

WHEN THE PRESSURES WERE STRONGEST

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 10, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In the spring of the year when the weather is balmy, when nature comes to life again covering the earth with a tender green blanket of new growth, and when the sun shines gently, life is easy. How different it is in the dead of winter. The storms rage and life is hard.

Life has many crises. Beyond those in nature, there are many others. In fact, those in nature have largely been controlled by the heating of our homes, the cooling of our homes, the clothing that we wear, and the comfortable means by which we transport ourselves. In other realms we have not been so successful in lessening the force of the stresses and strains of life. In the social realm, for example, life may go smoothly, or life may be a veritable hell on earth. Economic pressures are also quite common in the world today. There may be crises in our profession or work, which cause much strain and stress. In our physical well-being there are periods of crisis, alternating with periods of robust health. Life has its ups and downs, and is never the same for very long. In the way we face these crises we demonstrate the real quality of our lives. As we face the stresses and strains of life we demonstrate qualities of greatness or qualities of weakness.

Our Lord's teachings were indeed impressive, but their true greatness was not seen until Christ demonstrated the real value of his principles in the crises of his own life. As we have often seen, the central theme of Christ's life was love--love of God and love of man. (Mark 12:28). Let us notice how he lived this theme in the crucial moments of his own life.

The Temptations

When Jesus was only thirty he came to the Jordan to be baptized of John the Baptist. For many years the age of thirty seemed to me to be a rather advanced age, though for a number of years now I have felt that it is a young age. Christ was only thirty when he began his ministry. Immediately after his baptism he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for a period of forty days, to be tempted of the devil. During this time he ate nothing, and so was consequently physically weak and exhausted when Satan mounted his attack, "And the devil said unto him, If thou art the Son of God, command this stone that it become bread." Notice the psychological thrust with which Satan challenged Christ. "If thou art the Son of God ..." would almost instinctively cause Christ to demonstrate his divinity by performing the miracle. Yet, it was not right that he should do so. "Jesus answered unto him, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone."

Satan then spirited the Lord away to an exceedingly high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. He then said, "To thee will I give all this authority, and the glory of them: for it hath been delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it." Have you ever paused to think what this sally really meant to the Lord? In order to feel its force we must remember that he was part of the godhead who created the world in the beginning. The world belonged to him, until man by his rebellion and sin gave Satan the ascendancy for a time. How disturbing it must have been to hear Satan flaunting his dominance in the world which Christ had helped to create in purity and sinlessness. Christ responded to Satan's challenge, "If thou therefore wilt worship before me, it shall all be thine," with the words, "It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

Finally, Satan took him to the pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, "If thou art the Son of God, cast thyself down from thence," and then quoted from the Psalms to show that no harm would befall him. Jesus answered, "It is said, Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God." (Luke 4:1-12). In his weakened physical condition how difficult it must have been to have responded to these particularly disturbing thrusts from Satan. Perhaps it is especially significant to us to notice that he answered each with, "It is written." We, too, need the solid foundation of the scriptures on which to take a stance when we are tempted. This can come only from an extensive familiarity with the scriptures.

Sifting the Multitudes

In the sixth chapter of John we read of Christ's feeding the five thousand. Then in John 6:15 we read, "Jesus therefore perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him king, withdrew into the mountain himself alone." So great was his popularity at the beginning of the chapter that the multitude wished to make him their king. Seeing their desire and realizing that they were following him for the loaves and fishes, Christ delivered to them a discourse on the "Bread of Life."

His spiritual message was so far above their level of thinking that they responded by turning away from him. "Many therefore of his disciples, when they heard this, said, This is a hard saying; who can hear it? ... Upon this many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Jesus said therefore unto the twelve, Would ye also go away? Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we have believed and know that thou art the Holy One of God." (John 6:60, 66-69). The chapter begins with the multitude clamoring for him to become their king. The chapter ends with only a dozen men still following

him, and one of them is a traitor. How difficult this must have been for one who loved people infinitely, and who wished for them to be his disciples, that they might be saved.

It is in this same vein, at the end of the great chapter on woes, Matthew 23, that Jesus with a sorrowful heart recognizes the fact that the people of Jerusalem had turned deaf ears to his invitation. Yet, in spite of their hardened hearts, he still loved them. Note the tenderness of his words, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate, for I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, til ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." (Matt. 23:37-39).

Praying In the Garden

After eating the last supper with the disciples, and after instituting the Lord's Supper, Jesus went out into the garden of Gethsemane and there said to his disciples, "Sit ye here, while I go yonder and pray. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful, and sore troubled. Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: abide ye here, and watch with me. And he went forward a little, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." We notice here his recognition of what the forthcoming crucifixion would mean. Humanly, he pulled back from the cross. Yet, his love and loyalty to God was so great that he said, as recorded by Luke, "Not my will, but thine be done."

The spiritual destiny of the world hung in the balances as he confirmed his life-long intention of redeeming man from his sins. This was his last chance to pull out. Satan was tempting him even until the end. After winning the battle in the garden, Christ came back to the disciples, "And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them sleeping, and saith unto Peter, "What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." The opposition of enemies was difficult enough to bear; the unconcern of his disciples must have been even worse. While the spiritual destiny of the world hung in the balances, the apostles slept. A second time he went away to pray and a second time he came to find them sleeping. A third time he went away and again found them sleeping upon his return. "Then cometh he to the disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners." (Matt. 26: 36-46).

Betrayal

Almost before his words had died away Judas came to betray him. The text says, "And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, whomsoever I shall kiss, that is he: take him. And straightway he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, Rabbi; and kissed him." How painful this must have been to our Lord. One of his own trusted disciples, one who had been with him for more than three years, one who had heard him teach and had seen him work miracles, now led the angry mob from the high priest.

Yet, even though indignation and anger would have been completely justified, it seems, our Lord still loved even Judas. I have never been able to comprehend quite how our Lord could say, "Friend, do that for which thou art come." (Matt. 26: 47-50). Yet, say it he did. It can only mean that he loved even this betrayer, for his love depends not upon the subject loved, but upon his own nature. His is an unconditional love. He loves all men, whether friend or foe.

Shortly thereafter he is in the house of Caiaphas the high priest, where he is accused of blasphemy. Jesus was blindfolded and "then did they spit in his face and buffet him: and some smote him with the palms of their hands, saying, Prophecy unto us, thou Christ: who is he that struck thee?" (Matt. 26:67-68). How difficult: it must have been for the divine Son of God to suffer such humiliation at the hands of wicked men.

Peter's Denials

The same passage of scripture next tells of the denials of Christ's most outspoken disciple. "Now Peter was sitting without in the court; and a maid came unto him, saying, Thou also was with Jesus the Galilean. But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest." There followed a second denial and a third, and even an oath as Peter, "began to curse and to swear," saying, "I know not the man." Then it was that the cock crew, signifying the coming of dawn.

According to Luke's account, "And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter." (Luke 22:61). Although Jesus was inside the house of the high priest, and Peter outside on the porch, there was a brief moment in which the eyes of our Lord met those of Peter. Then, the text reads, "And he went out, and wept bitterly." (Matt. 26:69-75). How painful it must have been to Christ to know that Peter, who had been so close to him and so enthusiastic in his support, had weakened to the point that thrice he had denied his Lord.

The crucifixion followed. While nailed to the cross Jesus was aware of the attitude of ruffians who watched his agony. "And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself: if

thou art the Son of God, come down from the cross. In like manner also the chief priest, mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross, and we will believe on him.” (Matt. 27:39-42).

It was in the midst of this kind of railing that Jesus looked down from the cross and said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34). How easy and how natural it would have been for one dying unjustly at the hands of wicked men to have felt resentment and hatred in his heart. Instead, Christ was concerned for their welfare rather than angered by their sin.

Conclusion

The marvelous manner in which our Lord met the crises in his life gives us strength and courage in the crises of our lives today. Each of us will find that the super-highway of life often ends suddenly, and the road becomes rough and bumpy. It is in these stretches of bad road that the real quality of our lives is displayed. How important it is for us to be so grounded in the eternal truths of God that we shall be able to withstand the stresses and the pressures of life and yet retain our equilibrium and balance. When the pressures were strongest against our Lord, he was able to stand firm. His principles stand the test.

Not only did Christ teach truths far above those previously known by men, but by the way he met the crises in his own life we are convinced that Christianity works. It is no mere theory, but will stand us in good stead when the “rough waters of life” come upon us.