

THE BAPTIST HOUR

August 7, 1960

The Greatness Of God

Dr. J. Winston Pearce

Pastor, First Baptist Church
DeLand, Florida

Produced by

The Radio and Television
Commission of the
Southern Baptist Convention

Box 12157
Fort Worth 16, Texas

THE GREATNESS OF GOD

A young minister once talked with Bishop Stubbs, of Oxford, about a program of preaching. He wanted advice. What did the Bishop recommend? Said the older man, "My son, preach about God, and preach about twenty minutes." Bitter medicine, that!

Yet, unless a minister's preaching begins with God and ends with God, he has no worthy beginning, and he might as well end in much less time than twenty minutes. The field for preaching is broad and the opportunities are unlimited. Let the field be covered, let the opportunities be seized and realized, but let all be rooted, grounded in the garden, the Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

During the second World War, when the children were being evacuated from London, one little girl was heard to pray, "Dear God, please protect Mummy and Daddy from those terrible German bombs, and Dear God, do take care of yourself, 'cause if anything happens to you we are all sunk." We are.

And yet, weak and sinful creatures that we are, we give so little thought, so little attention to the One who is so great and holy! We become infatuated with the time and place and position. We want to know the right people, go to the right places, wear the right clothes, drive the right cars, and say the right thing until we merit the thrust that Mark Twain heard from his little daughter on one occasion. The great humorist had received an invitation to visit the Kaiser of Germany. The thought of that thrilled his daughter. "Why, Daddy," she said, "if this keeps up, you will be acquainted with everybody but God!"

Belief that Matters

Are you acquainted with God? Do you believe in Him? Does He have business with you and you with Him on the basis of real and genuine awareness? Is He real to you? I know the arguments for belief in God. I studied them as a theological student. My

memory has been refreshed again and again by the study of old and new books on the subject. Here is a universe, for instance. It is one verse. One cannot believe that it just happened. It is much easier to believe in God than that. You look at the world and it makes sense. It responds to reason. Why? Man has a sense of oughtness. There is that oughtness that fairly shouts its imperatives at us. Why? You think of God. Man has always done so. How and Why? You have a hunger and a thirst for God. All men do; that is, all normal people have hungers for God. There may be exceptions now and then just as some people are color-blind. When you bet your life on God a certain type of life results and that life and that type of life is the highest that we know. Why?

Now about each of these arguments books have been written and other books will be written. But this is no place for even a brief discussion of them. Few people are led to believe in God by arguments, proofs and analyses anyway. Santayana's words are wise when he says, "O world, thou chooseth not the better part. It is not wisdom to be only wise and on the inward vision close the eyes. But it is wisdom to believe the heart. Columbus found the world and had no chart save one that faith deciphered in the skies. To trust the soul's invincible surmise was all his science and his only art. Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine that lights the pathway but one step ahead across a void of mystery and dread. Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine by which alone the mortal heart is led unto the thinking of the thoughts divine."

Well, if a person can't do that, if he will not do that, if he does not do that, little can be done for him in the way of arguments for the reality of God. If he does go along with Santayana, and what is far more important, if he does go along with the New Testament, then he will not need the arguments so much anyway.

Now, of course, the matter of believing in God alone is not enough to do us a great deal of good. The Bible says the devils in hell also believe and tremble. It isn't enough to believe in God. What kind of God do you believe in, and what kind of belief do you have? That is the thing that really matters.

The Earl of Asquith received many honors and recognitions and invitations, and one day they were reviewing the whole lot before his little daughter. She was amazed at it all, and a look of questioning came over her face after they had listed the honors and recognitions of her illustrious father. And finally she looked up and said, "But is he still my father?"

That is the question. With all of His attributes, His creativity, His holiness, His power, His wisdom, His majesty, is God still our Father? Are His dealings with us on that basis? If so, how shall we explain some of His actions and some of His seeming inactions?

The old mystic whose meditations are revealed in the "Theologia Germanica" has a suggestion that is fruitful at this point. He says it is his desire to be to the eternal goodness what his own hand is to a man. What are the relations of a man's hand to a man?

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, musing, no doubt on this question from the old mystic, says, "First, a man is greater than his hand; second, a man uses his hand; and third, a man suffers with and through his hand." Now this seems to be true of our relations to God. It is not an adequate analogy, of course, but it is suggestive. And in this sermon, let the limitations be placed at the point of these attributes of God. We do believe in God in these ways, do we not?

The Greatness of God

A man is greater than his hand, he is superior to it, he can go on living even if a hand is lost. So God is greater than the world, greater than you and I. He transcends it and us. He is superior

to both. It was never meant that God should glorify man, but that man should glorify and serve God. God is great, He is very great. Isaiah says that He measures the waters in the hollow of His hand, He measures out the heavens with a tapeline, He estimates the dust of the earth as being about a peck, He weighs the mountains on His scales like the ones used on the farm to weigh cotton. The hills He weighs on jewelers scales, the nations of the earth are like a silver drop of water in a bucket. He sits enthroned about the earth and the inhabitants are grasshoppers. His knowledge is past finding out. His wisdom, who can fathom?

And yet, strangely enough, it is in the greatness, the power, the majesty, the sovereignty of God that many people find their most difficulty. While we're here, we ask, "Can God do anything?" That is an old question. I think the answer is No. It is not enough to say that He is powerful, nor has to do what He is going to do, keeping certain things in mind. It is not a matter of just getting certain things done; it is a matter of getting them done in a certain way for a certain purpose to bring about a certain result, in man and in the world. God cannot deny Himself, be false to Himself, act in opposition to Himself. Let us see if that can be illustrated.

Do you remember the first step that your baby took? Foolish question — as if you could forget. With all the hours you spent in begging the child to come three feet across the floor to your arms? Recall the prizes you offered her? Now, if it had been only a matter of getting the child across the three feet of space, it would have been a very simple matter to take her bodily across, or to take her by the hand and lead her across. But then, that was not what you wanted, was it?

When our daughter was fifteen months old, the family moved to a new home, a home in which all the bedrooms were on the second floor. My wife and I spent some time in deciding what to do about Patricia and those stairs. We knew that

if we put a gate at the bottom and a gate at the top of the stairs, we would one day forget to close the gates and the child would then have free access to danger. We finally decided to risk the danger from the beginning.

I admit it was a rather harrowing experience, watching a fifteen-month-old child ascend and descend the high and curving stairway. My wife would be leaning over the railing from above, watching, while I stood at the bottom ready to pick up the pieces. The problem was for the child to get from the top of the stairs to the bottom of the stairs. But the purpose was more than that. The purpose was for her to do it under certain conditions and circumstances. Otherwise, her parents conceivably could have always led her up and down the stairs. What we wanted was for her to learn to go up and down the stairs of life alone.

Well, it seems that God is faced with something of the same problem. He wants certain things done, and He wants certain things done in certain ways, and He wants certain conditions to prevail. He insists that we do our own work climbing the stairs of life under certain conditions, and play the game according to the rules. He will not present the formula for penicillin to man on a platter. He will not make wars to cease unto the ends of the earth until man plays according to the rules of the game.

I believe in that kind of God. How many questions that would answer; how many problems that would solve; how many heartaches that would ease. He wants to do so much for us. He wants conditions so different from what they are. He is so very powerful. He is altogether sovereign. But the work must be done in certain ways, under certain conditions, achieving certain purposes. God cannot do our homework for us.

God's Instruments

The second thing about that body and hand is that not only is the body greater than the hand, but the body can

do things with the hand that it can't do without it. The body uses the hands, the hands are instruments of the body. We are instruments of God, and He can do things with us that He cannot do without us.

Now to say that is not dishonoring God. That is not blasphemy. That is claiming a share in the kingdom of God. One of the most beautiful weddings we ever had in our church, and one that spoke as deeply to my heart and soul as any I ever had, was of a young woman, a beautiful young woman, who had no arms. She had never had arms, yet she was a graduate of one of our great universities. At the wedding, we had a double ring ceremony — no arms, but a double ring ceremony. And the ceremony moved along so smoothly, with such beauty and dignity that there were those in the audience who did not know the girl was armless, making it necessary for the ring to go on her toe instead of her hand. What a magnificent demonstration of love that was — the love of God and the love of Christ.

But when all that has been said, there are things that people with hands can do that those who do not have hands cannot do. And God can do many things with you and by you, through you and in you that He cannot do without you, for you are the body of Christ, and each of you a different member of that body.

The Suffering of God

And now the third point. Not only is God greater than the hand, not only can He do things with the hand that He cannot do without the hand, but just as the body suffers with the hand, so God suffers with man. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed. We do not have a high priest who is unmindful of our feelings and of our abilities, but He is one who sees and knows and cares and suffers with us.

Walt Whitman, a poet of an earlier day whom some admired so much, used

to say, "I do not ask a wounded man how he feels, I am the wounded man." Now one may question Whitman on that, but not God. Wounded for our transgressions, God knows your name. God knows your problem, and God has done and is doing something about your problem. The cross is at the center of life.

You remember that story coming out of Rome of the triumph of the great emperor after his victorious campaign, riding slowly through the streets of the imperial city in his chariot; how everyone was being held back on the sidelines as the thousands thronged the streets. Suddenly a child broke loose from the ranks and went running toward the slowly moving chariot. A soldier rushed toward her and said, "Back! Back! He is your emperor, Child, back!" The child turned a laughing face toward the soldier and said, "He may be your emperor, but he is my father!"

Yes, God knows your name, He wants to use you, He was wounded for your transgressions.



This sermon leaflet is free. However, if you wish to share in the cost of printing and distribution our address is: THE BAPTIST HOUR, P. O. Box 12157, Fort Worth 16, Texas.

Radio and Television Commission of The Southern Baptist Convention

P. O. Box 12157

Fort Worth 16, Texas

REV. PAUL M. STEVENS, Director