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

**51. THE LAMP OF PROPHECY**

*"He (Jesus speaking of John the Baptist) was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light."*

*John 5:35*

THIS is a very remarkable parabolic illustration used by our Lord. The subject as announced, is intentional, for it marks the true theme and value, the lamp of prophecy. Peter described "the word of prophecy" as "a lamp shining in a dark place."

John was more than a prophet. We have our Lord's warrant for that statement, Said He to the people, "Wherefore went ye out? to see a prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face,

Who shall prepare Thy way before Thee."

So in that sense he was more than a prophet.

But he was distinctly a prophet, perfectly fulfilling in his public ministry, the prophetic office. We remember that Peter said on another occasion "To Him" that is to Christ, "give all the prophets witness." If that applies, as verily it does to all the prophets, the record of whose ministry and whose words we find in our Old Testament, it is perfectly true that all their prophesying found culmination in the ministry of John. He was the last of the long line of the Hebrew prophets, coming after a silence of four hundred years during which no authentic prophetic voice had been heard, Malachi having been the last. Yet in his message he gathered up all the foretelling, all the hopes and all the aspirations of those prophets Who had given witness to the Christ. He was the forerunner, the immediate forerunner of the Christ, and therefore the culminating word of the long line of prophets.

In this way this illustration of our Lord applied specifically to him; "he was the lamp that burneth and shineth." We follow our usual custom and consider three matters. We enquire, What was the subject illustrated by our Lord. Then we will examine the figure itself, in order that we may deduce the abiding teaching.

Let it be said first of all that these words of verse thirty-five may be taken as parenthetical. By that I do not suggest that they are unimportant. He had been talking about John and at that point He said of him, "He was the lamp that burneth and shineth." What then was the occasion? What lies round about that statement? What had led our Lord to speak of John? It was a great occasion when He made a claim which the rulers understood in one way; when they had challenged Him as to His right to heal on the Sabbath day and make a man carry his mattress on the Sabbath day, He had made use of those tremendous words, "My Father worketh even until now, and I work." We are not considering their value in their setting, save to refer to it. They said He had made a man break Sabbath when He had restored a man to power to keep the Sabbath. When they said in effect, He was making a man break the Sabbath, He said, again in effect, God has no Sabbath while man suffers. What they understood Him to do was to make Himself equal with God, when He said "My Father worketh … and I work." They were quite right, but it stirred their anger, and they fain would have killed Him on what they conceived to be the ground of His blasphemy in making Himself equal with God.

Following that, we have His discourse, this wonderful message that He bore to them on His authority, on His relationship with God, on the fact that He was speaking by Divine authority, thus vindicating the claim He had made of being on an equality with God; and He sternly rebuked their unbelief. In the midst of this He referred to John. That then is where these words occur. John's ministry was well known. The whole countryside had been influenced by it, and these men had gone with the multitudes to hear him. Jesus reminded them of that.

They had sent to John, and he had told them. Moreover, they had rejoiced for a season in his ministry, in his light. Having said that to them, He pointed out to them how John His forerunner had borne witness to the truth when he had proclaimed Him. He reminded them they had listened for a while to John, and had rejoiced, and almost in an aside, He said of John, "He was the lamp that burneth and shineth."

So with all our knowledge of the ministry of John in mind, and our recognition of the fact that he fulfilled the prophetic office, and of what our Lord said of him, which was equally true, that of all who had exercised that office of the past, and of all who were to be called upon to exercise that office in coming days, here is the description of the prophetic office, "a burning and a shining lamp."

We come now to consider the figure in its deepest values. What was this figure Jesus used? The lamp. Scholars are all agreed in what may not be quite patent to the ordinary reader, that when Jesus used that word "the lamp," not a lamp, although that might quite well have been said, there was a great definiteness in it. So careful a scholar as Westcott emphasizes the fact that Jesus was taking something quite familiar to them, that which they could see in any house; that the definite article, "the lamp," points to the familiar household object. That is the figure, that of the lamp burning. Our minds go wandering there helpfully. We remember that Jesus said, No man lights a lamp, or a candle, the same word, and puts it under a bushel. There He took the same figure. It is the ordinary, everyday figure of the lamp, shining in the house, and giving light.

Look at that lamp for a moment. We recognize first that it has no light in itself, but it is a centre of light, when the illuminating essence is supplied, and ignition takes place. It is always so. It is so even to-day with the lights round about us. It is very remarkable how underlying principles do not change. Of course when Jesus was talking the lamp was the light, with the wick and oil. I am old enough to remember that was the illumination in my home in boyhood, just a lamp, with wick and oil. But that lamp never lighted the house. Then I am still old enough to remember when the lamp was superseded by gas. They put in all the fittings, and some of them were fearfully and wonderfully made, brackets on the walls and chandeliers. But look at them, there is no light, The bracket and the burner give no light. Now the very homes who used that method, have electric light, and no one knows exactly what it is. What do we do? We wire our buildings, and put in fixtures, and bulbs, or something else, but there is no light in them. The lamps do not light the building. The light comes when some illuminating essence is supplied, and ignition takes place. In the old days ignition took place with the tinder box. The tinder was struck on flint until a spark smouldered, and you blew it, and touched the wick with it, and by that fire it became a centre of light. It is the same with the gas burner. The tap was turned on, and it was touched with fire, and the room was lit, the house was lit. Now we have gone beyond all that. We do not have to touch anything with fire ourselves. We do not have to put a match to the gas burner, but we just press a lever, and there is a flash somewhere of fire, and there is light. But there is no light in the lamp, gas burner, or bulb. Something more is wanted.

Still look at the lamp. What brings the light? Burning, always burning, always fire. There is no light apart from fire, from the sun to the wax vesta there must be burning. Burning in the case of the lamp with the wick and the oil, burning always means consuming. While it burns it is being consumed, and by the consuming of the oil, touched with fire upon the basis of the wick, light is given, and it is not consumed. If that consuming process fails, if it becomes overcharged with charcoal, or fails to supply the oil, the light is snuffed out. We must have burning, and burning means consuming. Whatever we see in a lamp is transitory. It is not going on all the time. Presently it will consume by itself, burning; and out goes the burning, shining.

But because burning, shining, and so illuminating, and always by the process of burning. That was our Lord's figure. Said He of John "He was the lamp that burneth and shineth." I would venture to suggest the introduction of a little word there. "He was the lamp that burneth and so shineth." There is no shining without burning; and any burning that does not issue in shining falls back into ashes, and the light ceases. John was the lamp that burned and shined.

The teaching deduced is so simple and on the surface that we do not tarry with it. Take it in the case of John. The greatness of his work, and the marvel of it, was not something done out of himself, but through himself, and all the influence he exerted in that marvelous ministry as the forerunner of Jesus was not the result of anything in himself. It was the result of an oil that was there, supplied to him. Here without being fanciful at all I take the figure employed in the Old Testament as the figure of the Holy Spirit. Yes, what a great work he did, what a marvelous work; but a work which was consuming, and therefore transitory, and must presently find its end. It did find its end. I am using the word in its true and beautiful sense. He burnt himself out into the essential light; and there was the greatness of his word at the end; "He must increase ... I must decrease." Yes, he decreased; but Jesus our Lord tells us how he was burning, and therefore shining. That is the true function of the prophet.

It has been the function of the prophet in every age. Go back through the history of these marvelous prophets, those we call mistakenly major and minor, the prophetic utterances, and it is true that they were never self-luminous. Their light was derivative. We hear them again and again as we study them saying, "Thus saith the Lord," and they were shining. They were lights in dark places; and indeed, the prophetic ministry is always characterized by darkness round about it. Apart from the darkness there is no call for the prophetic ministry. The prophet is always shining in a dark place; but he is shining because he is burning. He is being consumed, and in the consuming process light is shining and flashing everywhere. "To Him bare all the prophets witness." What high honour, and what grave responsibility. It is the responsibility of a lamp well trimmed, supplied with oil, burning; and there responsibility ends. The issue of the fulfilment of such responsibility in the prophetic office is always shining, the scattering of light upon the darkness.

In a familiar passage Peter said on the day of Pentecost, quoting one of those old Hebrew prophets, Joel,

"And it shall be in the last days, saith God,

I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all flesh;

And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

And your young men shall see visions,

And your old men shall dream dreams;

Yea and on My bond-servants and on My bond-maidens in those days

Will I pour forth of My Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

The gift of prophecy will fall upon all. That is what Joel foretold. That is what Peter claimed to be fulfilled. There was a day when men ran unto Moses and complained that certain were exercising a prophetic gift that were not as was supposed - to use a phrase not Biblical but modern - in regular orders. You remember what Moses said. "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets." The centuries ran on and on, and the prophetic gift was being exercised to Malachi's time; and then silence for four hundred years, reborn in John; fulfilled in Jesus to the very ultimate limit of all truth, caught up by those whom He called and trained. And on the day of Pentecost the Spirit fell upon the whole assembly, not upon Peter and James and John and the twelve alone, but upon the sons and daughters, upon the bond-slaves and bond-maidens; and they were all prophesying. That is the great ideal.

How terribly we have lost it. But the fact remains. There is no Christian man or woman, a child of God by the marvel and supernatural wonder of the new birth, but is called to prophecy. Prophecy is infinitely more than prediction. That is the smallest element in prophecy. It is forthtelling, it is the proclamation of the way and will of God about the past and the present, as well as about the future, and we are all called upon to be prophets. If we are to fulfil the prophetic office in any measure, we must be lamps burning, and so shining. We are lamps, no light in us, or of ourselves. The lamp may be very ornate, and the gas fitting very beautiful, and the electric fitting may be very charming; but they are no good in themselves. There must be the communication of the element of light, touched by fire into radiance; then the burning and the shining, a lamp in a dark place.