**VOLUME 1; CHAPTER 8 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**BACKSLIDING by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*If from thence ye shall seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou search after Him with all thy heart and with all, thy soul.*

*Deuteronomy 4:29*

THIS BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY IS A SINGULARLY BEAUTIFUL ONE. It is not a history. Historically, it covers a period of a very few days, for in all probability these final discourses of Moses occupied only a brief time in delivery. The book is more than it code of laws. All it says had been said already by this self-same man. It consists of the last messages of Moses to the people of his heart. It is prophecy in the deepest and fullest meaning of that great word. It is the forthtelling of the word of God to listening men. It is a poem full of light and full of fire. Here again the words of law are uttered, but in reading one is conscious rather of the driving power of love's great reason than of the binding nature of law's requirement, not that the requirement of law is lowered in one single particular, but that love speaks with wooing winsomeness and tender constraint. It utters the same thunder, but always in the tone of infinite pity. One would be inclined to say that in Deuteronomy we hear the law from the lips of a man who after long years has found his way into intimate communion with the heart of God. It is the Evangel of law. In the pleading tones of the great leader of the people one discovers that the reason of law is love, and if I ever ventured to choose a motto from some uninspired writer to preface so great a book as that of Deuteronomy, I would write Browning's words:

I report as a man may of God's work,

All's love but all's law.

Law is here, but it is the law of love. The text on which I have chosen to speak to you is a supreme illustration of the consciousness of Moses of the tenderness of the heart of God. He had been supposing the possibility of backsliding on the part of the listening people. In the light of subsequent history his words are seen to have been prophetic.

After describing in detail the process of backsliding until the issue of it is revealed, he suddenly breaks out into these words: "If from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul."

My message tonight is to those who are conscious in their own lives of any measure of backsliding. To such persons as the Apostle would address in the words he used when writing to the churches of Galatia, "Ye were running well; who did hinder you?" to those persons to whom Jesus is saying to-night, through the language he used to the Church at Ephesus, "I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love"; to men and women who, looking back on their past days, remember the thrill and passion of discipleship as the supreme consciousness of life, but who now are sighing, "Where is the blessedness I had when first I found the Lord?" to men and women who are conscious of backsliding from their loyalty to Christ and relationship to God.

I beseech you to remember that the distance between yourself and your Lord matters nothing. The first cooling of passion is the tragedy. The final corruption is but a sequence to be expected, and which cannot be avoided save as the first love is restored.

I am speaking tonight to some who have traveled a long distance from the Father's house, to some who seem as though they had lost track of the way that leads them home; or I may be speaking to many others who have just lost their first love, who are maintaining all the externalities of Christian relationship, but have lost the thrill, the fire, the passion, the devotion. Whether to those or to others upon the trackless burning desert of degradation my message is exactly the same.

What is my message? It is in my text. Would God I knew how to say it. "If from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou seek Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul."

First, let us put our emphasis upon the word "thence," for to do so will be to be driven to inquire as to the process and issue of backsliding. "Thence." Whence? And we shall answer the question by reverting to Moses' description, which occupies the earlier verses. Secondly, we will lay our emphasis upon another word in the text, "if," for by so doing we shall see the conditions upon which a man may return. "If ... ye shall seek the Lord thy God ... if thou search after Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul." Finally, we will hear, as God shall help us, the great central song of the text, "Thou shalt find Him."

"If from thence." The ancient message contains striking illustration of the matters concerning which we desire to speak. We may forget all the local colouring and look through to the underlying principles, and in doing so we shall find that a master hand has sketched for us the whole story of back-sliding in every successive age of the world's history. There is no man or woman, young man or young woman, away from the Master whom they once loved and served, be the distance great or small, but that the process described by Moses of old is the process through which they have passed to the place of degradation. The issues he describes are identical with those which always follow the path of backsliding.

What is this process? Mark three things: First, "When ye ... shall corrupt yourselves." Second, "When ye ... shall make a graven image." Third, "When ye ... shall do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord." The first is purely personal, perhaps hidden from men, corruption of self. The second is the sequel to self-corruption, the making of a graven image. Finally, the overt act of evil. What is self-corruption? It is the devotion of the life to something lower than the highest. The first movement of backsliding may be accomplished without committing any sin which the age names vulgar. In the moment in which a man takes his eye from the highest and sets it upon something lower, be the distance apparently never so small, he has set himself upon the decline which ends in the desert and in the agony of rejection. Self-corruption is the first step in the backslider's pathway, the choice of something lower than the highest. What is the highest? The thing you have seen that is highest. That is the highest for you. To you it was the fair and radiant vision of the loveliness of the Christ in those days when you knew He was fairer than all the sons of men, more perfect in loveliness. You saw that, and you turned your eyes from it to something a little lower, to some ideal you built for yourself out of your own imagining. You corrupted yourself when you allowed the false ideal to intrude into the realm of your own thinking, your own desire, your own choosing. That was the beginning of the whole story. Following that is what always follows, the setting up of a graven image. You say, "Here your message breaks down. I have set up no graven image." Remember, the graven image is always the figure of that which lies behind it. When a man has corrupted himself, the issue is always that he thinks falsely of God. Man is so linked to deity in the very essential of his being that he will form his conception of God upon what he is in himself. There is a sense in which, try as he will, he cannot escape this. He is forevermore projecting his own personality into immensity, and calling that God. That is the whole history of idolatry through all the centuries. Man has flung the lines of his own personality into immensity, and called the result God. In proportion as his own personality has become corrupt and evil, he has projected corruption and evil into immensity, and made that his god. When a man corrupts himself, he corrupts the idea of God by putting something false in the place of God. In the old days it was a graven image, so that, as the prophet said, man took to himself a tree or a piece of stone, and carved out of it a semblance, a grotesque imitation of himself, and called it a god. So when a man has corrupted himself by accepting some ideal lower than the highest he immediately makes a god after the pattern of his own ideal, and descends a little lower on this course of backsliding, until swiftly and surely he descends to a course of evil which a little while ago he would have declared to have been impossible to himself. He does the evil thing who never intended to do it. He started by choosing the lower ideal. He proceeded, in the next place, to corrupt deity, by projecting into immensity the false lines of his own corrupt nature, and worshiping that. Suddenly the light that seemed to lure him fades, and the very ideal which he worshiped fails, and he finds himself doing things he never dreamed he could do.

I am trying, as God shall help me, to set the story of your backsliding in relationship to the spiritual and infinite. Shall I put that story in slightly different language? You corrupted yourself in that hour when you ceased your devotion to the God of your mother, and ceased to hand over your life wholly and absolutely to Christ. Your backsliding proceeded when you put into the place of Christ something else. It may have been your business. It may have been your very passion for knowledge. It may have been a far more mean and paltry thing than either of these, your pursuit of pleasure. You put something where Christ used to be. You who once took of your talents, and time, and strength, and poured them out in sacrificial service in the cause of Christ have been worshiping with all the soul, with all the heart, and with all the mind, wealth, fame, pleasure, I know not what. You know. There is your graven image. The result has been that this week, in the prosecution of your business, in the pursuit of your pleasure, you have done things which, if you thought I could proclaim them in your name from this pulpit, would cause you to blush and hurry from the building. You did not begin here. You began with the lowered ideal. You continued with the false deity, and the hour has come in which your hands in the sanctuary are unclean with deeds of evil, and you know your very heart has become polluted. That is the process of backsliding.

I pray you mark the issue of backsliding as Moses describes it here: "I call heaven and earth to witness ... ye shall soon perish utterly from off the land." That is the first thing. "The Lord shall scatter you among the peoples, and ye shall be left few in number among the nations, whither the Lord shall lead you away." It follows, finally, that "ye shall serve gods ... wood and stone." I think there is a sacred, and holy, and tender, and burning satire in those words of Moses. "You," he says, "men of highest vision and noblest passion and fair ideals, men who have seen, but have turned your back upon the vision, you shall serve gods of wood and stone, which see not, hear not, smell not, eat not." That is the issue of backsliding. First, lack of possession. In the case of these people, possession of the land; in your case, possession of everything which you ought to possess. The man who turns his back upon Jesus Christ to possess any-thing inevitably loses it. Take one of the most burning and tragic illustrations in the whole of history, that of Judas. Judas let Jesus Christ go for thirty pieces of silver. Did you ever notice that he never spent one of them? Presently I see him hurrying back to the men who had bargained with him, and in a great intensity of agony I hear him say, "I have sinned in that I betrayed innocent blood." And the cruel mockery of hell is here in the answer of the men who say, "What is that to us? See thou to it," as though they had said, "You made your bargain, abide by it." And he flung down the thirty pieces of silver. They bought with them the potter's field. He never spent one of them. You turn your back upon the God of the land, and you lose the land when you lose the God of the land. You turn your back upon the God Who made you and put you with all the capacities of your personality into this world, and you lose the world into which He put you. I know that is a thing which can be said only by experimental knowledge. I pray that God's Holy Spirit may carry conviction to some man here tonight. You cannot see the flowers if your back is toward God. You can botanize, but you cannot see the flowers. The man who has turned his back upon God has lost his land. He may own it under the laws of his country. He may even shoot over it for two weeks in the year, but he has lost it. The man who has turned his back upon the highest ideal has lost every real thing that comes within his reach. There will be many a weary march, many a hot and eager rush over the desert to reach the blossom, the bloom, and the fruit, but when the hand touches it, it is an apple of Sodom. The man who turns his back upon God loses also his influence and his power. May I say a thing that may sound strange and startling, and ask you to think of it. I can imagine that a man who has never been a Christian can exert some kind of pure moral influence upon his fellow men, but the man who has been a Christian and has turned his back upon God cannot do it any longer. The world holds in supreme contempt the man who has turned his back on Jesus. You have cut the nerve of your influence, backsliding soul. You have become lonely and scattered, without power to help in the world, because you have turned your back upon your God. There is nothing more tragic in the whole wide world than the man who once ran well but has been hindered, and has gone back to the weak and beggarly elements of the world. Oh, the tragedy of it! Think of it. You serve the god you have made for yourself. Worship and service are linked. Service is the expression of worship. Worship is the method of service. There is no escape from this. You are serving your God. You turned your back upon the living God, and set up a god of wood or stone, a god of mist, of vapour, of your own imagination, a cloud that rose like smoke from the fires of your own evil doing. You serve it. The tragedy of this worship, of this false service, is here. Your god cannot see, cannot hear. It is an insensate deity. There is no answer from the thing you worship when you cry to it in the time of fear. There is no sympathy, no heart in idolatry. The god of wood or stone gives no answer to the agonized cry of man, and all the false deities of your rationalism never help you in the tragedy of your pain, never soothe or solace you in the agony of your loneliness. You serve a god that cannot see, cannot hear, cannot taste, cannot smell.

There is nothing so tragic in all London as the backsliding soul. Moreover, if that tragedy is more terrible in one place than another it is in the case of the man who is a back-slider, and is attempting to go on with work for God. The backslider in the pulpit is the supreme agony and tragedy in human life. The backslider in the Sabbath school class, in office in the church, in the church membership, the man or woman who keeps up the external semblance when there is no fire burning upon the inner altar, who compels himself or herself the deadly drudgery of worship when there is no voice of the Spirit in the soul - that man is more to be pitied than the man who has cut himself adrift from the church and gone out into the darkness. There is far more agony in the heart backsliding that lacks the courage to be out and open than in the heart of the backslider that passes outside. I sometimes am afraid that our churches today are crowded with backsliders. I remember Thomas Cook saying to me years ago, "It is almost refreshing to have to go in the inquiry room with a man who has never professed belief on Jesus Christ before." Oh, the tragedy of the men and women who keep up the external semblance of Christianity with no virtue, no dynamic, no passion, no fire!

Is not this the story of backsliding? Did not the agony and tragedy begin when you took that ideal lower than the highest, when in your folly you made your own god because you thought the God of your childhood was unnecessary? Is it not true today that, like Samson of old in his agony, you grind for the amusement of mocking Philistines? The god you have made has no heart, no power, no pity.

My message tonight is to be found in these words, "If from thence." Mark this "if," and see the conditions. "If thou shalt seek." Seek what? "The Lord thy God." The search to which a man is called if he would return from the desert of his backsliding agony is not geographical; it is not circumstantial. He is not called upon to search for lost conditions. Moses did not say, "If you will seek with all your heart the land you have lost you shall find it." That would be a hopeless thing. He did not say, "If you will seek to set up again for yourselves the conditions from which you have departed you will be able to do it." That would not be true in human experience. What, then, is man to seek for? The Lord. Seek for your God. Get back to the conditions by getting back to God. If you are at a distance from Him tonight, at a distance from the light and song and glory of bygone days, do not attempt to regain the light and the song and the glory. Do not waste your time dealing with effects which you cannot correct; deal with the cause. Seek the Lord your God. It was when you turned your back upon Him that you lost your land. It was when you turned your back upon Him that you lost your power. It was when you turned your back upon Him that you became the bondslave of the things which have no heart, no tears, no pity, no sympathy. Therefore, turn not back to the land. Turn not back to the hope of new influence. Turn back to God. "If from thence," from the lonely and distant place of disappointed hope and agony of spirit. "If from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God." How am I to seek? "If," says the servant of God, repeating his "if," and emphasizing its true meaning - "If thou search after Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul." That is, into this search after God, which is to be the way of restoration, man is to put his whole heart and soul. The man who has wandered far away is promised that he will find God, but the conditions are that he shall gather himself up for the business of finding, that he shall put into this search both passion and principle. My brother, are you waiting until some emotion created in a service or a mission, or by some preaching, shall surge upon you? You will wait long and hopelessly, and wait in vain. When you have done with your playing God is to be found. When you have done with your emotional fooling - and I am not proposing to alter that phrase, I am not proposing to take back either the adjective or the noun - when you have done with your emotional fooling, and will put the fiber of your being into the business of seeking God, He will break upon you in light and glory, but never till then. I am not here tonight to tell you that, having wandered away from God, the pathway back home is flowery, easy, or simple. I am not here to tell you that you must be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease. If you are a man you would not thank me for lying to you, even in the name of hope. You must seek God with all your heart and all your soul.

Let us pass to the promise. "Thou shalt find Him." Hear me, and God help me to speak these last few words as I ought to speak them. He is as near to you as He was in the old bright days. It is you who have changed, not He. You turned your back upon Him. He never turned His back upon you. It has often been pointed out that the Scriptures never speak about God being reconciled to men, but always of men being reconciled to God, and the method of the statement is of absolute importance. The moment in which you with all your heart and soul set yourself to seek, you will find God close at hand.

What is this that Moses promises? "Thou shalt find Him!" To find Him is everything. As Philip said long ago, "Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us." Find God, and you have found all that your heart wants. You are crying, "Oh that I knew where I might find Him." You are quite right. If you can find Him there is nothing else. If you seek Him with all your heart and soul you will find Him. Find Him where? Just where you are. Will He come with flaming and flashing glory? In all probability, no. Will He come with some new sense of His coming, making you thrill in every fiber of your being? In all probability, no. It is far more likely that He will come with a still small voice. But you will find Him if you seek Him. To find Him is to find all that has been lost by the process of backsliding. Backsliding began with the corruption of self. The finding of God is the redemption of self. I find myself when I lose myself. There was infinite meaning in the word of Jesus when He said, "Whosoever would save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life ... shall find it." It is in that moment when I set myself to seek God as the first matter in my life, when I crucify myself with my affection and my desire, and will no longer ask whether this thing is for my pleasing, but will give myself to seeking God, that I find Him. To the man who finds the true God, God is enough. Dagon falls to be broken in pieces. The lost ideal and the lost joys are found. Instead of outward and external act of evil, the outward and external act of good becomes the habit of the life, but never until God is found.

The issues are changed. If you will find God you will find the flowers and the land, and the possibilities of your own being. All the grey sky will flash with the purple of morning if you will but find God. To find God is to find everything. Instead of serving insensate deities you will reign in life in fellowship with the living and eternal God.

Let me lay my final emphasis upon these words. "From thence." Are you away from God? And, of course, I take it for granted that every Christian in this house who is not away from God is in sympathy with me, and is praying for the man who is away from God. Are you away, just at the beginning of the backsliding process? Have you within the last few weeks or months turned your eyes from the highest to something a little lower, or are you far away from Him tonight, almost in despair? I want to crave the patience of this whole congregation while I speak to one man. I mean that very really. I do not know where he sits, but here is his letter. I do not know his name, and I do not ask to know it. I am perfectly willing to respect his expressed desire that I will not try to find him. Let me say to this man that this sermon was prepared before I got his letter. I say this for his comfort, for if ever God sent a message to one man by a messenger who did not know the man, it is so in this case. I am going to respect this man's confidence by not reading all his letter, but I am going to read a sentence or two, and I am sure he will let me do it, because, as he says in his closing words, there may be numbers here tonight like him. He is a young man, and tells me that he came to London thinking that religion was a prop for weak people, having his own ideal, which he attempted to follow. Then he tells the story of the loss of the land, the story of the loss of influence and power, the story of actual sin. Then he tells me how, not knowing why, he wandered into this building last Sunday morning, and heard me read about the risen Jesus, and he tells me how, in the light of that vision of Christ, he was conscious of his own degradation. Then he says:

"I crept home, broken down, broken-hearted. This is my tale. Surrounded by people yet utterly alone. There is no one to whom I can go, though my heart is aching and my mind is sick. Can you give me one word of sympathy, one word of hope, or, better still, one word of guidance? I shall be present at your service tomorrow night and all I ask is that you will say something which I can recognize and seize upon for myself. I do not want to be sought out in any way. Let me remain, as probably I am, the type of scores of unhappy men similarly situated."

Can I give you one word of hope, my brother? Yes. If I could not, I would never preach again. What is my word of hope to you? This is it. "If from thence." God gave it to me before He gave me your letter. He knew you were going to write that letter. He led you here last Sunday morning, and brought you face to face with your lost Lord. He gave me that message for you: "If from thence." Just where you are tonight. How I know what it means, alone in the crowd! "If from thence ye shall seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find Him, if thou search after Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul." "Oh that I knew where I might find Him." Are you saying that?

"Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and spirit with spirit can meet -

Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

Man, I am your fellow man, a sinner like yourself. I cannot show you these things. See the vision of my text. Never mind my sermon. Seek Him, seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. Trample your pride beneath your feet. Crucify your prejudice. Put the whole business of your life into this minute, Trust Him, and for you also, or I could never preach again if it were not true, the day will break, and "He will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten." He will restore to you the land. He will put about you the arms of His love, and lift upon you the light of His face, and make you His own. But you must seek Him with all your heart and with all your strength. My brother, I will not attempt to drag you from your place of hiding until you want to come, but though my hand never rest in yours and my eye never look into yours, right there the Christ Whose purity your sin has insulted is waiting to take you back to His heart. Let Him do it. May God bless and help you.