**SERIES 01 (PREACHED IN 1907) - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**02. CHRIST, GREATER THAN JONAH by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*"The men of Nineveh shall stand up in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold a greater than Jonah is here."*

*Matthew 12:41*

IT IS so self-evident that it seems useless to argue the superiority of Christ to Jonah. Yet there is a peculiar significance in this claim. Let us spend a few moments with the setting of the text. The Pharisees had asked for a sign. He declared that the only sign they would have would be that of His death and resurrection. This He stated figuratively by referring to Jonah, whose sign was that he preached to Nineveh even though he had been cast out to death. The Book which bears the name of Jonah was not a prophecy spoken to Nineveh, but a prophetic story giving an account of Jonah's call, his disobedience, his repentance, his subsequent obedience and mission to Nineveh. Its supreme value to his own people was that it told the story of his failure in order that they might learn the sin of their exclusiveness. Yet when our Lord made use of the story it is quite evident that He was not thinking of that value of the prophecy, but of the sign of Jonah to Nineveh. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the place of death and yet came and preached, so the Son of man would be cast out, and after a brief prelude of three days and nights, in which His voice would be silenced and His message heard no more, He would come again.

Turning from the occasion of the declaration to the declaration itself, we see at once the fitness in the comparison to be greater even than the first application would suggest. The story which Jonah wrote was intended to rebuke the exclusivism of the Hebrew people, and in the writing of that story, even more radiantly than in his commission to Nineveh, Jonah revealed himself as a prophet of God. The fact that the story is written is a revelation that at last he understood the meaning of his own failure.

Now Jesus stood among the people. He had delivered His message. He had spoken to them the word of truth, and they had not repented. He put Himself into comparison with Jonah in order that He might put them into comparison with Nineveh, and so in that whole ratio of comparison we are able to consider our text.

In order that we may understand this I shall ask you first to go back to the story, and consider Jonah's failure and Jonah's greatness.

"The word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me. But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord; and he went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish." There no reason is stated, but the fact is declared.

Why did this man resign? Why did he manifest this independence? Why escape; why not go to Nineveh? Turn to the last chapter and he tells you himself. "He prayed unto the Lord and said, I pray Thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore, I hasted to flee unto Tarshish: for I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and full of compassion, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy, and repentest Thee of the evil." For a moment I am more startled than ever, for is there a more wonderful declaration concerning God in the whole of the Old Testament than that? It is almost a verbatim quotation of that unveiling of the truth concerning God which was made to Moses in answer to the passionate desire of his heart to know God perfectly. Here is a knowledge of God that is most remarkable. Why then did he flee? Because in his own heart and life, while knowing this to be true of God, he was out of harmony with that side of God's nature when manifested outside a certain circle and circumference. Remember what Nineveh meant to the Jew, the gross, brutal oppression of Assyria! Remember also that a hundred years after this, according to Bible chronology, there came the prophet Nahum, who uttered stern denunciation of this very city of Nineveh, announcing its doom. When Jonah was told to go with the announcement of judgment, he knew that if Nineveh did but turn from her evil way in answer to his preaching, God was full of compassion and would spare her. Here is a remarkable knowledge of God, an intimate acquaintance with the very deepest thing in His heart; but here is a man out of harmony with it; knowing it, but in rebellion against it. The revelation is an appalling one. Even after the message had come to him for the second time, and he had delivered the word and had seen the mighty city, shaken to its centre by the sense of its sin, turning in sackcloth and ashes of repentance to the way of right, there was no rejoicing, but anger and hot displeasure in his heart. I never can feel wholly out of harmony with him as I see him sitting in loneliness outside the city, having at last delivered his message, feeling angry in his heart that so vile a city had been spared. If l only look at Jonah I am always in sympathy with him. It is never until I am brought into actual realization of the heart of God that I see how great and grievous was the failure he made in the fulfilling of his work.

But think for one moment of the things of his greatness. He was a man sent of God, a man, notwithstanding his faltering, ultimately obedient to God. He was a man of splendid honesty. He was a man with a burning passion for the right. He was a man with an intimate knowledge of the heart of God. He was a man who must have walked very near to and talked familiarly with Him ere he could feel the resentment which he did feel in the presence of what he knew would do. He knew Him so well that he knew if these people only repented God would repent Him of the evil. His passion for right, his intimate knowledge of God, the great conception he had of the mercy and tenderness of God, all these things reveal his greatness. If I see a man failing, I see a great man failing. If I see a man falling short of the highest, I see a man falling short of the highest who had come into intimate acquaintance with the highest, and up to a certain point had fulfilled it in his own life and ministry. Yet while that side of our meditation is full of fascination, I turn from it, for it is but the background.

Listen to Christ as He stands in the midst of the men of His own age and says to them, "a greater than Jonah is here." How is He greater? Let me only ask you to notice one or two simple things. First, Christ is greater than Jonah in that the word of the Lord never came to Him a second time. There is nothing more beautiful to me in the of Jonah than the opening of the third chapter, "And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time." I do not think there is a man in this house who has ever been called to the prophetic office and to preach the word of who does not know the comfort of that. If God only gave me one chance, then my voice would have been silent long ago, but the word of the Lord comes a second time. Oh, the infinite beauty of it. Thank God for it. Heart of mine, take courage, though thou hast failed to deliver the message, though thou hast stumbled by the way, there is the second time, and not the second time only, but many more. The word of the Lord never came the second time to Jesus! There was no faltering, no failing, no hesitation. He lived with ear ever open for the voice of the Father, and what the Father said, He said. You have but to consider some of the simplest things in the story of Jesus to see how true He was to the message of God. I am not now referring so particularly to His public utterances, though these also were wonderful, but to some of those private things, those methods of His with individual men, for it is far harder to preach to one man than to a thousand. I watch Jesus talking at midnight with a ruler, talking in daylight with a young ruler, sitting at the board of the patronising Pharisee, coming into contact with the men of light and leading, dealing with men who were the off-casts of society, and for ever more speaking the message of God. No faltering, no failing, no of the truth to the circumstances of the hour, but quietly with dignity, directness, immediateness and unflinching loyalty, speaking the word of God. Never a second time. Never a journey to Tarshish. Never an attempt to escape, but the everlasting "must" which sounded in His first recorded word driving Him on forever more, "I must be about my Father's business." It is when a man says 'I must' that I care to hear him, not when he says 'I ought.' When a man says 'I must,' he is revealing the driving power in his life. It is the thing that he must that reveals what the man is, "I must be about My Father's business." There was a quick, ready response to the truth and the delivery of it without apology, without hesitation, and without flinching. There was no second time in the ministry of Jesus. The first sound of the Father's voice was authoritative and binding upon Him.

But turn to the greatness of Jonah, and there the superiority of Jesus is even more clearly evident. Can any have a higher conception of God than that revealed in the words of Jonah, "a gracious God and full of compassion, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy, and repentest Thee of the evil." I maintain that there can be no higher declaration of the truth than that concerning God, and yet as I follow my Lord and listen to Him I find that He said the same thing, and there is a fullness of meaning and a revelation of the heart of God utterly and absolutely lacking until He came. I am sometimes inclined to put what I mean thus, Jesus said nothing new; yet everything He said was new. Take the New Testament and find me anything in the teaching of Jesus which I cannot find you in the Old Testament. I challenge you to the task. I am told sometimes that Christ revealed the Fatherhood of God. The psalmists had sung of it long before He came, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him." I am told sometimes by those whose insight is still keener that Jesus revealed the Motherhood of God. Zephaniah, to name no other, had known it long ago, as he had sung of God singing in silent mother love over His people; first brooding over them, and then breaking the silence with singing. There is nothing in the New Testament, in the teaching of Jesus, that I cannot find in the Old Testament. Jonah said, "I knew Thee that Thou art a gracious God, and full of compassion, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy, and repentest Thee of the evil." Can Christ add to that? Nothing. He added nothing to it.

Some of you do not believe all this. You ought not, if I said no more. It is but a partial truth. What is the other side of it? Everything He said was new. That was the peculiar charm and wonder and amazement of the prophetic work of Jesus. He went back over all the past and gathered up the things that men had already said, and so said them again as to make men say when they heard them, We never heard that before. He took that gem of poetry from among the psalms, which told of the Fatherhood of God, and revealed to men what fatherhood really meant. He took Zephaniah's thought of God's Motherhood and put it into simpler language. The world, hardly knows about Zephaniah's idea, but all the world knows that Jesus said, "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen, gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" He said the things of long ago so that they broke into new harmonies, wooing and winning the hearts of men. He said the old things, and so said them that they became new. Out of the old roots without form or loveliness or anything winsome, He made the flowers to blossom and the fruit to come. As an interpreter of the truth He was infinitely greater than Jonah or any other prophet who had preceded Him.

But the final thing is that He is greater in His sympathy with God, understanding the two great facts which men are so slow to understand in their union and communion, that God is light and God is love. Jonah knew both, but He could not agree to both at once. In the case of Nineveh he knew that God was light, hating sin; he knew that God was love, and he knew perfectly well that if he rebuked the darkness by uttering the message of light, and men turned from darkness, love would welcome them, and Jonah was not in sympathy with the heart of God. Jonah was living within the narrow limit of the national outlook, and I am very much afraid that one must add, within the narrowest limit of a self-centred life, and he was out of sympathy with the heart of God. "A greater than Jonah is here." Jesus was in sympathy with God. He saw Him as light and as love. As light: Jonah never uttered things so stern as did Jesus. Once again I ask you to take the Old Testament and think of it in the light of the New, the great prophetic words of the past in the light of the prophetic words of Jesus. Those wonderful old Hebrew prophets were a fine race and succession, severe and stern in their denunciation of sin; over and over again absolutely refusing to make compromise with evil; flinging themselves with all the force of a rough and rugged and magnificent nature against evil things. Jesus did not lift up His voice nor cry, nor make a tumult of words. He spoke perpetually in quiet tones and accents, if I interpret aright the story of the New Testament, and yet in sentences that burned as none other have burned, scorching men, making men afraid by the utterance of the simplest thing. Leave the whole prophetic band for a moment and think of that great law of which they became interpreters, and to which they called men back in all their reforming work, and then think of the teaching of Jesus. You will remember how one New Testament writer puts two things into contrast, or comparison, as I would rather say, "The law was given by Moses," and men thunder it; "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ," and they whisper it; but it is not a true emphasis, it is not a true tone! "The law was given by Moses," and you may put all the thunder at your command into your utterance, but do not miss the thunder in the second part, "Grace," and let us put infinite tenderness into it, "and truth," and let the word vibrate in thunder! Truth with grace, never grace at the expense of truth. Never pity at the cost of purity. Never a lowering of the standard of the Divine requirement. Light for ever more as well as love. The severity of the requirements of the mount of beatitudes is far more terrible than that of Sinai. If I am seeking an easy law I shall not go to the mount of beatitudes, I shall get back to Sinai. Sinai says to me, "Thou shalt not" - I will quote it in all its baldness in order that we may see the drastic and tremendous difference - "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Jesus said, "Every one that looketh ... to desire … hath committed adultery ... in his heart." Where would you rather live if you are seeking an easy ethic? Jonah's greatness was his passion for right; but his passion for right becomes a low burning, smouldering, dying fire by the side of the white intense heat of the passion of the Son of God for right.

Yet there is the other thing. He was not only in sympathy with God as light, but with God as love. How tender He was. He never said an angry thing to or about the crowds. He always carefully differentiated between the scattered sheep and the false shepherds. In the presence of the multitudes scattered He was moved with compassion. In the presence of the false shepherds He was moved with indignation. Here are some interpreters of the Mosaic economy, and they have arrested a woman in the act, and they bring Him to see what He will say to her. He and wrote with His finger in the dust, and I quite sympathize with you when you want to know what He wrote. I should very much like to know what He wrote, but I am not going to speculate. Then He looked not at the woman but at the men and said, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her," and He bent back to His writing. I was never more interested in a procession in my life than I am in that one. "They, when they heard it, went out one by one, beginning from the eldest, even unto the last." Beginning from the eldest, of course, the eldest had most sin and hurried out first. They all went, and He, incarnate purity, was left face to face with smirched womanhood. What will He do? He looked at her, and then He spoke, and His voice was the voice of a great absolution as He said, "Neither do I condemn thee go thy way; from henceforth sin no more." He saved her from her enemies, then bade her go and sin no more. The standard is not lowered. Law is there. A solemn warning is flashed on all the future years, but oh, the tenderness of it all. His wooing, winning tenderness is that which brings us bruised and weary sinners to Him in perfect sympathy with God. Out of that high and holy sympathy of light and love He spoke, and mark this, He never spoke as One feeling there was any conflict between the two. Jonah was called upon to utter doom upon the city, and he knew that if he uttered it, and if the people repented, God would turn to them, and Jonah was angry. Jesus was called upon to utter a city's doom and He came within sight of it and upon it and said, "Your house is left unto you desolate," but that was not the first thing. The first thing He said was, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I" - this is My desire, not thy doom, but thy deliverance - "how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, but ye would not;" that is love. "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate;" that is light. If but Jerusalem would have turned, would have heard and repented in sackcloth and ashes as had Nineveh, Jesus had not gone forth from the city and sat in sulky loneliness, in rebellion against love because light seemed to be thwarted. Jonah's consistency was narrow. Christ's was eternal. The consistency of God is proved by His repenting. His changes prove His changeless nature, and not His changeableness. He changes because He cannot change. Man, is to you what you are to Him. It is you who change. God never moved from His attitude of light and love, when Nineveh is sinning He utters its doom, but when it changes back to light, He changes back to love, because He cannot change. Jonah was changeable and he could not fall into line with the unchangeable God; but Jesus was in sympathy with God, one with Him in the eternal and essential principles of His nature of holiness and compassion, of light and of love. He could weep over a doomed city, and rejoice in the alteration of the verdict and the putting away of the sentence when men turned back to and turned back to them.

Finally, what are the deductions we may make from our study concerning the greatness of our Master as a prophet? First that He includes all previous teaching in His own words. All that others had uttered of the eternal truth He gathered up in His own person and His own teaching. "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in His Son." Have we lost anything that the prophets said since Jesus spoke? Nothing. No note of essential music is missing from the harmony of His great message to the world. Everything that the men of the past had said that was true in portions and parts, here a little and there a little, He said in all fullness.

And yet again, He fulfilled the deepest intention not only in the sense of realizing their foretellings but in the deeper sense of carrying out to logical conclusion and finality their teaching, "It hath been said ... I say unto you." In no single case in the great Manifesto did He contradict the thing that they had said. He caught its heart and spirit and unveiled it and revealed it, and carried it further on to finality and to completion. They had said the thing that was largely local and for the moment, the thing upon the surface. He said the thing that was eternal and essential and of the deepest nature of God and the nature of man.

Once again, and finally, He abolished all the imperfections of the partial systems of the past, and abolished the necessity for the imperfections of all the partial systems which were to follow Him. By that I mean all that may be brought to me today as a message from heaven I test by what He said. The thing that grows away from Him, however specious it may seem, is to me a heresy not to be listened to for one passing moment. The message that calls in question the accuracy of His vision or His view, the new that tells me He blundered at any point or was mistaken, is an idle story. It cannot woo me. It cannot win me. I have no use for it. His was the final speech. I do not mean by that that we have yet perfectly understood it. There is a great deal of light and truth yet to break out from the words of Jesus. I never come back to my New Testament and sit and ponder the messages of my Lord without being startled, surprised by a new note, a new light, a new meaning. No man has exhausted the meaning of the Christ. There is much more light and truth to break out from all He said, but there is nothing to be added to what He said. He said the last thing.

Look back over the nineteen centuries and see the light growing and broadening. That which first illuminated the distant horizon now shines in glorious splendor over the world, and all of it came from the teaching of this Prophet. I look on, how much more I know not. Not many years for us. Centuries perhaps in the outworking of the plan of God. This I know that when the last superstition has been made to bite the dust and flee away, it will be by the exposition and unveiling of the things of this great Prophet uttered nineteen centuries ago.