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

**46. ANGELS AND LADDER**

*"Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said about him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I told you, 'I saw you underneath the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these!" He said to him, "Most certainly, I tell you all, hereafter you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

*John 1:47-51*

WE ARE still with our Lord in the first days of His public ministry. Nathanael was the fifth of the group constituting His earliest disciples. He stands out, of course, by reason of our Lord's remarkable description of him; a wonderful revelation of the man, especially falling from the lips that spoke no idle or careless word. As He saw him coming to Him, brought by Philip, before He had any conversation with him, He said concerning him, unquestionably to those who were round about, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." That is a remarkable description of the man, linking him up with the history of the ancient people of God, by the use of the name Israel, given to one Jacob in connection with that night, when God crowned him by crippling him, that name that means ruled by God, Isra-el. Jesus saw Nathanael, and said, Here is one who fulfils the ideal of the name, "an Israelite indeed." Moreover, He added that word which I never read without thinking that in the mind of our blessed Lord was the thought of the man to whom the name was originally given. Jacob was characterized by guile, by extremely shrewd cleverness; and by ability to practise a good deal of deceit in his own interests. We know all his clever meanness in dealing with Laban, but I am always glad he proved one too many for Laban.

But here was a man who Jesus said fulfilled the ideal suggested by the name, marking his relationship to all the spiritual values suggested by the name; an Israelite indeed, in whom there was no trickery, no double dealing, a clean, transparent soul, submitted to the authority of God. It was a great definition.

The words we are to consider are the background of the story of Nathanael. They were not, however, addressed to Nathanael alone, but to the group. There is a sudden transition from the singular to the plural, in what our Lord said. He first talked to Nathanael, "Because I said unto thee, I saw thee underneath the fig-tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. And He said unto him," but He dropped into the plural, "Verily, verily I say unto you, Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." There are other occasions in the records, when our Lord did that very thing. We shall find it later on in this Gospel, when He was talking to Peter, He suddenly dropped into the plural, "Let not your heart be troubled." I only emphasize it because the words we are now considering were spoken to the group of disciples round about Him at the time. How many more heard Him, of course we have no means of knowing.

What then was the subject which our Lord was intending to illustrate when He said that to this group of men? Secondly, what was the figure He employed? All that so that we may consider the abiding value of the teaching for us.

Turn to the subject illustrated. Notice the method and setting of the thing Jesus said. Observe first that He opened with that formula, "Verily, verily." Another interesting thing to notice in passing is that John is the only one who announces that Jesus used that formula in that form. No less than twenty-five times in the course of his Gospel it is found. Our Lord introduced something He had to say by that formula, "Verily, verily." Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report Him as saying "Verily," and not one of them uses it twice. We may ask, Which did He say? My opinion is that John was the more acute listener, and noticed the double affirmation, the Amen, Amen, for that is the word. It is the method showing that He had something of tremendous importance to say. The formula always marks urgency. It is as though our Lord had been saying something, and then wished to re-arrest attention, and to fasten attention upon something now to be said of urgent importance. It is a great study, because wherever it is found it leads to something of urgency, and occurs as a rule in the midst of other statements. That is the first thing to notice in His method.

Then this is the first occasion on record, considering the life of Jesus from the chronological standpoint, when we find Him using the term "Son of man." We are here at the beginning of His public ministry. That was our Lord's favourite designation of Himself, "the Son of man." It is also arresting how constantly He used it. This is the first occasion, and He always used it of Himself. We never find anyone else using it of Him in these Gospel records. No man called Him that. No demon called Him that. His enemies never called Him that, nor are His friends reported as calling Him that. It was His own name for Himself, with one exception. In John 12:34, on that day when the Greeks had come to Him, and He was saying things of great import, someone in the crowd said, We know about the Christ, or the Messiah. What dost Thou mean when Thou sayest, the Son of man must be lifted up. Who is this Son of man? Just once the phrase is found on the lips of enquirers, and evidently the very form of the statement shows it was a peculiar designation for Himself. They felt at that moment He was claiming Messiahship. His disciples had confessed Him Messiah, and others knew He was claiming it; and a voice from the crowd spoke, What is Thy view? Who is this Son of man? Notice that voice linked the phrase which He was using with the idea of the Christ, or the Messiah. We know about the Christ. Who is the Son of man?

Then notice again we are observing the method and setting that this was an immediate answer or response to Nathanael's confession concerning Him. Nathanael had said, "Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel." Then Jesus, continuing the conversation had said to him, Do you believe because I said I knew you before Philip found you? You shall see greater things than these. Then speaking in the plural, You shall see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. "Thou art the Son of God." He did not deny it, but what He called Himself on that self-same occasion was "Son of man."

Then the setting of Nathanael's confession in the presence of our Lord's supreme knowledge and our Lord's declaration, "Thou shalt see greater things than these," and then His interpretation of that. What are the greater things? To summarize everything, the purpose and issue of His presence in the world, the Son of man; and the purpose and issue, angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man, and the heavens open. Through Him there is this link between the heaven that had been closed, and the earth that had been in ignorance. The purpose then of the subject illustrated was that of Himself, in His incarnation, and as to its purpose.

Look now at the figure employed. It is quite evident that our Lord was referring to something that had happened, and that was recorded in their history. It is found in Genesis chapter 28. It is the story of Jacob who became Israel. He was travelling away in disobedience, going away from home to a distant place, as the result of his duplicity of which his mother was the inspiration. He laid him down in a place called Luz, to sleep, and put his head upon a stone. He dreamed a dream, and in the dream he saw a stairway. I do not like the translation "a ladder." The Hebrew word literally means a stairway, a terrace. And he saw Jehovah in the dream, and He was seen standing not at the top of the stairway, as our translation might lead us to think, above it. No, He was right there, on the earth by the side of Jacob. The ladder, the stairway, was standing. When Jacob woke, he said, God is here; Lo, God is in this place. He saw the stairway, and there is the picture out of the dream. Jacob and Jehovah close together, and right from the place where they were close together in the dream, the sweeping stairway moved up until it was lost in heaven. Ascending and descending messengers of heaven in their order - angels is the true word, which means in the Old Testament as in the New, messengers - were going up, bearing messages. They were coming down, bearing messages. That is the picture.

I believe Nathanael had been reading about Jacob when he was under the fig-tree. I believe he had read of his home-coming when God crippled him to make him Isra-el. That was all in his mind, I believe, and our Lord took as His illustration the first description of him, the things he had been thinking about under the fig-tree, in the place of his quietness and his devotion. Have you believed because you were told I knew you before Philip found you? You shall see greater things. You shall see heaven opened, as Jacob did, when he was going out from home. You shall see heaven open, and you shall see what Jacob saw, angels ascending and descending upon the stairway, and the way shall be the Son of man. The figure He was using was that of the ancient dream.

What did that mean to Jacob at the time? It was a revelation of Jehovah's care for him, of Jehovah's love of him. I stress again the point that how at that moment he was going away from home under a cloud. Nobody can defend his action by which he gained what he felt he ought to have, the birthright from Esau. We do not defend Jacob there. It was his in the economy of God, but we really do not help God, but postpone the realization of His purpose when by tricks we try to aid Him in bringing it about. So it was for this man. He was going out under a cloud. Of course distances to-day are so different. Take the map, and look at his journey. The country from which he passed, and the country to which he was going. It meant complete exile from home. One can easily imagine his restlessness that night, and his sense of loneliness, accentuated by the conviction that it was his own wrongdoing that was driving him out. He had this vision, and he found that God was there.

When he awoke, what did he say? "This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." But he said something far more than that. He said, "Lo, God is here, He is in this place, and I knew it not." Mark the tenses there. The present conviction put into contrast with the past ignorance. "Lo, God is here." When I laid down last night I did not recognize that. I did not know it. I did not think of God as here. No, probably he thought he had offended God, and that God had abandoned him, and that he would have to do the best he could. But that vision, the Lord standing there, Jehovah manifesting Himself in his dream as there, was close to him; and lo, the stairway and angels going up, and coming down, and Jacob learned that night how God cared. We cannot go on with that, for it is a sordid story. The very next thing we find is Jacob bargaining with God. If You do so and so, I will do so and so. He was a mean soul. Nevertheless that great revelation had come. That was the vision our Lord recalled to the mind of Nathanael when He said, "Greater things," and greater things are included in these. Thou shall see the heaven opened and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man.

In that whole scene, and in that use of the figure of speech gathered from a piece of history in the sacred writings with which Nathanael was most familiar, undoubtedly there stands for us for evermore a revelation of the fact of the interrelationship between heaven and earth, that they are not divided, that they are not so far apart, that earth can have dealing with heaven, and heaven dealing with earth. That was the general lesson taught by the vision of Jacob, and that was the tremendous fact Jesus had come to teach humanity at large.

Mark how the two spheres merge in His own Personality, the Son of God and the Son of man. He belonged to the heavenly abode and the heavenly region and the heavenly order. Yes, but He belonged to the earthly region and abode and order. He was Son of man. Heaven and earth were linked in His Person. And it was an unveiling of that fact that He announced to men through Himself. Through Him the door closed should be opened. The Old Version rendered it, "Thou shalt see heaven open." The Revisers have it, "Ye shall see the heaven opened." The very form in which it is stated suggests the fact the door was shut, that man had somehow lost his connection, his sense of relationship with the heavenly world and order. Said Jesus, Through Me that door shall be opened. "Ye shall see the heaven opened," and left open through Me.

Then the angels, what are we going to do with them? I would advise you to do nothing with them, but accept them, and believe what He said. Of course we have got beyond medieval art. Modern art knows nothing of the angels. We have lost the angels in our thinking, and our philosophy. We do not believe in angels. No, we are largely Sadducean! They believed neither in resurrection, angel, or spirit. As surely as you let the angels go, you are likely to let the Spirit of God and the resurrection go. That is the danger. That is where that philosophy leads.

"Angels ascending and descending." He said so, and I think He was remembering the Old Testament story. He knew the Scriptures in His human life. He knew of the angelic visitation and ministry, remembering possibly that very word, "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him." At any rate He said that the ministry of heavenly beings should be maintained between heaven and the earth upon Him, and through Him.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews had a strong conviction about angels when he said, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?" The word "ministering" is liturgical, that is the anglicizing of the Greek word. The double function of the angels is revealed in that great word. First they are liturgical. That is their supreme function, that of adoration in worship in the presence of the eternal Throne, and the ineffable glory of God. Go back to Isaiah, and we find that in the vision Isaiah had, he saw the seraphim, and saw them engaged in liturgical service. They were crying out, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory." That is praise, that is worship, that is liturgical service, and the writer of the Hebrew letter says that is their function.

But sometimes that exercise ceases. They are sent forth to minister, to do service to those who are heirs of salvation, the ministry of angels on behalf of such. Again that is seen in that very passage of Isaiah. He saw that vision of the angels, heard their anthems, and then it was he cried, Lo, I am a man of unclean lips. Then one of them was sent forth to catch from the altar the live coal, and touch the lips of the sinner, and cleanse him. They are sent forth to minister.

This is not out of date. There are very many things we know for certain that we cannot prove. My last word is that of testimony. I am sure we are surrounded by angel ministry, "angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man." The angel ministry had largely ceased until He was near, then coming again, in the Temple one appeared, to Zacharias, and another to Mary. They have not appeared often. I do not say they never do, or never will; but I believe we are compassed about with a cloud of those who serve us through Jesus Christ.