**VOLUME 1; CHAPTER 15 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE SIFTING OF PETER by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

*Matthew 16:16*

*He began to curse, and to swear, I know not this Man of Whom ye speak.*

*Mark 14:71*

THE CONTRAST IS A STARTLING ONE. IT IS AT FIRST SIGHT almost inconceivable that these are the words of the same man, and yet we know that they are. Then surely we have placed them in the wrong order, and ought first to have read "I know not the man," as language used in the days before he met the Christ; and his declaration, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," must have been made subsequently. We know, however, that this is not the case. If, indeed, they have been read in their right order a long period must have intervened between affirmation and denial. As a matter of fact, not many months had passed between the hour in which Peter rose to the height of that most wonderful confession and the hour in which he denied any knowledge of Jesus. So startling an association of texts compels us to inquire the meaning of the change which has come over Peter since that glorious and radiant hour when, amid the rocky fastnesses of Caesarea Philippi, in answer to the challenge of his Lord, he had said the one thing the heart of Christ had been waiting to hear, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

I do not propose to consider particularly that confession of Peter, nor do I intend to dwell at any length upon the final words. I am desirous rather of asking you to consider with me the awful possibility of passing in brief time from the most blessed confession to the most dreadful denial. I think perhaps I might take another text from which to preach tonight, and if I did so it would be by way of application at the beginning as also at the close. The text would be, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." The story of Peter's denial is the story of backsliding, and it is a story which reveals the truth which we perpetually need to remember, that no man openly backslides at once. The open blasphemy is always preceded by heart backsliding. If we would understand how it came to pass that from that height of affirmation to that depth of denial a man could pass in those few brief months, we must go back to the occasion of the affirmation. We must see what happened immediately afterwards, and then attempt to trace the downward progress of this man, until from mountain height we find him in the depth of the valley.

You will remember that immediately after Peter's confession our Lord told him of His purpose concerning His Church and His Kingdom.

For the first time He introduced the band of disciples, in so many words, definitely and plainly to the fact of which He had been conscious all the while, that He could win His crown only by way of the cross. Immediately, while the light of the glory of the confession and the annunciation concerning the Church was still about them, I find the first movement in Peter's backsliding. He said to Jesus, "Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall never be unto Thee." As we hear him we are inclined to sympathize with him. We feel that we would have said exactly the same thing under the circumstances, and in all probability we would have. That, however, does not prove Peter to have been right. We may make every excuse that we will - and it is better that we should - for his limited light, for his fickleness and feebleness of character, but the fact remains that in that moment he passed out of immediate and close fellowship with his Lord.

When this man could not see Christ's method he withdrew from absolute and unquestioning loyalty to his Lord. So long as Jesus had spoken to him of building a Church, Peter remained loyal; but the moment Jesus ceased to speak about keys and began to talk about a cross he was puzzled, astonished, disappointed, confused. He could not see how suffering could be the way to the throne. He could not see how his Master's going to Jerusalem and being ill-treated, and finally - for he would use no other word - murdered, could issue in the building of that glorious Church to which his Lord had just made reference. He could not see how keys of any kind could be of use to him if the Master were to pass into the shadow and lose His life. Neither could I have seen it, nor could have you. So far, let us confess our perfect sympathy and fellowship with this man. It was a strange thing Jesus said to him. He had so hoped for the coming of a Deliverer. The Deliverer had come, and at last, Peter, in a moment of supreme, divine illumination, had looked into the face of the long-hoped-for Messiah and confessed Him. In his confession there was the outpouring of his soul's hope of triumph, and victory, of the breaking of chains and loosing of the captives, of the restoration of order and the setting up of the Kingdom of God. I am growingly reluctant to criticize Peter, but for our own soul's profit let us see wherein lay his mistake. It lay in the fact that he was not prepared to accept his Master's estimate of necessity, was not prepared to follow his Lord simply, even when he could not understand his Lord's method. That is the common mistake of the saints. We have all made it, and therefore, sooner or later, we have found ourselves at a distance from Jesus.

The great lesson of Peter's denial is that wherever there is arrested development of Christian life there must follow deterioration of Christian character. Life must make progress to higher levels or sink lower until it pass away. I must follow Jesus Christ wholly and absolutely without question, or there will be an ever widening breach between Him and myself, until I, even I, presently shall deny Him with blasphemy over some flickering imitation fire. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

Your affirmation of loyalty is God-inspired. Your confession of Christ is true to the deepest within you. You are perfectly honest and sincere. God help you to follow Him all the way, whether you understand Him or not. God help you at least to keep by His side when clouds almost obscure the vision of His face, for if once you let yourself question His wisdom and His word there will be distance which must increase. Let us trace this in the history of Peter. The whole subsequent story is written for us in chapter 14 of Mark's Gospel. I am not going to read the whole chapter, but I desire to take you from stage to stage, that you may see how this man passed away from Jesus ever a little further, until we come to the open denial in our second text. Remember that the first step was taken when Peter shunned the cross because he did not understand it, and questioned his Lord's wisdom when He declared the method necessary to His crowning. You will find the next step in verse 29 of this chapter. "Peter said unto Him, Although all shall be offended, yet will not I." Then going on to verse 37, I read, "He," that is Jesus, "cometh, and findeth them sleeping, and saith unto Peter, Simon, sleepest thou? Couldest thou not watch one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Notice, the Lord did not call him Peter then. He went back to the old name. The next step is to be found in verse 47. "A certain one of them that stood by drew his sword, and smote the servant of the high priest, and struck off his ear." Mark is Peter's friend, and does not mention his name, but we know that the "certain one" was Peter. There we have the next step, and increased distance. I pass on to verse 54 and read, "Peter had followed afar off," and I think he seems yet a little further away from his Lord. At last he was sitting with the officers and warming himself in the light of the fire. Then, in verses 68-71, a serving maid charges him with being a Galilean, and tells him that his speech betrays him, and thrice, and finally with curses, he denies his Lord. Let us now notice the stages.

First, refusal to follow his Lord into the mystery of pain and refusal to believe that his Lord knew best. Next, boastfulness. "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I." What follows? Failure in the devotional life, inability to watch, and the cessation of prayer. Then zeal without knowledge, hastiness, the drawing of a sword, not under the command of his Master. What next? Following afar, because his Lord had rebuked him for his zeal without knowledge. Then in the chill of the night we see him warming himself over a fire which the enemies of Christ had built. And then a laughing serving maid and a lying Apostle. Christ is denied, and the man of the mountain is in the depths, the man who thought he stood has fallen. The first refusal to follow Jesus has culminated in dastardly and blasphemous denial.

These things need looking at a little more closely, that we may see how perfectly natural is the story. After the refusal of the cross Jesus Christ sternly rebuked Peter. "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto me; for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men." From that moment there was in the heart of Peter a consciousness that his Master was not able to trust him, a strange sense of distance between friends which is the most agonizing consciousness that can ever come either to one or the other. This man, knowing his Lord's attitude to himself, will endeavour to lessen the sense of distance by loud profession. John tells us the story far more fully than it is stated in Mark. Peter said, "Lord, whither goest Thou?" Jesus looked at him and said, "Whither I go, thou canst not follow Me now; but thou shalt follow afterwards." Then Peter asked, "Lord, why cannot I follow Thee even now? I will lay down my life for Thee." Jesus answered, "Wilt thou lay down thy life for Me? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, the cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice." Then Peter said, "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I." I pray you notice the principle which questioned his Master's knowledge working itself out. Peter said, in effect, "You do not know me, although You think You do. You are suspicious of me. You think I will deny You, but I will never deny You." Moreover, his boastfulness is of that most objectionable kind which puts itself into contrast with other people. "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I." In that moment Peter went further from Christ. Jesus set His face toward the cross even though there was not a single soul able to sympathize with Him. He gathered Peter, James, and John, and took them to the sombre shadow of the Garden of Gethsemane, and, withdrawing Himself from them, told them to watch. He returned to find them asleep, and going up to the man whose profession had been so loud He said, "Simon, sleepest thou? Couldest thou not watch one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." Peter boastful had become Peter unwatchful. Peter confident in himself had become the man who did not feel his need for watchfulness or for prayer, and thus in the presence of the very agony which the Lord had predicted he fell asleep. Suddenly, upon the darkness of the night there flashed the torches of the foes of Christ who had come to arrest Him. Peter was there. He had been boastful and unwatchful, and now he must make up in zeal for what he lacked in devotion. He drew his sword and smote Malthus, cutting off his ear. The Lord immediately rebuked him, "Put up again thy sword into its place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." Then we read that "Peter followed Him afar off." Oh, the humanness of it. Peter said in his heart, "I can do nothing right. Whatever I say is objected to. Whatever I do is wrong. Very well then, I will drop behind." He "followed afar off." Do you see the growing estrangement? He still followed, but it was "afar off." It was a cold night, and there was a fire in the court, round which the soldiers and enemies of Christ were gathered, in all probability laughingly discussing the arrest they had made, and perhaps wondering what it all meant, for in the garden they had seen the glory flame from His eyes and had fallen to the ground. They were now perhaps laughing at their own stupidity and superstition. Peter was cold, and he warmed himself at their fire. When a man gets there it is so easy for a laughing servant girl to make him swear that he never knew his Friend at all.

Let us turn from the picture, keeping it in our minds only as a parable and a teaching. Let me say to you that the steps of Peter's downward career as here revealed are always the steps manifest in backsliding from the Lord. It begins at some moment when it is impossible to follow Him by sight and we decline to follow Him by faith. It begins in some crisis when He calls to something higher than we have known, and because the way to the higher level is the way of the cross and shame we draw back. Backsliding begins in some moment when we think we understand the genius of Christianity better than Jesus Christ does. You say, "Does man ever so imagine?" Ask your own heart if you have not come there often. I believe and confidently affirm that the fact that you have left the Church of God and have turned your back thereto does not constitute the first thing in your backsliding. You were disobedient to the heavenly vision. Some of you have entered only today upon that first phase. The cross has confronted you, and you have shunned it. You did not believe that could be the pathway to the higher life of crowning and victory, and you have put your own thinking concerning Christian experience over against the clear command of your Lord and the word of your Lord, and immediately there begins to be distance between you.

The next thing inevitably will be boastfulness. I want to put this as practically as I know how. I am always afraid of the man who tells me he is never going to deny Christ. I have been in experience meetings, in testimony meetings, in fellowship meetings, and I have heard men say, "Whoever else turns his back upon Jesus Christ I am never going to do that." If a man should so speak in a Church meeting over which I presided he is the man I would watch over and pray for, because he is in danger. The moment a man says "I will never leave Thee nor forsake Thee, O Christ, though everyone else shall," that man already has passed a little way out of communion with his Lord. The trembling soul in the Church who says, "I walk fearfully, I am afraid lest I should grieve Him, I am afraid lest there should grow distance between me and my Lord," I need not watch over. That trembling soul will be found close to the Lord all the way.

What follows boastfulness? Always the same thing, lack of prayer and lack of watching. Young man, when you commenced your Christian life you were very regular in your habits of prayer, you were afraid of yourself and watched constantly for the coming of the enemy. You burned bridges behind you which, alas, you are beginning to reconstruct today. You dared not walk down certain streets after you broke with evil and set your face toward following Jesus Christ, but you are beginning to frequent those old paths again. You are not quite so watchful as you were, and you excuse your lack of watchfulness by saying that there is no necessity for that carefulness and narrowness which characterize some people. There is great need for narrowness when you are walking amid precipices. The man who is sure he is safe, and who ceases to watch and drops prayer out of his life, who imagines he can live an independent life as a Christian soul, is falling already.

What follows? Again, always the same thing as in the case of Peter - zeal without knowledge. The Church of God today is cursed by zeal without knowledge. This is the age of fussy feverishness, and there are multitudes of people who are attempting to overtake their lack of spiritual life by service. It is not very long since a young lady came to me and said, "I feel my Christian life is at a very low ebb. I feel that there is distance between me and my Lord, and I do not know how to improve matters. Do you not think it would be a good thing for me to take a class in the Sunday school? I replied, "A thousand times, no. In the name of God leave the children alone until you are right with God yourself." The same thing expresses itself in the invitations which sometimes reach me. People write, "Will you come and conduct a few days' special services? We want to see a deepening of our spiritual life, and we think if you came and held some evangelistic services it would help us." I invariably reply, "Get right with God first and then, if I have time, I will come." You cannot make up by doing for what you lack in being. It is well for us to remember that the last act of Divine surgery which the hand of Jesus ever performed was made necessary by the blundering zeal of a distant disciple.

What follows zeal without knowledge? A slackening of the zeal, following afar off. Let us speak in the language of the day - one attendance at church on Sunday instead of two! On Sunday morning looking out to see whether it is wet, a thing you never do on Monday morning. I do not say these things to raise a smile. If they amuse you, God have mercy on you. Following afar. Following, yes, I will not deny you are following, but afar.

If you are far from Jesus you get cold, and then you want to warm yourself, and you begin doing it at the world's fires. There are all sorts of fires - they are called fires, but they are not, they are only painted. You begin to talk of narrowness. Your father did not allow you to play cards or go to the theatre, but you are so chilly you want something to warm you. There are scores of men who ought to be tramping to Calvary with Christ who are playing with the devil's fire trying to get warm. That is what I mean, nothing more and nothing less. What right had Peter at that fire? It would have been better for him to have been starving outside in the cold night than getting warmth there. The world knows you. You cannot drop the speech of Jesus all at once. You are of the same country and kin as He is, and your speech will betray you. You will have someone say to you when he meets you at one of the world's fires, where you are trying to get a little warmth, excitement, enthusiasm, "I thought you were a Christian."

Where ought we to draw the line as Christian people? Where the world draws it for us. The worldly man has a very keen and accurate estimate of what the Christian man ought to be. You will have some servant maid, someone in the world, say to you, "Really, I thought you were a Christian." God have mercy upon you - that is the moment of your last peril. You may not curse. You may not take any oath on it. You may adopt the method of the age in which you live, and smile, and say, "Yes, I used to be." You may just as well swear at once. I do not think any worse of Peter for swearing that day. It is the fact that he denied his Lord which is the tragedy. The blasphemy was the expression of his nature. If he had remained true to Christ the same impetuous, impulsive nature would have expressed itself in a song instead of an oath. It is the relationship that is wrong, the distance is wrong. It is the tragedy of denial that is the agony of the story.

To you who have drifted away from nearness I might use the Apostle's words, "Ye were running well; who did hinder you?" This is the final thing, that you break with the Church and break with the ordinances of religion, and break with the external manifestation of Christianity. You are now known among your friends as a man who once held religious views. God have mercy on you! The swearing word was the accident of a temperament; the denial was the sin of a soul. The fact that you do not swear is simply due to your temperament, and yet you may even do that. It is not long since a dear and beloved friend of mine, a Christian minister, sheltered in his own home for the last weeks of his life a man who had been a preacher of the Gospel, an evangelist, winning souls, but who, when my friend found him, was preaching his sermon and praying in a public house for a pint of beer. You say, "I will never do that." Beware, that is what Peter said. You say, "I could not sink to such a level as that." "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." You have made a glorious confession. It was sincere, true, high, noble, God-inspired, Christ-approved, and yet close to you is the depth of denial.

Another thing I would say to you is that if you have wandered the slightest distance from Christ your only hope of safety is in immediate return. You may return now, if you will. Listen to me - and God forgive me if there has been anything of undue and un-Christly sternness even in my tone - have you denied Him? Have you actually gone so far as to say you never knew Him? He will take you home now if you will come. Next Sunday evening I hope to speak about Peter's home-coming, but you need not wait for next Sunday, you can get home now. You have gone a long way from Him, but He has not left you. You say that is a contradiction. There are all sorts of contradictions in Christianity, and its paradoxes are its most blessed things. You are as far off from Him as denying Peter, but He is close to you; and tonight, without sign or sound for man's knowledge, fling your-self back upon His heart and He will blot out all your sin and love you freely. You are not as far as that perhaps. Where are you? Place yourself. Warming at the world's fire? Quit it. I am talking to those of you who have confessed Him and known Him, but have lost your power for witness because you are at a distance from Him. Are you warming at the world's fire? Leave it. Jesus can make fires for you if you are cold. He made one for Peter by and by. I know you are tired. I know the drab drudgery of the life that some of you live, but do not make the mistake of trying to warm yourself at painted fires. Go back to Him. Walk with Him. Talk to Him. Serve Him. Let Him talk to you. Then, suddenly, in the midst of the chilliness, you will say, "How my heart burns within me when He talks to me by the way." Or are you following afar off? Is the old first love, the love of betrothal and espousal gone? Press back to Him. It is you who have changed, not He. It is your love that has cooled, not His. Press back to Him, and you will find Him ready to receive you even now. Or are you among the number of those who are neglecting prayer in order to do more work for God? Do less work for God and pray more. Are you neglecting the hour of devotion because you have so many things on hand in connection with the Christian Church? Get some of the things out of your hands and hold your hands empty to heaven for a longer space, I charge you. I often think it would be a blessed thing for the Church of God if for a little while she attempted to do less and worshiped more. The doing, in the end, would be not less, but more and mightier. I pray you hasten back to the mountain top, the place of quietness and seclusion, of keen watchfulness and prayerfulness, which marks your sense of dependence. Perhaps you have not come so far as this, and are a little angry with me tonight. You are saying, "Why does the preacher so talk to us? We shall never do this thing. I am never going to deny Christ." Is that the language of your heart? Then it proves you are a distance from Him. The nearer a man is to Christ, the more conscious he is of his own frailty, and the more is he possessed of strength, though he hardly knows it. The nearer a man lives to Jesus Christ, the more acutely conscious is he of distance between him and his Lord by reason of his Lord's superior strength and his own frailty, and the more he presses closely to Him.

Are you shunning some cross which His will appoints, setting up your own estimate of His will and method as against His? Do not shun the cross. He sees the cross as a means of grace. It is an old word and we have made a proverb of it. We used to engrave it upon bookmarkers - "No cross, no crown!" It is the whole philosophy of Christian life. Remember the cross there is not His cross, but your cross. Did He not say, "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." It is when a man shuns the cross that he passes out of intimate fellowship and begins the downward course.

My final word is that already twice said. Wherever you may be, you need go no farther. Turn back to Him and to His love, back to His heart ere you rest tonight, and you will find Him the same loving, almighty Saviour.