**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**25. PARABOLIC ILLUSTRATIONS**

*… Matthew Chapter 24*

IN THE parabolic illustrations and parables which remain to be considered in this Gospel again we find ourselves in a changed atmosphere. The illustrations throughout the three previous chapters have moved in the realm of judgment and of denunciation. In this twenty-fourth chapter our Lord had left the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, never to return until He was taken back as Prisoner.

As they passed out of the Temple, His disciples drew His attention to the buildings. I wonder why they did so, for He surely knew them. Note His immediate reply. He said, "See ye not all these things? Immediately before this, before they left the Temple, He had declared, "Your house is left unto you desolate." As they went out, the disciples said, Lord, let us show You these buildings. It was unthinkable to them that that house should ever be desolate; but within a generation from that time it was literally true. He now said, "See ye not all these things?" Take a good look at them, because they are going. "There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." Remember the Temple as it then was, for material magnificence there had been nothing like it. The temple of Solomon had been wonderful, but the temple of Herod, from the standard of material magnificence far outshone the glories of Solomon's temple. It was a wondrous structure, and He said, "Not … one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

Then they went down from the city. Follow them in imagination along the way they took, across the Kedron, and up the slopes of Olivet. When they came there, He sat, and the disciples came to Him privately, and they said, "Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the age?" - the consummation of the age. I resolutely change that phrase, "end of the world," and adopt the marginal reading, which is correct. They were not asking when the end of the world would be, in the sense of the break-up of the material structure, as some people seem to imagine, even now. No, it was the consummation of the age. Their question really resolved itself into three: first, When shall these things be? secondly, What shall be the sign of Thy coming? third, What shall be the sign of the end of the age?

They were three perfectly natural questions. I do not think they meant to ask three, but one. They had heard Him say the things that were coming to pass. They had heard Him in denunciation declare the tribulations that were coming. Now they said, When is it all going to happen, when? It is interesting how all down the ages men have been busy asking that futile question, When? These men started it. They said, When? and they linked up the things He had foretold with His presence, the sign of His coming, His parousia, His presence again in the world. They felt that His prediction of the consummation of the age involved the winding up of all things, and they believed it would be brought about by His presence; but what they wanted to know was, When? It was a plain question that they asked.

Our Lord answered them. I take now only the beginning of His answer. When they had asked their question, He said, "Take heed that no man lead you astray." We are interested now only in the two things. They said, When? and they did not understand what the things were to which they were referring. They thought they did. They still had their material conception of a Kingdom that was to be set up, that the Roman power was to be destroyed, and the Messiah would reign there, materially. They had no correct vision of the future. I am not criticizing them. We are trying to see how they looked at things. They believed He would bring all this about. They wanted to know how long they and the world would have to wait. To that the first answer of Jesus was, Be careful, lest you are led astray, for many will come, claiming to be Christ.

Jesus then answered their question. That answer occupies the whole of this and the next chapter. To that question asked by the disciples our Lord gave a long and fuller answer than He had ever given before, or ever did again, showing there was vital importance in what they asked, even though they were mistaken in their outlook. He showed that there would be a consummation, that these things were to come to pass, showing, moreover, in the course of His answer that they would be connected with His own coming, His own Parousia, His presence. He sat there upon the slopes of Olivet as Teacher, and with that group of men honestly perplexed, He surveyed all the coming centuries. In this prophecy He uttered definite predictions, looking on down the centuries.

While it is not our subject now to deal with the prophecy, it is difficult to look at the illustrations He used without having the background in mind. As we study carefully we find He broke their question up into three parts, and showed when "these things" would be, that they would not be immediate; and then what should be "the sign of His coming"; and finally showed clearly what would be the nature of "the consummation of the age." This Olivet discourse moved wholly within the realm of prophecy. He was looking on to things beyond His departure. He knew He was going to Jerusalem to be killed; He knew He was going to rise again; and He was in no perplexity as to the course events would take. He was making no speculation as to the future. He clearly marked the course of events all down that period after His Cross and ascension until the present hour, and beyond it.

Does anyone whisper, When will the end be? I recommend to all such the answer Christ gave to His own disciples, and pray that we may ever put upon the things of God the measurements of His own outlook, in which there was an utter absence of dates, or of the fixing of an hour. Processes, events are marked, the consummation is revealed; But there are no dates from first to last.

The illustrations have to do with that period, and principally with the consummation of the age. We find then in this twenty-fourth chapter five illustrations. The first was that of lightning. The second was that of a carcase with eagles gathered round. The third was that of the fig-tree. The fourth was that of a master of the house, and the thief, the burglar; and the last was that of the lord presiding over his household. Let us take each briefly, following our usual line.

Verse twenty-seven, "For as the lightning cometh forth from the east, and is seen even unto the west; so shall be the coming of the Son of man." Our Lord had foretold definitely the destruction of Jerusalem. What He had said about the Temple is involved in what He said, "When therefore ye see the abomination of desolation, which was spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place." That was fulfilled when the Roman armies invaded the Temple. Then the abomination of desolation was standing in the holy place. The Master was looking on to the fall of Jerusalem which came within a generation. He had foretold it, and He was now warning His disciples that the fall of Jerusalem, the wars and rumours of wars before that event, and the actual "abomination of desolation standing in the holy place" were not the signs of His advent. He foresaw all these things, but they did not signify the nearness of His advent; and in that connection He used the figure of the lightning.

The figure is so simple that there is no need of interpretation. Lightning is seen from one arc of heaven to the other. It is patent and self-evident, and He was insisting upon this in connection with His coming, that it will be as clear and as patent as the flash of the lightning across the sky from the east to the west. His coming will have a universal manifestation. We must not forget that the figure is used to show that the fall of Jerusalem, and the trouble immediately coming on the generation, was not the sign of His coming at all. Some believe that He came in connection with the fall of Jerusalem, and that His coming is past. But nothing can be clearer that was not the sign of His coming. When that hour comes, it will be something self-evident to the whole world. Of course the figure He used took in a hemisphere. If we watch the lightning, we only see it in a hemisphere. It goes from east to west, and from the point where it ends as to our observation, it goes on again. This figure, showing that His coming, when it takes place, will be universal, known and self-evident, needs no proof either than its own manifestation.

Immediately following it, we have the words, "Wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together." The Old Version reads, "For wheresoever." It should read as in the Revised Version. He had talked about the lightning. Then, "Wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together." What did He mean by that? What was He illustrating? This illustration is in exactly the same realm as the former one, but here with a judgment application. The coming of the Son of man will be as patent as flashing lightning across the sky, but what will it mean? He was referring now to the judgment that was going to fall.

Take the figure of speech in all its simplicity. Vultures, carrion birds, swift birds, detecting the presence of a dead thing, fasten upon it for its complete annihilation. He was looking on to the condition of death that would obtain at His advent. Do we really believe that? Our Lord distinctly said, "When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" All exposition that says the victory of the Kingdom will be completely won at His coming is unscriptural. There will be a terrible condition of affairs, and however much we may be perplexed by some of the details, if we carefully read the book of Revelation, we see some of the awful conditions, and fearful blasphemy against all the advancement of goodness, until this culmination in judgment. The world in its final outworking of its choices and inspiration is looked upon as dead; and the vultures represent the last processes of judgment. Where the carcase is, there will they be gathered together.

Pass on to verse thirty-two, to His next illustration, the fig-tree. The coming of the Son of man shall be manifest like the lightning; the coming of judgment when the vultures gather together over the dead, the carrion of a world that has rejected God; and yet notice, from the fig-tree learn this parable. It is interesting to notice in passing that Luke also records the saying, and adds four words Matthew omitted, that Jesus said, "Behold the fig-tree, and all the trees." So do not lay too much emphasis on the fig-tree, although the picture was the symbol of the people and of the nation. Do not imagine the Lord was only speaking of the Jewish people, but of "all the trees." He was taking a simple illustration from Nature. What was it? That there are signs in Nature by which we can know summer is coming. We need not take the fig-tree. We can take the balsam-tree. Some of us have seen it blossoming. It is a prophecy of what is coming. We see the burgeoning of the trees, and we know summer is coming.

Now mark what our Lord says. Lightning, vultures, a carcase; but as a process, leading on to something, summer. "Now is the winter of our discontent," but there is summer-time coming; and in a simple and yet beautiful figure of speech, here He returned to the subject of His second Advent, and showed that there would be signs that lead to it, signs that show these things of His own glory manifested, and the things of a sharp act of judgment, destroying the dead carcase, and the sign of summer. We may know by these things that the summer is nigh.

Go on to verse forty-three. "Know this, that if the master of the house had known in what watch the thief was coming, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken through. Therefore be ye also ready; for in an hour that ye think not the Son of man cometh." Our Lord has returned to the ultimate idea of the consummation. This portion of His discourse had to do largely with the responsibility of His people. To that subject we come more fully in subsequent parables. The subject He was illustrating here was the need for vigilance, alertness, watchfulness, and He took that commonplace illustration of a man who had a house. He is the master of the house, and the thief may dig through - that is the actual word - and break in upon it. Now if the master of the house had known when the thief was coming, he would have prevented his breaking through. Therefore watch, for ye do not know when the Son of man is coming.

This is an illustration by contrast, the Lord Himself in contrast with the thief. The idea is that if a man knew when the thief was coming, he would watch. We are to watch, because we do not know, and because we do not know, there is all the more necessity for watchfulness. The Master added three words here, "at every season," marking the necessity for watchfulness.

Then the last of these illustrations is in close connection. "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath set over his household." This marks the responsibility of those who are watching. It is difficult to get these illustrations placed in relation to the great mosaic of the discourse. We are now looking to the consummation of the age. We do not know when it is coming. There will be signs that mark it near, and those are the signs of judgment, clearing the way for the glory that is to be revealed. We do not know when that event will take place, hence the necessity for watchfulness, alertness, diligence; all which words may be expressed in another - readiness.

How are we to be ready? Our Lord took the figure of the house-hold where the lord is absent. The servants are left, responsible for the things of that household, and this subject illustrates the responsibility of the watchers. What is their responsibility? "Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing," watching. How? Giving to each in the household his "food in due season. Verily I say unto you, that he will set him over all that he hath. But if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord tarrieth; and shall begin to beat his fellow-servants, and shall eat and drink with the drunken; the lord of that servant shall come in an hour when he expecteth not, and in an hour when he knoweth not, and shall cut him asunder, and appoint his portion with the hypocrites; there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth."

What an august majesty of outlook. At the consummation of the age appalling things are going to happen; and there will be the judgment of wickedness. His charge to His own is that they shall watch, be diligent, alert, be ready, Then this little illustration shows that the true test of vigilance for the absent Lord, and expectation of His coming, is right behaviour within His own household. Here His Church is in view, down the ages. A communal relationship must be maintained, and if within that household there are those who are professedly the servants of the absent Lord, who are not behaving as they ought to do to their brethren, we can go on into the New Testament, and to the letters of John especially, and find words that interpret all that behaviour. There can be no watching for the coming Lord on the part of people who are first of all behaving as they ought not to each other within His household; and who are giving way to riotous excess of living on the earthly plane. There must be the watchfulness, true fellowship and behaviour within the household, until the Lord shall come.

If when He comes, He finds these things have not been so, then mark the almost terrible word, "In an hour when he knoweth not," He shall come, and "shall cut him asunder," put him out, "appoint his portion with the hypocrites," where there shall be sorrow, and perpetual rebellion, in other words, "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

All these illustrations need the context perhaps as none other we have considered. Let us note the vision of Christ, the interpretation of Christ in answer to the questions of His disciples, as He said to them, Take heed, do not be led astray. Do not imagine that the Advent is so near, or that things are coming to a consummation as speedily as you imagine. Many will arise, false christs, and claim that they have come for fulfilment of all things. Do not believe them. Do not go out to the wilderness to them. Watch and wait, knowing that we do not know the hour, but that we know the fact, and are living in the power of it by true relationship with each other within the household of God, and so hasten the coming of the Day.