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

**38. THE PARABLE OF LOST THINGS**

*"He told them this parable. "Which of you men, if you had one hundred sheep, and lost one of them, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one that was lost, until he found it? When he has found it, he carries it on his shoulders, rejoicing. When he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you that even so there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. Or what woman, if she had ten drachma coins, if she lost one drachma coin, wouldn't light a lamp, sweep the house, and seek diligently until she found it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the drachma which I had lost.' Even so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner repenting." He said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of your property.' He divided his livelihood between them. Not many days after, the younger son gathered all of this together and travelled into a far country. There he wasted his property with riotous living. When he had spent all of it, there arose a severe famine in that country, and he began to be in need. He went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He wanted to fill his belly with the husks that the pigs ate, but no one gave him any. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough to spare, and I'm dying with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will tell him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants." ' "He arose, and came to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe, and put it on him. Put a ring on his hand, and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let's eat, and celebrate; for this, my son, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found.' Then they began to celebrate. "Now his elder son was in the field. As he came near to the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants to him, and asked what was going on. He said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and healthy.' But he was angry, and would not go in. Therefore his father came out, and begged him. But he answered his father, 'Behold, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed a commandment of yours, but you never gave me a goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this your son came, who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' "He said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But it was appropriate to celebrate and be glad, for this, your brother, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found.' "*

*Luke 15:3-32*

THIS familiar chapter of Luke's record contains one of the best-known parables of our Lord. One phase of this, that of the lost son, usually referred to as the parable of the prodigal, has made a greater impression on human consciousness than any parable Jesus ever uttered. We do not now dwell upon the details of the parable, but rather attempt to gather its values, asking first, what it was our Lord intended to illustrate here; secondly, looking at the figures of which He made use; and finally gathering the teaching He intended to give on this particular occasion.

This is one parable, with three pictures. Luke uses the expression at the beginning, "He spake unto them this parable." There are stages in the pictures, but there is no break in the parable itself. First, then, what was the subject that our Lord was intending to illustrate? Reminding ourselves of the historic setting, this parable was uttered towards the close of that memorable Sabbath day, of which Luke alone gives so full an account. Jesus had uttered His parable of the great supper, in the house of the Pharisee. He had used the two parabolic illustrations of building and battle, illustrating the reason for the severity of His terms of discipleship; and at the end of the previous chapter there fell from His lips those words, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." Going straight on with the narrative, Luke says, "Now all the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto Him for to hear Him." He had uttered severe terms, interpreted in the figures of building and battle, showing that He needed those with Him who should stand by Him in His building until the work was done; and in the war till the victory was won; and the publicans and sinners pressed closer to Him; they drew near to hear Him.

But they were not alone in the crowd. "The Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." He let them come near Him. He did not stand aloof. Indeed, He went so far as to sit down and eat with them. The scribes were the appointed moral teachers and interpreters of the law; and the Pharisees were the great ritualists and supernaturalists in the realm of religion. Both these criticized Him. The crowds, held in contempt by the rulers, were getting near Him, and He was receiving them. The Pharisees end scribes were standing aloof, critical, uttering words of condemnation. We discover then, unquestionably, the subject which our Lord wished to illustrate. He was first declaring the meaning and reason of His receiving sinners. That is what the Pharisees and scribes objected to. He received them, and the word is a very strong one. He received them to Himself. He took them into close comradeship, and sat down, and had close fellowship with them, and He ate with them. He was trying to show these critical rulers why He received sinners and ate with them, He was interpreting to them the actions they were criticizing. It is quite evident that the subject He wished to illustrate was not the manner of His own ministry and method; but rather the attitudes and activities of God in the presence of derelict humanity. When we remember these things, then we are prepared to follow Him, listen to His words, look at the pictures, and gather the teaching.

There are here four pictures: three, and one more. Jesus first drew the picture of a shepherd and his lost sheep. He began by appealing to them, as was so constantly His custom. "What man of you." He told the story of a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, one of which, no reason being given, had wandered and was lost. He declared that any true shepherd, if he had lost one sheep, would leave the ninety and nine, and go into the wilderness, and find it. It was not the first time He had employed the figure of the shepherd. That, however, is the first phase of this parable.

Then next, a woman and her lost drachma, her piece of silver. As a picture there may be differing opinions as to its intention. One view is that this woman had lost a piece of current coin in the house She had ten, and had lost one. The story would lose nothing if that were its meaning. I think, however, that there is something deeper in it. The women of that time often wore upon their brow a frontlet that was called *semedi*. It was made up of coins, in themselves perhaps largely valueless, each one of which might be worth 10 1/2d., or perhaps a little more; but under a shilling. But it was a coin that had stamped upon it the image of authority. Again here scholars differ as to the significance of the frontlet. Some hold that it was a frontlet that revealed betrothal; and again others, that it revealed the marriage relationship. Whether it was of little monetary value or not, it was of priceless value to the woman who wore it. That is evidenced by the fact that she sought it diligently, sweeping the house, until she found it. I cannot imagine a woman sweeping a long time to find a shilling! But I can imagine her searching diligently to find something which, to her, was a thing of beauty, and adornment, and suggestiveness. However, that is the picture. One coin out of ten, gone. The woman had lost that which perfected the symbolism of her frontlet.

The third picture is familiar and beautiful, that of the father who lost his boy. But there is another. It is the final phase in this parabolic setting forth of Jesus. It is the picture of an unnatural son, who was upright and loyal by all the outward appearances of life, but who had no understanding of, or sympathy with, his father's heart; and consequently held his brother in contempt. Undoubtedly there were such, as there always are. There is the merging of four figures.

What does it all mean? What did our Lord intend to teach? First of all, as we listen to Him telling those stories, keeping in mind that crowd of men about Him, and that crowd of publicans and sinners pressing eagerly forward, conscious of their own failure and sin, yet eager to hear Him in spite of the severity of the terms He had uttered; as we listen to Him we gather what His outlook was upon humanity. He saw humanity lost. Whether it was the sheep, or the drachma, or the son, in His view each was lost.

Take the first three phases. What an illustration is there of lost humanity. First, a lost sheep. A sheep is one of the most stupid things. It goes anywhere where it sees a gap. It does not stop to think. It cannot think. A gap appears in a fence, and the animal goes through it, and away it goes, wandering on, until it is lost upon the mountains, and does not know its way back. There are multitudes of people who exactly fit in with that description; lost from sheer stupidity.

How was the piece of silver lost? It was not to blame at all for being lost. There was something lost through the carelessness of others. Mark it well, lost at home, but lost. There are multitudes in our Churches to-day who are lost at home through the carelessness of others. They are still somewhere about, but they have no purchasing power, and they are making no contribution that is worth-while to the great cause. They are lost through the carelessness of others.

When we turn to the picture of the first son, we have a very different story. This is not stupidity. This is not a losing through the carelessness of others. This is deliberate, self-centred pride. This is the lost son, representing those lost because they rebel against all restriction and all order, and vainly imagine that away from God and Christ, and away from the Church, there is freedom, liberty; and they will be able to express themselves. They go to the far country, away from God and Christ and the Church and restriction, and they say, Let us eat, drink, and be merry; and they go, and they are lost! There is tremendous power in every phrase. He went into a far country, and spent his substance, which he had derived from his father. He was spending what his father had given to him. Humanity away from God is expending the forces which God has created in them, and committed to them. Every man who sins with his hand, foot, eye, or mind, is sinning with force that God has given to him to bless him, and to make him. Men are prostituting their gifts, wasting their substance; they are lost!

Then that sentence from the lips of our blessed Lord always seems to have in it a biting satire. "When he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that country." That does not necessarily mean there was some physical famine. It may mean that if a man have spent all in London, there is a famine in London! One can be in the midst of plenty, and yet find a famine. He joined himself to a citizen of that country. He was not going home yet; not he! He was going to face it out. And "he sent him into his fields to feed swine." We may not get the force of that, for we are not Jews. He gave him the lowest and most degrading and humiliating thing to do. And "he would fain have been filled with the husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him." I never read that sentence without thinking all the nobility was not gone from him even then. I know men who, if no man gave to them, they would have helped themselves. He did not. He suffered hunger.

But "he came to himself." It is a great hour when a man comes to himself, when substance is gone, and friends are gone, and the possibility of finding food is gone. There is nothing left. He came to himself, and that is when reason dawned again. He began to think. He was lost. That is Christ's outlook. He was lost through his own deliberate choice and pride.

Yet there is another picture there. Another son is out in the fields doing his work, attending to the affairs of the estate, and very proud of what he is doing. He hears the sound of music and dancing, and makes enquiries, and a bond-slave tells him, Your brother is home. My brother! Notice this, Jesus never called this man a brother. He called the other man his brother, but He never called him the other man's brother. It is a slight matter, but worth noticing. He was lost. He did not know his father. He did not know his father's heart. He was lost in his father's country; duteous, and a man can be lost there, well as everywhere else. The lost sheep - a stupid thing. The lost piece of silver, guiltless, being lost through the neglect of others. The lost son, rebellious man. The lost son, so concerned with duty that he had no fellowship with his father, with God. The outlook on humanity - lost!

Where is the emphasis? On the word lost in each case, not on the condition of the thing lost. The emphasis lies in agony upon the heart of the one who has lost. The shepherd is suffering more. than the wandering sheep. The woman is suffering because the silver is lost. It is the father who knows the depth of agony when that boy is away. It is the father who knows the pain of having a son who does not understand. Lost, the possession gone, the purchasing power of the coin, or its significance from the standpoint of order and beauty, gone. Love deeply wounded by the wanderer, and the hide-bound vanity of self-pity.

If that is the Lord's outlook upon humanity, what is His relation of God? All the stories merge and blend. The lights of the Urim and Thummim are flashing in rainbow splendour through these stories. He first shows that God is mindful of His own, and He has never forgotten. That shepherd did not forget the one sheep, though he possessed the ninety and nine. Neither has God. That woman did not forget the silver, though she had lost it through her own carelessness. And the father had never forgotten that boy. The sentences here are so beautiful. "While he was yet afar off, his father saw him … and ran." Is there any lack of dignity to see an old man running? Do not believe it. Why did he not stay and wait and retain his dignity? He could not. I declare that there is no dignity greater than the running of a father to meet his boy. That is God.

But there is more than that, of course. It is revelation of God acting for the recovery of that which was lost; the journey of the shepherd. The phrase is enough.

"None of the ransomed ever knew

How deep were the waters crossed.

Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through,

E'er He found the sheep that was lost."

That is God. The search within the dwelling is God seeking by His Spirit. The woman is the instrument, but the inspiration is Divine. Then we see the picture of God in the father, welcoming the boy. It is wonderful to see that when the boy got back, he found that which he had left home to find in the far country, and had not found there. He went into the far country to have a good time. Judged by the days in which we live, he expected to have fine clothes, and jewellery. When he got back home, the father called for the best robe, a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. He got these when he came home. He lost them in the far country. He expected food, and variety of menu, and he came to an hour when nobody would give him husks. But when he got home, they killed the fatted calf. He went to the far country to be free from restraint, and he found disillusionment. When he came back he found merriment, gladness, restoration.

Then we come to that other man in the field. How we have tried to explain him. What varied explanations have been given, There is no explanation that is final. It has been said that he represented the Jew, and the other son the Gentile. To me that is far-fetched. I am sure He intended an illustration of the men criticizing Him, the scribes and Pharisees. But whatever we have said about the elder son, the father did not say anything unkind to him. "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine." He went out and entreated him to come in. He was as concerned about that son as about the one who had been away. All he said to him was in the nature of a tender and gentle appeal. That was the revelation of God that He gave to those who were listening.

Then look at them again, Pharisees and scribes. What did all that mean, or what did He intend it should mean for them? I have no means of knowing if any understood Him. Any interpretation of religion which holds derelict humanity in contempt is the worst form of irreligion. To hold in contempt the unwashed multitudes outside is the most irreligious thing of which a man can be guilty. Such attitude demonstrates ignorance of God, and consequently failure to appreciate the true value of humanity.

What about those publicans and sinners, and those listening crowds. To them it was a message of hope, it was a revelation of love, it was a call to faith. Oh, matchless parable, shining with all the glories of the grace of God; rebuking all that religion which is merely devoted to duty, and ethical, and cold, and dispassionate! Oh, wondrous parable, wooing the sinner, the failure, and the wanderer back to the Father's heart and home!