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

**63. A WOMAN IN TRAVAIL**

*"A woman, when she gives birth, has sorrow because her time has come. But when she has delivered the child, she doesn't remember the anguish any more, for the joy that a human being is born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow, but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you. "*

*John 16:21,22*

THIS IS our last study. We have considered thirty-four parables of Jesus, and seventy-three parabolic illustrations - one hundred and seven in all. How comparatively little Jesus said; yet in the course of that teaching these one hundred and seven illustrations have been used by Him.

In this last converse with His own, He used four parabolic illustrations: first, the parabolic action and interpretation of the washing of the disciples' feet; then the stupendous illustration of the Father's house and the many abiding-places therein; then the allegory of the vine; and now this illustration of a woman in travail. He was now speaking to His own disciples in the presence of the facts that they were facing at the moment, and in view of the change that was to take place, as the result of these facts. In answer to the difficulty raised by the disciples, He used this superlative final illustration. We consider then, first, the subject He intended to illustrate; then the figure He made use of in order to deduce from that consideration the teaching for ourselves.

The subject illustrated. We must remember the background of the occasion. He was going, and they were sore troubled by reason of that fact; and because they knew He was going as He had told them by the pathway of suffering and death. But their supreme trouble was not so much that of the method of His going, dark as that must have appeared to them; but the fact He was going at all, that He was leaving them. He had been with them for three and a half years in very close converse, and He was going from them. Immediately preceding the use of this figure He had given them the allegory of the vine, and His statement in verse sixteen was the concluding sentence of that section of the allegory. "A little while, and ye behold Me no more; and again a little while, and ye shall see Me." That has no reference to the second advent. He was not referring to His second advent then. He was referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit, through Whom they would see Him as they had never seen Him before, and would remember all that He had told them. In the course of that conversation He had declared to them He would not leave them orphans, desolate; that He would come to them, when He, the Paraclete, should come, Whose office it should be to take of those things of the Christ, and reveal Him to them; and interpret all He had said to them, and make Him, the Christ, the consciousness of these men, as they had never known Him before.

If anyone is looking for the experience of the Holy Ghost, they are looking for something the Bible has never promised. The Spirit does not come to make us conscious He is there. He comes to make us conscious that Christ is there. It is the revelation of the Christ that the office of the Spirit is fulfilling. All this He had been teaching them; and He had said this, "Again a little while, and ye shall see Me." It is beautiful to read of the perplexity of these men. Let us try to put ourselves in their places, They said, "What is this that He saith, A little while?" John has recorded this in a good deal of detail. "A little while, and ye behold Me not; and again a little while, and ye shall see Me; and, Because I go to the Father?" What does He mean by the little while? We do not know what He means.

Then Jesus understanding their perplexity, said to them, "Do ye enquire among yourselves concerning this, that I said, A little while, and ye behold Me not, and again a little while, and ye shall see Me?" Then He did not seem to explain it, and yet He did. "A little while?" "Verily, verily, I say unto you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice; ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come; but when she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for the joy that a man is born into the world. And ye therefore now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no one taketh away from you."

This reveals at once what our Lord was doing when He used this remarkably arresting and final figure of speech in the course of His teaching. He was recognizing their sorrows. He was, moreover, declaring that sorrows to them would be inevitable, as He was a Man of sorrows, and they were inevitable to Him. But He was intending to reveal by that illustration the meaning of those sorrows, and the issue of them. There they were, filled with sorrow, and their sorrow would become yet more profound, would become deeper. They would go forth presently, when He was absent from sight, and especially after He had come to them again, and made Himself a reality as they had never known Him before, they would go out by the way of sorrows. He was speaking to them, He was speaking to His Church, He was speaking to us, of the nature of those sorrows. Then He used this figure.

Let us reverently take the figure He employed. It is the figure of motherhood, in its ultimate function. We read here, "A woman when she is in travail." That should be a definite article, not the indefinite, as we describe the difference between articles. "*The* woman." As a matter of fact He made use all through of what we call the generic article, "The woman." He is using the figure of motherhood in the ultimate functioning thereof. He is using as a figure the travail of a woman, when she goes down under the whelming floods into darkness and agony, and faces death. No profounder figure of sorrow could be employed than that. Do not forget all wars are fought out at last on the heart of womanhood, and the sorrows of the world are consecrated in motherhood.

To me it is a most arresting fact demanding most reverent consideration that the very last time He is recorded to have used an illustration, He adopted this figure. I never read it without feeling somehow He had in mind the Virgin Mother. He was recognizing the fact that His very existence on the earthly plane, in the marvel and economy of the will of God, was due to birth-pangs borne by a woman. I think He knew, too, perfectly well that if Mary, His Mother, had passed through that baptism of agony and death, she had come out into the joy and sunlight, when the Man Child was born into the world. So the figure recognizes a process of sorrow and anguish, the issue of which is deliverance and life and joy. Do not forget the condition of these men, and what lay before them, and their understanding of it. It was the recognition of process and anguish, into the very deep abysmal depths of the shadow of death; but it was a process the issue of which was deliverance and life and joy. He employed this in His last illustration to His disciples and to His Church.

The reference of course is a wonderful one. One cannot read it without the mind sweeping back over the Bible to the appalling mystery of evil in its genesis in human experience. We remember words spoken there by Jehovah to the woman. "Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children." That is the first gleam of evangelical light that shines when sin had entered, when God had whispered, shall we dare to say, into the heart of motherhood the secret of the way of ransom and redemption through suffering, through sorrow; but out of the suffering and sorrow children, new life.

It is interesting to see how this figure is employed in the Old Testament more than once. It occurs seven times in the prophecy of Isaiah (37:3; 49:15, 20-21; 54:1 and 66:7-13). In every case it is a picture of deliverance and life coming through suffering and pain. We find in Hosea (13:13) he employed the figure in describing an experience through which Ephraim must pass, out of which there should come ransom and redemption. Micah employed it also (4:9-10), and in doing so he described an experience through which Zion should reach deliverance through suffering.

When we come to the New Testament, we find our Lord had employed it already by the use of a word. In Mark 13:8, when He was foretelling earth's convulsions, all the troubles and the sorrows and the convulsions of the earth, He said this, "These things are the beginning of travail." The Authorized Version reads, "the beginning of sorrows." That is not translation, it is attempted interpretation, but it breaks down. He used the very word for child-birth, the beginning of travail. Paul, when writing to the Romans (8:22) said, "We know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God." Travail leading to new life; and so the figure, not often employed, is nevertheless found in Old and New Testaments.

In the Apocalypse we find there in the figurative language of the twelfth chapter the picture of a woman bringing forth a man-child through suffering and sorrow.

What does this all mean? Our Lord was showing these men and His whole Church the inevitability of sorrows in His enterprise. I am not referring to personal sorrows peculiar to us; but to the sorrows of Christ Himself, reproduced and carried forward in the Church, Listen to Paul. "To you it hath been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer in His behalf." Or listen to Paul again, in his self-same letter to the Philippians, when he expressed the deep passion of his own heart, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings." The inevitability of sorrows for Christ Himself; and it was only by the way of His sorrows that He came to the way of His joy. "Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." He had never realized that joy had it not been by the pathway of sorrow.

What is true of Him is true for the Church. It is only by the sorrows which are the sorrows of fellowship with Him that she can carry out His enterprises. She must have fellowship with the travail, the birth-pangs, the agony through which men and women are born, and new life comes into the world.

To me one of the most fascinating pages in the Acts of the Apostles is found in chapters thirteen and fourteen. Paul was starting out on a missionary journey, and there we have the account of how he came to Antioch in Pisidia. A wonderful work was done there, but persecution arose. He had to flee, and he came to Iconium. There was wonderful work done until enemies came down, and he had to leave Iconium and he went to Lystra. Enemies followed him there again. It was a wonderful time at Lystra. There he probably found Timothy. But his enemies came there also, and nearly caught him. They cast him out and rained stones on him and left him for dead. I can see him lying there for the time being, bruised, bloody, and broken, left for dead. Then something happened. What was it? Read for yourselves. He was not dead! Presently he gathered himself up, that broken body. What did he do? Did he try to get away from it all, and go farther afield? No, he turned back, and he went back to Lystra, the place where they had stoned him, and then on back to Iconium, and to Antioch in Pisidia from where he had to flee. What did he go back for? He went back to strengthen the Churches, and to show them that what he had been suffering was not against but for the Kingdom of God. He went back to show them, as Luke says, "That through many tribulations we must enter into the Kingdom of God," that the sorrows were the very means of bringing life. Paul was sharing in the birth-pangs out of which new life came. That is but an illustration, but these two chapters tell the whole fascinating story, and grip the soul as a revelation of what Jesus was here teaching His disciples.

Yes, we have our sorrows, but "your sorrow shall be turned into joy." He was not promising them compensation for suffering, that they would have suffering now, and must bear it. They will give you such joy presently, that the sorrows will be forgotten. That is not what He said. He said these sorrows shall be transmuted, turned into joy. The woman when she is in travail knows bitterness and sorrow and anguish; but afterwards she forgets the anguish and sorrow because of the child she holds in her arms, the life won out of death. So with you, said Jesus in effect, and so with My Church.

How much do we really know of what it is to suffer in this way? To revert to something which has often been pointed out. We do talk such insufferable nonsense about cross-bearing. Someone has been ill individually, and suffering, and they say it is a great and bitter disappointment. I do not undervalue the suffering, or underestimate the disappointment. Or someone has lost everything, and they say, We are Christians; we must all bear the cross. That is not the cross. We have never touched the cross so long as our suffering is purely personal. We have only touched the cross when we are in fellowship with Christ, suffering on behalf of others, and suffering that others through our sorrows and our suffering may be brought into life.

O matchless wonder in these simple and yet sublime records of the life and teaching of Jesus, the climax of which is one that shows how all suffering, in fellowship with Him, is of the nature of the pangs of birth, and must issue in the joy of the new life.