

(music instruments playing) (choir singing)

- Accept these offerings, we beseech thee, oh Lord, and mercifully direct and enable us by thy Holy Spirit, that all things which we do in thy name may be truly rot in thee, through Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen. (music playing) It is also nebulous, the student was complaining, the preachers talk and the people talk about a feeling in here and an experience in here and so on, and there's nothing public to point to. When you work in the world of every day, you can point to something that everybody else can see. A guy says, there's a moon, all right? You point to the moon and there it is. Everybody can see it, or else you accuse the man of hallucination. But in the Christian faith, there's nothing like this to point to, so the student. And it was precisely to this mood that Elijah was appealing when in the long ago, and in the story that we read, that he decided to take religion out of the stratosphere of theological speculation and make it walk on all fours in terms of observable consequences. When he said to them, why do you halt between two opinions? If God is God follow Him. If Baal is god follow him, they didn't say anything. But when he suggested some appealed to observable consequences and ended by suggesting, the Lord that answers by fire, let him be God. Then all the people murmured, "It is well spoken." Now there's obviously something very appealing and something very modern about this appeal to observable consequences. You find it in the New Testament. Our Lord did not scorn making an appeal to precisely this type of argument. He said, "If I do not do the works of my Father, "don't believe me." And when John the Baptist sent messages to Him, raising the question of the ultimacy of His Messiahship, our Lord only gave him an indirect answer. He just told the messengers to wait around for a few hours and watch Him. Watch Him heal the sick, watch Him open the eyes of the blind, watch Him touch the legs of the lame, and then just to go back and tell John the Baptist, what they had seen. He was willing to stake everything on an appeal to these observable results. Now, the church has always known that there is some connection between truth and observable consequences. But in its history, it has never been quite sure what kind of consequences it ought to appeal to. The God that answers by what?

Congregants: Fire.

- Shall be God. And when we look through church history, we find various various answers to this particular type of question. Sometimes during church history, the approach that Elijah made has been repeated. The God that answers by signs and wonders let Him be God. If you came up to Philadelphia today, I would take you out to Fairmont Park if we had the time and I would show you a little bush. If you looked at the bush, it looked like every other bush that you had ever seen. But around this bush is a little picket fence, and around the picket fence is evidence of thousands and thousands and thousands of people who have walked around that little picket fence. And there you'll find high on that picket fence, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of rose rows, medals, stationary images. There are canes there, there are crutches there, there all sorts of things there. Hundreds of dollars were collected there by the park guards. For two or three years ago, two little girls said that they saw the Virgin appear in the bush. And although the church, the Catholic church

never certified the vision tens of thousands of people flocked there, because they wanted to have a share in the miracle. It is a spirit which is very near to the heart of many people. It is the spirit of the character in Browning, who said, "God, if you want us to love you, "throw us a handful of stars." Now, when we turned to the New Testament, they lived in the atmosphere of the supernatural. And yet it's surprising how little this appealed to miracles and wonders was part and parcel of their appeal. Paul puts miracle working way down on the list and both Jesus and Paul reminded their hearers that Satan too could work miracles. And Jesus Himself was constantly in a struggle to play down His mounting reputation as a miracle worker. When He healed people, He would tell them, "Now, please don't tell anybody. "I don't want this to get around." You remember that in His last agonizing hour, He repudiated the temptation to put His Messiahship to the final proof by working the ultimate miracle. His enemies propositioned Him, If you're the son of God, come down from the cross and we will believe. Supposedly He had, suppose the nails had dropped out of His hands, the nails had dropped out of His feet and He had stepped down onto the ground before them all. Would this have prove that He was the son of God? Would this have prove that He was indeed the Messiah? And the answer must be no. And it must be no because of two things, for one thing, there's always a naturalistic explanation for almost any phenomenon. You remember there in John, when Jesus was praying to His father and said, "Father glorify Thy Name." That the father spoke from Heaven and said, "I both have glorified it and will glorify it." And then we read that those who were standing by said "It thundered," ah, yes, this is the eternal skeptic, it thundered. Did somebody's prayer get answered? Uh, it thundered. Did God work a mighty work here? Oh, it thundered. Did the spirit of God reveal Himself in a special way in his life? It thundered. There's always the possibility of a naturalistic explanation, but quite aside from that, there's another problem in appealing to signs and wonders. And that is the fact that there is no essential connection between character and miracle working. If I said to you this morning, I want to demonstrate that what I am telling you, is the absolute truth. And I'm going to demonstrate it by making this cow jump over the moon. Now I want you to watch me very closely. Abracadabra Bup bup adup. Now watch it it goes up, up, up, up. Now, watch it over. Over, over, here It comes down there. Now I have prove to you what I say is true. No, I haven't really proved this at all. The only thing that I have demonstrated is that I can make cows jump over moons. And that's quite a different thing than proving the honesty of what I am saying or the truth of what I am saying. The God that answers by signs and wonders. I don't think that this will bring us where we wanna go. Well, the church has tried another answer in its history. The God that answers by the greatest amount of force, let Him be God. Now in the early centuries, there was no appeal to this type of thing, but by the time that the church developed a state in culture at the time of Constantine, the possibility of making its appeal to the superiority of Christianity on the basis of force became a live option. Kenneth Latourette, in speaking about the threat of the Muslims in the ninth and succeeding centuries says that the first reaction of the Christian Church to the Muslim invasion was an appeal to military force. And he traces the Iberian peninsula campaign in Cecilia down through the crusades. Commenting on the crusades he says, "Never in the history of the world "has any religion with a possible exception of Islam, "given rise to such a prolonged procession of holy wars." The superiority of the Christian faith over the Muhammad faith was to be proved on the battlefield. The God who answers with the greatest force, let Him be God. We don't have to do it quite as strongly on the battlefield. There are all forms of other ways. There are all sorts of other ways of coercion, by which this same appeal is always a temptation of a religious group. Whenever a majority try to suppress a minority, whenever a majority seek to use the apparatus of government in order to coerce the centers, they are making of the gospel, the power of God under coercion, and are assuming

that the mark of God's favor is the ability to survive in a power struggle. But how foreign this is to our Lord Jesus Christ, for when we turn to our Lord, we find that this is precisely the thing that made Him a perpetual stumbling block to His contemporaries. He would not do the thing that He ought to do in the way of coercing the minds and hearts of men. From His entrance to His exit, His meekness was a stumbling block. They all were looking for a king to smack their foes and lift them high. Thou came us the little baby thing that made a woman cry. Where is the power of God in that? There at the very end of His life, that thing that we call a triumphal entry, they knew what triumphal entries were. They'd seen them, men coming in horses and chariots with their captives behind them. Here comes a man on an ass. If I may be excused to play on words. He was a little asinine. He was a little ridiculous. There was no appeal here to the normal instincts of the human heart. It was not that our Lord did not know anything about the blandishments of worldly power. He'd been tempted by worldly power at the very beginning of His career. A tempter came and offered him all of the accoutrements of political success and worldly kingdoms. And He had trampled them under His feet, no power of this type for Him only at Calvary. No allegiance of angels would come to scatter His foes when He needed the most to demonstrate that God was still with Him and that His father was still on His side. Oh no! The only power He permitted Himself was the power of suffering love, salvation by cross. Yeah, but salvation by club, never. No, the God that answers by the greatest amount of force can never be the Christian God. There's another kind of appeal, which the church has made. It is an appeal which E. Stanley Jones is referring to, when he tells of how one day he slipped into a debate in India between a Hindu and a Christian. Christian was a very educated man. And in the process of the give and take of the debate, the Christian propounded a very profound question to his antagonist. It involved a lot of knowledge, a lot of erudition. And when he had propounded it, he stopped for a minute. And then he said to the Hindu, "If you will show me "that you understand my question, "quite aside from answering it, "I will concede the debate to you." Here is another appeal, an appeal of a different kind. The God that answers by the cleverest arguments, let him be God. Now there are those who would tell us that arguments have nothing to do with Christian faith. A man like Soren Kierkegaard will remind us of the fact that to defend anything is to discredit it. If a man walks in and says, "Gentlemen, I want to make an announcement this morning. "I am in love," period. "And I want to defend my condition." or, "I want to interpret my condition by suggesting "that there are three things to be said for being in love. "The first is this, and the second is this "and the third is that." This guy's making himself ridiculous. What a lover does, if he's genuine, is not to defend his love by saying, here are three reasons for falling in love, but by coming in and throwing up his hand and saying, "Boys, I'm in love." And so says Soren Kierkegaard with the Christian, the Christian is a witness. And when he witnesses, he witnesses not in the language of logic, but in the language of experience, who so have felt the spirit of the highest cannot confound him nor doubt him nor deny ye though, with one ye though, with one voice Oh world though, vow deny stand vow on that side for on this am I. Now I think there is much to be said for suggesting that the Christian faith moves on a level different from argument, in spite of the fact that I think that Soren Kierkegaard and some of his followers have overcome. After all, we do not have to be obscurantistic, because we are Christians. There is still in the Bible, the injunction to love the Lord, thy God with all your mind. And mind is still part of the God- given function of a human being. But still after all is said and done, there's a lot to what Soren Kierkegaard says. We must have reduced the Christian faith to a parlor game for egg heads. It's not the clever in mind after all that will see God, it's the pure in heart. And when Jesus said, if any man wills to do God's will, He will know. He put His finger upon our human dilemma. Our trouble is not in the thoughts in our minds, but in the desires in our souls. And that's what needs cure.

Several years ago, when I was preaching out at Stanford University, the first Sunday that I was out there, a man came up in the line afterwards just to shake hands with the preacher. He wasn't one of the students, he was a man in his forties, I would say. And in shaking hands with me, he merely said that, "I'm an agnostic. "I just happened to be here this morning. "But something that was said interested me." And I thanked him and he moved on with the crowd as others pushed in. But when the next Sunday he came back in, again, spoke to me and again said, that something had been said interested him. I stopped him and suggested that we make a little date. So he was satisfied that we should, and we made a date to discuss his intellectual difficulties. When I went over to the office and the time that the date had been made, there was a note tacked up there. He was awfully, sorry. He had been called out of town on business. Very sorry that he couldn't meet me and that was that. When I got back to Philadelphia at the end of the summer, I got a letter from him from Florida and again, he expressed his regrets that he had had to leave town so suddenly. But incidentally, he said something about, he had to go to New York from Florida, and I immediately wrote back and said, well, if you have to go to New York, don't you have to go through Philadelphia? Why don't you stop off, and we'll discuss your intellectual doubts. So he wrote back and said he was sorry, he was in an awful hurry he couldn't do that. So again, I wrote back and said, tell me your hotel in New York. And I'll come up to your hotel and we'll discuss your intellectual doubts. Well, he couldn't get out of this one. So he told me his hotel. And on the day appointed I went up to him to argue with him about the Christian faith. Well, we went round and round and for two hours, I of course thought I answered his problems. He thought that I didn't. And finally I remembered what sometimes in the heat of my own interest in debate, makes me sometimes forget the thing that I've just been saying, that Christianity is not the conclusion of an argument with the beginning of a commitment. And finally I said to this fellow, I said, "Now, listen." Of course I was sticking my neck way out. "Suppose that I could prove to your satisfaction, "that Jesus Christ were the Son of God "and the Savior of men. "Would you promise me that you would give yourself to Him "body and soul? "No holes barred?" I can see him right this minute. His eyes began over here. They went up the wall, up over the ceiling, down the other wall, over the floor and back on my facing it. And then he said, "Well, well, I don't think I would." When I pressed him, what his problem was, it was almost the new thing. During the war, he'd been a major and he'd been stationed in India and he hated it. Absolutely hated it. And somewhere along the line, he'd gotten a fear. If he ever became a Christian, God would send him back to India, which was the end of the line, as far as he was concerned. (crowd exclaiming) Know when the best said life, but a poor player that threats and struts his hour upon the stage and then his heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fear, signifying nothing. When he talked that way, he wasn't giving a philosophy of nihilism out of a well reasoned argument, but out of a wasted life. We think with our characters and in all matters of truth that matter, truth is a function of character. Though I'm afraid that apologetics will never solve our problem either, we must say goodbye perhaps regretfully to the God who answers with the cleverest arguments, as indicating the truth, which we seek. Obviously I have to stop somewhere and I have to stop on a positive note. So let me come to my final one. About a month ago, I was in Washington DC and in a committee meeting, and a man came up to me and he said, "I bring you greetings from the Reverend Robert Wells "in Denver, Colorado." And I thank him. The Reverend Robert Wells. He hadn't always been a Reverend. When I first knew him, he was a communist. And he got out of communism the hard way before it was popular to get out of communism, at the very end of the 1930's. When he decided to go into the ministry, he became a Christian and go into the ministry. One of his friend's said, "I don't believe that your conversion is genuine, "unless you go down to Headquarters "and tell them that you're a Christian "and

turning your card face to face, "and that you're going into ministry." We went down to Headquarters and felt like he ran into the only one that was there at the time was the librarian. So he said to the librarian, "I'm turning in my card, "I'm going to the Christian ministry." And the librarian thinking that this was a new way of infiltrating said, "Jeez, that's a swell idea who thought up this one?" But I'm getting a little bit ahead of my story. What I want to tell you is how he became a Christian. I was holding meetings in Syracuse and this young communist leader from Syracuse University came one night. And after the service, he came up and introduced himself to me. And we got into an argument. We went over to the pastor's house and we argued and debated till 1 O'clock at night, over the relative merits of Christianity and communism. I didn't win my boy. But during that week of special services, there was a young fellow with the name of Carl who had a genuine and real experience of Jesus Christ. And he, and this young communist became fast friends. Now, Carl was a very average mentality and the communist was smart as a whip. And they used to debate and they used to argue, the communist always won. He could always push the Christian to the wall every time. No problem. Every time he could push the Christian to the wall. So finally one night, they were arguing and the Christian said, "I don't know the answer as usual. "I haven't the slightest idea of what to say, you got me." But he said, "I do know that Jesus Christ is real, "and I know what He's done for me. "and I know the change that has come into my life "as a result of His touch upon my life." Then I started to see a strange thing happened, and yet it wasn't so strange or it's the miracle of the Christian faith. It has repeated itself in every age and in every generation, the armor of defense with which the communist had surrounded himself, was shattered as if by a blow from the legendary hammer of Thor. And he stood defenseless without a word before this young man, Carl. For he had noticed this boy's life, he had noticed this strange quality of living that had come into this boy's life. He didn't know what it was. He couldn't tell where it was from. He recognized that it was more than human, and it finally broke him. And late that night, my communist friend knocked at the door of my minister friend months after I had left town, of course, and said, "I want to find out how to become a Christian." And this is the end of our search. Is it not the God who answers by changed lives, lives that are changed in the likeness of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Is not the thing, this is the thing to which we point to. And if there's anything that is public to which we can point as the young student with whom I began complained, is it not precisely to this? Is it not the wonder of the Christian faith, that all types of men, savages and students, PHD's and all learned, ancient Greeks and modern Americans, Orientals and accidentals, garbage men and geologists, they all witness to the same experience, they all are transformed in the same image, in the same likeness, the image and likeness that is so unlike what we are by nature, made to be that the very libido itself is transformed in the process? Is it not here that psychology and the Christian faith merge in telling us that only a life that can give and to receive love is a life worth living? And the Christian faith takes this insight, expands it and builds around it and points to the lover of our souls, as the one norm of what a love life might be. And then points through the reproduction of this love life and the power of the Holy Spirit in life after life, after life. And when men of all cultures and of all generations, and of all temperaments, and of all different backgrounds, and of all different educations, and of all different economic spread, all find precisely the same type of character, the character, Jesus Christ, Himself being formed in them. Is there not here emerging, the possibility that they are dealing, not with illusion, but with something real. The God that answers by change lives, lives, change in the likeness of Jesus Christ, let Him be God, yes. And is it not from this perspective that we can go back and say, is this not the sign and wonder that we point to? The miracle of the new birth in and for and through love. And is this not the force also that we appeal to the force, not of crude and craft and naked power, but the force of

omnipotent suffering, the omnipotent force of suffering that reproduces the power in other people to love infinitely even while they are being infinitely rejected and is not the old source still true, that the best argument is a practical demonstration in life. No, the thing that emerged in the long ago from Palestine, the thing we've captured the imagination of generations and which broke the Roman empire, what emerged was not a new speculation, but a new spectacle behold, how these Christians love. What emerged was a new manhood. If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. All things are passed away. Behold, all things are become new. The God that answers by changed and transformed lives in the direction of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. Let Him be God. Thy lover of our souls, we seek thy face will Christ that beyond our sin, beyond our self will, beyond our impoverishment might come thy power and thy grace and thy mercy to reconstitute us in thy own likeness, that men might know that there is a God in Israel who is able and willing to save because He can reproduce, thy own self, within us. May grace and mercy and peace from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with us and abide with us and pursue us through each succeeding day, and week, and month and year until we see thee face to face, amen.