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

**49. THE LIFTED SERPENT**

*"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life."*

*John 3:14,15*

OUR PREVIOUS study was concerned with the illustration of the wind and the Spirit, by which our Lord illuminated His answer to the first question of Nicodemus, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus then spoke again, and Jesus employed the illustration of the lifted serpent in His answer to that second question, "How can these things be?"

We pause here to notice that there was an essential difference between the two questions which Nicodemus asked. The first was, "How can a man be born when he is old?" It was not a flippant question, but a serious one, revealing the fact that this man was thinking. He did not deny what Christ had suggested as to the value of a new beginning. Jesus said, "Except a man be born from above he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Nicodemus did not question that for a moment. What he did question was the possibility of the thing suggested. How can a man be born all over again, as though the first had never been. He is what he is as the result of all the years that have gone. How can he start again? It was an honest question, an intelligent question, but it was one revealing a great deal of doubt as to the possibility.

After our Lord had used that marvelous simile of the wind and the Spirit, in which He summarized by telling him that in natural things he did not refuse to act because there was mystery present, that he took hold of that which was patent and could not be denied. The blowing of the wind which he heard, he acted upon it, though there was mystery. He could not tell whence it came or whither it was going; so is every man born of the Spirit. Every man that is born of the Spirit obeys the law of the force, which cannot be denied, although he cannot understand the mystery of the activity.

When Nicodemus heard that, he then asked this question, not how the thing happened, but How can the thing be brought to pass? He was still in the same realm of difficulty. The word he used is a very suggestive one, *genesthai*, not How can this happen? but How can it come to pass? I may take Nicodemus' question, and render it a little more fully than in our Versions. It might properly be rendered, By what power can these things be caused to be? It is not a question of there being, but of there becoming. The first thing is incredible. Now if there is a law of the Spirit, how does it work? How can these things be brought to pass?

It was in answer to that question that our Lord used the illustration of the uplifted serpent. We may now proceed with the same three lines of consideration. First, the subject illustrated. Secondly, the figure He employed. Finally, of course, the teaching deducted for us and for all time.

What was the subject that Jesus was illustrating when He used that historic figure? For a moment look at the twelfth verse, in which Jesus said, "If I told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things?" We are apt to read that as though our Lord meant, I cannot tell you the heavenly things. He did not mean that, for He immediately proceeded to tell Nicodemus the heavenly things. That is what He is now doing. He had told him the earthly things, the necessity on the earth level for a new personality. He had illustrated that by a natural figure of speech, the blowing of the wind. He had told him earthly things, and Nicodemus was still in doubt. He could not understand. How would he believe if He drew aside the curtain and revealed the heavenly things. The earthly things declared were those of necessity for a man to be born from above, starting anew on the earth level. Nicodemus, you ask how that can be brought about? The answer is that which brings you face to face with heavenly things; the action of heaven that makes possible the earthly experience. Our Lord dealt with that from this point on, the action whereby a man can, by the reception of a new life from above, escape from his past. That is what had puzzled Nicodemus at first, how he could not only see but enter into the whole experience of the Kingdom of God. The secret of the life which liberates a human soul, and enables it, how that life is provided straight away, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him."

Those are the heavenly things. The earthly things, the necessity for the recreating of personality, the liberation of the soul from the accumulation and influences of the past, and the enablement of the soul with a new life to enter upon the Kingdom of God experimentally; these are the earthly things. You ask for the heavenly secrets. How will you believe if I do tell you? And the great declaration comes, with the sixteenth verse, always taken in very close connection with the fourteenth and fifteenth, and also with the seventeenth.

Notice how those two verses (3:16, 17) begin; "For ... for." That follows after the verse, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life. For …" Everything now beyond the illustration is in the heavenly realm. "For God so loved," and then "For God sent not His Son to condemn, but to save." Those are the heavenly things. Whereas we are not considering those verses at any length, we are bound to recognize them from the standpoint of the Divine action, and the consequent human responsibility.

So we come at once to the illustration. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness." Having first used an illustration in the realm of natural phenomena, He now used an illustration in the realm of historic record. Nicodemus knew the Old Testament. He was the teacher of Israel, and he knew the Scriptures. We are familiar with it. The story is in Numbers chapter 21, the account of how Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.

In looking at this figure, what did this uplifted serpent mean? Why did Moses lift up that serpent in the wilderness? Because the people had been guilty of definite and positive rebellion against God. There is one little sentence in that twenty-first chapter of Numbers that tells the whole story. "They spake against God." That is the history behind this incident. The people definitely and wilfully rebelled against the Divine government. "They spake against God," and this story in Numbers tells us that as the result of that rebellion there was a punitive action of God. There came to them the fiery serpents, and the deadly bite, and the terrible anguish and suffering.

But we have not reached the lifted serpent. That is only the background. Why was the serpent lifted? It was lifted because the people had rebelled against God, and because as the result of their rebellion they were suffering punishment. That was why.

Now, said Jesus, as Moses lifted up that serpent; and we go back with the simplicity of children to the story in Numbers, and say, Why did Moses lift it up, and what did it mean when it was lifted up? First, he lifted it up by the authority of God, by the authority of the very One against Whom the people were in rebellion. "They spake against God," and that God Whose authority they were insulting and denying arranged for the uplifted serpent.

Why was it lifted? To give those who were suffering as the result of their own rebellion an opportunity for return to the government of God. Let us get hold of that first. I know there is something else. What were they to do? Moses was to make a serpent of brass, and lift it on a pole. What were they to do? Look at the serpent of brass. It sounds almost foolish. It is not. Is there any healing in that serpent of brass? No, not so; no healing in it. Then why look? Because God's authority commanded it. His authority had been insulted. His authority ordered the elevation of that serpent, and men were to look, and there could be no look which was not the result of yielding to the Divine authority in a new start, a new beginning. The God contemned is now obeyed by those who look. There were hundreds who looked. It was a speculative look. There were those who did not look. We do know if they did not look they died by the poison of the bite. But the look was a yielding to a Divine command, and that is all. The work of the eyes had nothing in it of value. There was no healing in that uplifted serpent; but in obedience to a Divine command. So Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness; first upon the authority of God, and secondly to create for suffering men and through their own sin an opportunity of return to the government of God that they had refused, by obedience to His command as they looked.

Of course the third thing is involved in what we have said. That demanded repentance, a change of mind; an activity that grows out of a changed mind. If men and women in that camp heard the proclamation that God had appointed the lifted serpent, with the act of every head turned towards that serpent was the head of a repentant man; indicating a change of mind, no longer speaking against God, but obeying God.

Finally, of course, on the fulfilment of these conditions a way of healing and of new life was provided for those smitten, stricken, and afflicted through their own sin. That was the story in Numbers. Moses lifted up the serpent on the authority of God to create a point at which man who had spoken against Him and was in rebellion, and consequently was suffering, could turn back, and by looking be healed and restored, in glorious simplicity of obedience to the command.

Yet the sublime wonder of it. Every head turned was the head of someone who was repenting and now obeying the Divine command; and as and whenever a head was turned in obedience, expressed in the look, life and healing followed. Nicodemus, you know your history. You have asked about heavenly things. Let Me begin by taking you back to a page in your history, as though Jesus had said, that well-known story of the serpent; and there you will see heavenly activity creating the opportunity for earthly activity; and when the heavenly activity and the earthly come into touch with each other, there is the way of life. "As … so."

So we stand back as it were from the illustration, and at once see the greatness of it. There is revealed and suggested in this story in the wilderness the background of human need. What is it? Man perishing by reason of his rebellion against God. That is the whole story of this world's agony and failure. That is the story of the failure of your life and mine. That is the story of the failure of all social relationships. That is the story of failure in national life, and international relationships. All in the last analysis is in rebellion against God; and perishing is the result.

There is only one hope either for the individual or for the nation. What is it? A new beginning, a new birth, the communication of a new life which will liberate us from all the bondage of the past, and enable us for all that lies ahead of us. I go back twenty years for my illustration, to those dark and terrible years. How constantly it was repeated in writings of men who perhaps would not claim what we would claim, of confidence and belief in the Christ of God; but over and over again we were told that what the world needed was a new spirit. It is wonderful how all unconsciously these men simply repeated what Jesus said, "Ye must be born from above." There is the background. Nicodemus was there, and Jesus was talking to him, and as He used this illustration, at the time showing the background in the history of men and women perishing by reason of rebellion, with no hope whatever; then something happened so that they should be healed, and have a new element in life. So we see the condition of the world, and humanity.

Now in the foreground, our Lord told him the story of the Divine action. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up." "Lifted up"? Everyone knows what He meant,

"… lifted up, was He, to die."

That is what He meant. It is a great expression. We find it again upon the lips of Jesus (chapter 8:28). He was talking then to His enemies. "Jesus therefore said, When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am He, and that I do nothing from Myself, but as the Father taught Me, I speak these things." And once again, we have the phrase on the lips of Jesus in the twelfth chapter, in that marvelous word, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Myself." He used the expression then when He was looking at the Cross, and more than the Cross He was looking through to the victory. So He said to Nicodemus, "The Son of man must be lifted up."

So we are brought face to face with the Cross in a remarkable way by reason of the illustration. The serpent was lifted up by the authority of God. So was the Son of man. The lifting up on the Cross of Jesus was not finally the act of man. It was the act of man's sin; but He never had been lifted up except, again to quote from Peter, in his first Pentecostal sermon, He had been "delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God." Behind that Cross I see the eternal Throne. In that Cross I see the action of the eternal authority. That which man has condemned and rebelled against is acting in the midst of all the ruin, created by his rebellion, for the recovery of man from those results; by the authority of God creating an opportunity for man to return to the Divine authority. That is what it always means. It is so wrong to think we become Christians to escape the bite of the fiery serpent, or hell fire. Yes, we do; but to become a Christian means we get back to God, yielding to the authority which has been contemned, and against which man has rebelled.

That demands repentance, but it provides life, and healing for all who will be obedient to that command.

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One,

There is life at this moment for thee.

Then look, sinner, look unto Him and be saved;

There is life in that moment for thee."

But there must be the look. There must be the bending of the neck. There must be the submission of the life to the authority of God. There must be a return to the Throne of government which will be found to be the Throne of grace. We never know the grace until we submit to the government. "As …so."

Notice carefully how this reads. "As Moses lifted up the serpent, ... even so *must* the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life." We are still on the earth level? No, we are going on to the heavenly level now. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world should be saved through Him." A marvelous illustration, so simple, the historic incident, and yet so thrilling with the fact of the Divine power and the Divine authority and the Divine grace. If man rebels, punishment must come; but even when he is suffering, God finds the remedy; and the Son of man given of God, and sent by God, is given in order that through that action of God and His Son, man may have life indeed.