the things which shall be hereafter." What once was "the great obsession" is now "the great bore." To be quite honest, modern man is too busy with present concerns to bother about eternity.

Lest you think I am too cynical, let me document this judgment. Last January I spent a week on a college campus, and for hours on end engaged in religious discussions. I found that a few of the students violently rejected the whole idea of eternal life; but the great majority were simply indifferent. As one boy put it: "I simply don't care whether I survive death or not. There is enough here to keep me occupied. I'll just wait and see." Another boy branded all talk about this as "neurotic" and "morbid." And by far the most popular quotation on the subject was that of Henry David Thoreau. As the great humanist lay dying, someone tried to comfort him with words about another life. He retorted: "One world at a time, brother;

one world at a time." This seems to sum up their attitude: one world at a time. Whatever, if anything, lies beyond, let us forget it for the moment. Today is all that matters. Therefore, on these grounds I rest my opinion. Today's perspective is earth-bound and time-centered. In regard to life after death, at worst there is disbelief; at best, there is disinterest. When you point a modern man to eternity, he responds by shrugging his shoulders and asking, "So what?"

Granting that this is a prevalent mood, what can be said about it? Is it adequate for "the living of these days"? Does it square with all the facts we know? When applied in all circumstances, does it prove authentic? These are the questions that must be asked of any position, and the concept of "this life only" is no exception. How does it fare in actual experience? In my opinion the verdict is a negative one, for there is one experience that challenges its basic essence. It is not without purpose that I have chosen this particular Sunday to deal with the matter. For in what we are doing today - honoring the memory of those who have recently died - there emerges the rock on which "this-worldliness" is broken.

For a lack of a better phrase, I shall call this "the argument of affection." It is rooted in the relationship of love, and poses the simple question: "Can you stand by the grave of one you love and claim to be indifferent to the question of eternity?" It is one thing to say: "I do not care whether I survive death or not." It is something quite different to have loved and lost and say: "I do not care." You see, love has in it the seeds of eternity. Here is an experience that transcends time and space. To love is to feel that one is in touch with a Reality greater than the physical and the material. It does not stop with death. And this one experience invalidates what I might call "the religious provincialism" of our day. It shocks us out of our apathy and makes "the great Beyond" a vital concern. I cannot truly love and remain indifferent to this subject. Those of you whose loved ones we are remembering today or who have earlier known the pain of grief cannot, by virtue of this very fact, be neutral.

Here is another example of how we find ourselves by losing ourselves. The minute we turn from self-concern and begin to look through eyes of love, there emerges truth that we had never known before. The attitude of "one world at a time" is no longer adequate. It does not square with the dictates of love. It falls tragically short of meeting the needs of life. More than one person has discovered this truth through the death of a loved one. Robert G. Ingersoll was one of the most famous skeptics of the nineteenth century. His "stock-and-trade" was lampooning religion, and he was openly antagonistic to all talk of an after life. But in June of 1879 his favorite brother died, and as he stood by the grave side, things began to look differently. There, for the first time, he admitted an interest in immortality. Later, under the impact of that experience, he revised his thinking and affirmed another world. He made clear this was born, not of creed or book, but of human affection. He said: "It will continue...as long as Love kisses the lips of Death." This experience shatters thorough-going humanism; face to face with the death of another, Love cries out; and to this we cannot be indifferent. Therefore, Paul uttered a timely truth when he said: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (I Corinthians 15:19). That kind of hope is not enough. The most meaningful part of life, that is, love itself, comes to naught if existence is bounded by birth and death. Therefore, let us lay aside the superficial facade of indifference to eternity. It is a concern as burning and vital and relevant as love itself. The "argument of affection" is decisive; to all who

love, what happens after death does make a difference.

But this affirmation raises a crucial issue: is there a basis for this hope? Surely the heart cries out for eternity, but is this more than wishful fancy? Contrary to the song title, wishing does not make it so. I may want there to be an island in the sea, but this does not assure its existence. And in the same way, the desire for an after life is not enough. Religion has long been attacked as mere wish-projection; how can we substantiate what our love wants to be?

This question cannot be ignored, for on it turns the whole matter. Let me answer for the Christian faith. The foundation of our hope is not in a dream but a Deed. It is not a myth manufactured out of despair, but an Action rooted in history itself. Wishes well up from within; events crash in from without. And at the center of Christianity stands one Reality - Jesus Christ - the One who lived and died and rose again. He is the foundation beneath the longing of love. He is the language through which we know and understand God. If there is authentication, the Christian will find it here.

And authentication is to be found. For in Christ two things about God are made clear. First, He is love. Down to the last sparrow and the depths of sin, God has redemptive concern. As we feel toward our own, so to an infinite degree He feels toward us. Thus what we want for our loved ones is what He wants. And He is willing to go to any length to achieve it. The cross is often called a description of God's love. Here He demonstrated the scope of His willingness. You will remember they jeered at Him saying: "Come down from the cross if you are the Son of God!" Have you ever considered what it would have meant had He done that? If He had stopped short of death and called down the legions of angels, a limitation would have been set on God's love. There would have been one thing He refused to do, one indignity He would not endure. But notice: He remained on that cross, and thus defined His love by one word: unlimited. Therefore, through Christ we know that to the depths of His Being, God is love. The longings of our heart are His longings also.

The second fact about God gives meaning to the first: He is not only love; He is Lord. This word is a power-concept; lordship has to do with supremacy. We cannot ascribe this term to anyone who is inferior in strength. Yet we can ascribe it to God, for in Christ His mastery is revealed. If Christ's life and death are the definition of His love, then the resurrection is the definition of His power. Here He put Himself to test, and staged once and for all "the grudge battle" with evil. It was done to Christ that could be done, and then it was left to God to respond. I am reminded of an experience years ago. A magician came to our church and selected me and another boy to help him with a trick. We were to tie him up as best we could. He told us to use any kind of knots and all the rope we needed. So we worked feverously and finally finished. He asked: "Have you done all you can?" We answered: "Yes." Then, with unbelievable agility, he proceeded to undo what we had done and unloose himself. In that contest of strength, he was obviously "the lord."

And so it was with the Christ-event. After evil had done its worst, God went to work. He untied the knots of death and escaped the bands of the tomb. Evil's remity was within His ability. In rising from the dead, lordship was revealed. who loves is Lord, and He who is Lord is love. This crucial equation is the basis of Christian hope. We cannot be indifferent to eternity, and what is even truer, we can be sure of eternity. What the heart longs for as it faces death,

Jesus has assured. In Him is seen a God who is both willing and able to make us live forever.

Therefore, on this Memorial Sunday, I bring you "glad tidings of great joy." Against the backdrop of death are the evidences of hope. As the call of love rings out into the Beyond, the voice of Christ says back: "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). We are concerned about eternity, to be sure. Because of Him, we can have hope.

Years ago I read about an experience of President Duke McCall as he flew overseas. It seems a storm developed, and the plane had to climb to a higher altitude. Finally it rose above the clouds and there all was sunny and peaceful. As Dr. McCall looked down on the storm clouds raging below, two images caught his attention. One was a rainbow, which from that angle appeared as a complete circle. And in the center of that rainbow was the shadow of the plane against the clouds - in the shape of a cross. Dr. McCall wrote that that scene was a memorable symbol to him. Over against the storm was the rainbow - God's promise not to destroy creation - and the cross - God's fulfillment of that promise in reconciliation.

This is what I would have you see this Memorial Sunday: Death encircled by the rainbow and overshadowed by the Cross. It is a way of saying: "Thanks be to God, who as loving Lord gives us the victory over death!"