



Sermons

"IS THERE LIFE AFTER BIRTH?"

Sunday Morning, January 3, 1965
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Mark 5:21-34

The title of the sermon this morning may seem a little strange to you. If it had been "Is There Life After Death?" you probably would not have been surprised, for that sounds like the sort of subject that is usually discussed in church. However, the question "Is There Life After Birth?" is something altogether different. It focuses on the present rather than the future, and is concerned not so much with "the hereafter" as with "the here and now." Let me quickly assure you that this title is not a typographical error nor "a slip of the tongue." I deliberately structured it this way, and what is more, in so doing, I feel I am being responsive to the needs of our day. We can lament this all we like, but the fact still remains that only rarely does one hear today any questions about eternity. Sad as it may be, interest in "the things which shall be hereafter" definitely has waned. On the other hand, hardly a day goes by without someone raising a question about the meaning of our present existence. If one is perceptive, he will realize that here is where modern man is struggling. He wants to know about the present, and whether or not there is any purpose or vitality or fulfillment available for this moment. Other ages may have been predominately concerned with questions about fate and guilt and eternity, but our day is concerned about the meaning in this moment. Men are not asking "Is there life after death?" nearly as often as they are asking "Is there life after birth?" And if, as the church, we are truly concerned about our world, we must heed this question and shape our answer accordingly.

In a real sense, every sermon is an attempt to deal with this basic issue, and no one sermon could begin to cover it all. Therefore, this morning, I must limit my purpose. What I propose to do is to set forth just one principle, which, if followed, can lead to an affirmative answer to our question. You see, I believe there can be "life after birth" in a real and significant sense, and it comes when we learn the secret of living fully in the present.

Now let me enlarge upon what I mean by this crucial phrase: "living fully in the present." Among other things that we have been given, each of us has three distinct powers: the power to remember, the power to anticipate, and the power to experience. If you stop to think about it, these powers correspond to the three temporal modes of our existence—to the past, to the future, and to the present. And each of these has a unique function in the process of life. Against this background, what I mean by "living fully in the present" is that state of life where these three inherent powers are in the proper relationship to each other—the condition where the right balance is struck between past, present, and future. As I understand it, this state could be diagramed in the form of a pyramid. The past and future should be at the bottom, serving as foundations, and at the pinnacle should be the present—that one place in all existence where we have direct contact with life. We can remember and anticipate, to be sure, and these are important; but these are not the

same as moments of concrete experience. Just as only one part of a boat touches the water, so we touch the throbbing heart of Reality at only one point—in the ever-present Now. And this being the case, we must constantly give attention to this point, for unless we are fully aware of what is taking place here, there is no way to be in contact with the vital springs of existence. To put the matter bluntly, the present must always be more important to us than the past and future, and not the other way around, if there is to be life after birth.

Perhaps what I am trying to say will become clearer if I point to its personification in an actual life. I can think of no finer example than that of our Lord Himself, for better than anyone else, He had mastered the secret of living fully in the present. This did not mean He was oblivious to the past or unmindful of the future. The Gospels show that He had a real concern for both. Yet at no point did either of these lesser powers ever take over and dominate the present. No matter what had happened in the past or might happen in the future, Jesus was very much alive to what was happening in the present, and this was why He had such immense vitality.

For the sake of illustration, let us look at a cross section out of a typical day in the life of our Lord. I have in mind the fifth chapter of Mark's Gospel, which threads together a bewildering number of experiences. It begins on the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Gadarenes, where Jesus had gone with His disciples to seek a little peace. However, this was not to be theirs, for immediately they were confronted with the frightening spectacle of a raving mad man who could not be confined. In one mighty act of power, Christ brought wholeness to that fragmented life and restored this one to sanity. One would have anticipated a warm response from the neighborhood to such an action, but instead of this, because pigs seemed more important than a person, Jesus was ordered to leave. At this point, He crossed back over the Sea to find a huge crowd waiting for Him, but before He could begin to teach them, a ruler of the synagogue named Jarius rushed up and said that his little daughter was dying and begged Jesus to come lay His hands upon her. Without hesitation, Jesus complied, and in the midst of a jostling throng, He set out for the home of Jarius. In such a setting, how easy it would have been for Jesus' mind to have been preoccupied by either the past or the future. For example, He could have looked back and become lost in weary resentment. Had He not tried the night before to seek some solitude, only to be interrupted and harassed almost beyond endurance? Or, again, He could have relived His triumph with the Gadarene demonic, turning over again and again in his mind how the powers of destruction had been destroyed. Then, too, He could have remembered all over again the sting of humiliation of being asked to leave that country, or harbored the disappointment of not getting to speak to that great multitude that had gathered on the shore. There were any number of things that had just happened which could easily have dominated His consciousness as He walked along there.

There was also the temptation to become absorbed with the future. Jesus could well have begun to think: "Will I get to the home of Jarius in time? Will I be able to do anything if she is already dead? This is a prominent Jewish leader; if I win his support it could mean much for My cause." Such anxiety about the future could quite naturally have occupied all of His attention.

In light of these possibilities from both directions, what did happen is doubly remarkable. For in the midst of all this pressure and confusion, Jesus stopped abruptly and asked: "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples were irritated at first

by such a question, but that is exactly the point I am trying to make: Jesus was more sensitive to the present moment than all the rest. What had occurred turned out to be an episode of moving pathos. A simple woman who had suffered for twelve years with the problem of perennial hemorrhaging touched him. Her malady was physically debilitating, socially embarrassing, and religiously defining. This poor thing had tried every remedy under the sun to no avail, and now, as a last desperate resort, she had acted on a rumor and had come to Jesus, hoping He might help. Her condition was such that she was afraid to approach Him openly, so she had decided to slip up behind Him and touch one of the tassels on His cloak. When she did, lo and behold, the miracle occurred, and she was healed! It was at this moment that Jesus stopped. What impresses me here is not primarily Jesus' incredible power or His individualizing love, but rather His astute awareness of the moment. All that had happened or might happen did not keep Him from sensing what was happening. Neither past nor future deflected Him from the most important of all times--the living present. He was sensitive to and aware of what God was doing in the everlasting Now--and this is precisely what I mean by "the secret of living fully in the present."

Having set this ideal forth, let me be the first to admit that it is easier to articulate than to achieve. How surpassingly difficult it is to do this one thing! As I look back over my life with what I hope is deepening sensitivity, I am coming to realize how rarely I have given my best to the present moment and how often I have let that treasure slip away because I was absorbed somewhere else--my mind has literally been absent from the one point where life is most vital. And when you realize that authentic light is to be found in only one place, how tragic it is to spend most of our lives somewhere else. But when I am honest with myself, more often than not this has been the story of my life. Existing? Yes, but not fully present or alive to the meaning of each moment.

A good example of this out of my own experience occurs when I am driving around town. Because of my work, I spend a good bit of time at Kentucky Baptist Hospital. I am ashamed to have to admit this, but more than once I have left the church and a few minutes later found myself in the hospital parking lot, when that was not even where I was going. You see, I was so absorbed either with something that had happened or something that was going to happen that I did not even know what I was doing. Another time I remember stopping for a red light at an intersection. A moment later, the horn behind me blew and I automatically started up. I was almost run down by a car on the other street, for you see, the light had not changed; it was simply a church member blowing to wave hello. There I was--physically alive, but my mind was far off somewhere. I realize this is not only physically dangerous, it is personally tragic--for the only point of real contact with life is the present, and if you are not conscious there, you are not alive in the fullest sense.

Therefore, I doubt if there is any question of more importance than this one: where do you really live? Where do you spend most of your time? Going back to the figure of the pyramid, which of the three powers have you set at the pinnacle? Do you essentially live in the past, making what has been the focus of your life? Memory is a wonderful servant, of invaluable help in that role. It only becomes a problem when it becomes our master. A man ought to learn from history; the tragedy occurs from trying to live in history. I like the little story about the farmer who went out one morning and found that the wind had blown down his plum tree. When asked what he was going to do, he thought for a moment and said: "I'll pick the fruit and burn the rest." This is a proper attitude, it seems to me, toward the past.

It should illuminate the present, but not dominate it. If such domination does occur, then one has turned his back on the light and chosen to live in reflection.

Or perhaps you live in the future. You have seen enough of life to know some of its possibilities, and so you spend most of your time wondering about what is to be. This may take any number of forms. One of the most common is anxiety, like the questions: "Will I lose my job? Will the stock market crash? Will my loved ones die? Will I someday have cancer?" Another form of living in the future is building air castles—"Someday I am going to stop drinking"... "Someday I'll get organized"... "Someday I'll write that book." Still another familiar way of living in the future is that of perennial postponement—"When I get out of school, I'll spend more time with my family"... "When I feel worthy, I'll become a Christian." These are familiar sounds to all of us, I am sure, but do you not see that life in this place is not real life at all? We should have a regard for the future, to be sure. The shadows of our deeds do fall in front of us, affecting what we shall become, but this is precisely my point: we should use the future only as it stimulates the present, but never as an escape from the present or as a means of paralyzing it. This is the most unreal of all the realms—living in a future that probably will not be that way at all.

Actually there is only one place to live an authentic existence—and that is the point of this whole sermon—in the ever-present Now. I repeat: here and here alone is where Life touches us and we touch life. There is a once-and-for-allness about the flow of time. History is not a cycle, repeating itself. It passes this way only once, and if we miss it then, we have missed it forever. Here, too, is the only place of creativity. We cannot fully remember or change the past; we cannot fully know or control the future. But at this present moment, we can experience and at least in part we can act. Here is the only place where life can be lived, and wise is the man who made this secret his own.

One day a lawyer asked Jesus directly what life was all about, and our Lord answered with the story of the Good Samaritan. Here was a merchant who had been robbed and bloodied and left for dead by a road. His plight was one that would lay instinctive claims on any sensitive human conscience. Yet here came a priest along, whose vocation it was to preserve the past. Now perhaps he was in deep thought about ancient history; at least we know he walked on by unheeded. Next came a Levite, one who had the practical responsibilities of serving the Temple. He was probably absorbed in what he had to do shortly, so he also walked blindly past. Last of all came a Samaritan peddler to observe the scene. He could have retreated into the past and remembered the antagonism between his race and that of this Jew. Or he could have projected into the future and become frightened over what might happen if he stopped—could this man be a trap? However, the Samaritan was controlled by neither direction; only by the present moment—he did on the spot what he knew was right. He was living fully in the present.

Which brings me back to where I started: "Is There Life After Birth?" I answer "yes." Where is it found, you ask? Right here, right now, when you are sensitive in the ever-present Now to what God is doing and calling you to do. Here is the place to live if you want contact with the Life that is Life indeed!

Tell me then—where do you live? In the past? In the future? Or in the Now?