**VOLUME 1; CHAPTER 20 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUND IN THE CITY OF GOD by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.*

*Zechariah 8:5*

ONE ALMOST EXPECTS TO HEAR SOMEONE SAY, "How extremely shocking!" Some people would probably be surprised to know that the Bible says anything about children playing. This verse not only speaks of them playing, but surprises our prejudices by declaring that boys and girls are to play together, and even startles us further by saying that boys and girls are to play together in the streets! If not inclined to say, "How shocking this is!" I can quite believe that many would say, "Well, it certainly is marvellous." The prophet, inspired of the Spirit of God, knew perfectly well that people would say it was a marvellous thing, so he immediately continued, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts: If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in those days, should it also be marvellous in Mine eyes? saith the Lord of hosts" - which being put into other words simply means. The thing which surprises you, that you look upon as marvellous, that almost shocks you, is the very thing upon which the heart of God is set. God believes in children playing, He believes in boys and girls playing together, and He believes in them playing in the streets.

This is a picture of the coming age. I do not mind at all what you call it. Call it, if you will, "the golden age." Call it, if you so please, "the millennial age," or if you prefer to drop back into the language of your childhood, speak of it as "the good time coming." It is a picture of the ultimate victory toward which men perpetually looked in the midst of the battle, of the final triumph which was a constant inspiration of earnest and consecrated service. Ever and anon these ancient Hebrew seers saw glimpses of the coming glory, heard notes of the coming harmonies. These men were not near-sighted. They were far-sighted in a far finer sense of that word than that in which we mostly use it today. They saw so far ahead that the things they saw have not yet come to pass. They saw a Kingdom established over which a King should rule in righteousness and in equity. They saw a Kingdom established in which a King should rule, and - mark well the language - not by the sight of His eyes or by the hearing of His ears: these are the bases of all judgment at the present moment. They very often lead us into error. This coming King is to rule in righteousness and equity, as one who knows perfectly and absolutely all the facts of the case. As these men looked on they saw nature at peace, and in the midst of it a little child at play. Let us notice the picture which my text suggests. Zechariah speaks of Jerusalem, Zion, the Mountain of the Lord of hosts. This is not a picture of heaven. It is a picture of earth. This is not the picture of a land and conditions beyond the clouds to which men will escape from peril and strife. It is the picture of conditions which are to obtain here in the world where today sinning and sighing and sorrow abound. This is the picture of conditions which will obtain when the prayer which Jesus taught us to pray, and which, alas, we too often pray carelessly, is realized. "Our Father Who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth." Therefore I say to you that for a glimpse of the Kingdom that is to come, I do not come to a Sunday service, but to a Saturday afternoon in a park. When I want to form some true conception of what God's Kingdom will be like, I do not go to a prayer meeting but to a playground. I think I have exercised my ministry here long enough for no one to charge me with undervaluing either the prayer meeting or the Sunday service. They are but means to the end, however, which end is the playground for the children. The establishment of the Kingdom of God, the building of His city, the healing of all wounds, the realization of all the forces that lie in human life, at their most perfect condition; all that, and more, is by suggestion within my text. I know there are discrepancies in both, but in the park and the playground you are nearer the Divine ideal for child life, and I come there, not because that exhausts the meaning of the coming Kingdom, but because it is the only thing like it today. If I come into commercial life, I find there very little like the Kingdom of God. In the commercial world "in that day shall there be upon the bells of the horses, HOLY UNTO THE LORD." That is a poetic figure of a great philosophy. If I come into the law courts today I find very little like the Kingdom of God. They are doing their best, but it is a very poor best. If I come into the political arena I think I see there men striving after the ideals of the Kingdom, yet we are in prison still, and hampered by the god of mammon. If I want a glimpse of the Kingdom upon which I can base all my interpretation, I haste me to the playground. Be patient with me if I make that personal. If I want my own heart to understand God's coming Kingdom I turn my back upon my study and get to that other room, which is as far from the study as I can put it, where all the noise is, and get amongst my bairns. There I am nearer to the Kingdom than ever I am in my study. Zechariah was a stern prophet, who had no soft things to say in the presence of iniquities; Zechariah was a poet who saw the coming glories. Reading his writings up to this point, you can hardly think of him as having time for a child, and yet suddenly, out of his deep heart, illumined by the glory of the coming days, there sings into the ear of all the centuries the most poetic description of the Kingdom that I find in the whole of the Old Testament. "The streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof."

I draw your attention, first of all, to what this text reveals as the thought of God for the children. Let us imagine for a moment that we are not in London. We will transport ourselves to that Kingdom which is to be, and to that city which the prophet saw. In that city we see, first, that God's ideal for the child is that the child shall play. It is a very significant fact that all the millennial references to the child are references to the child at play. "The sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the basilisk's den." That wonderful day when "the lion shall eat straw like the ox," and the wolf and the lamb shall lie down together in perfect peace, will be the child's playtime. Have you ever taken a child to the zoological gardens, and have you ever been strangely perturbed by the child's deep anxiety to climb over the rails and get in amongst the polar bears? It is a Divine instinct. The child wants to be where God intended it should be, and where God means it to be presently, at play with all the lower animals. "A little child shall lead them." It is the child at play, the child in the midst of nature, set there to play. I charge you that you do not whittle down this word "play" until you have spoiled it. Ruskin says, "Play is an exertion of body or mind made to please ourselves." I think that is a perfectly accurate definition, but I do not think it takes in all the facts of the case. May I suggest that play is work. If you do not believe me and you have a boy four years old, stay at home from business one day, and from morning till night do everything that boy does. I very distinctly remember about a year ago, when one of my boys was four years old, he requested me to play horses with him. I agreed to do so on condition that he be the horse and I the driver. My garden at Norwood runs down in terraces, and I let him go wherever he liked; it is good to let young horses do that. He went to the bottom by one path, turned round and came up again. I had already had enough, but I let him go on. He went down and up that garden six times, and then I said I must go into the house for a few minutes - and I was there an hour. What is play? Play is work which is not a task set. Play is work, not for profit, but out of pure delight in the exercise of strength. I wish all the young manhood would remember that. Whenever you put gain or profit at the end of play you demoralize the play. The child has no thought of profit in play. It is work, not as a task and not for profit. God's ideal for the child is that it shall play, and the characteristics of a little child at play are merriment, earnestness, pity, defence of the weak. Watch natural and healthy children at play and you will find that all these things are manifest in the midst of the play.

If I may carry this a little further I would say that God's ideal for the child is that it should play itself into its work. We talk about the kindergarten system as though it were something we had recently discovered, as though we owed it wholly to Froebel. Here it is in Zechariah. He was a long way ahead. We are getting there perhaps sooner than he thought, but there it is - the children at play. If you watch children by careful, loving, tender watching, they will play themselves into the work for which God made them. In this age of collectivist thinking it is good sometimes to reassert the law of the individual, and every individual ought to be able to say concerning his or her life work, "To this end have I been born, and to this end am I come into the world." That is true, not merely of the poets, dreamers and statesmen, but also of the men and women whom we sometimes insult by saying they do mean things. There are no mean things if they come out of the capacity of the man who is doing them. If a little child learns its work through its play, all through the strenuous years you will find the man playing at his work. I do not mean playing with his work or doing it indifferently, but that it will be a delight to him. When work is what it ought to be in human life it is not a task set, not some-thing done for profit merely, but something done for the sake of the thing done. I have been in a carpenter's shop and seen a man at the bench making some plain piece of furniture, and looking at it and touching it with love as he saw it developing under his hand. That is the real carpenter, brother to Jesus of Nazareth. If you find a man who loves his work he will have as secondary motive under it all the two things for which Paul says we are to work, the support of himself and his family, and to have something to give to him that is in need. Beyond that, work is done for the sake of the work, but children never come to that unless you give them their chance to play. You must begin with playtime for the children. That is God's ideal.

Then notice, further, that there is in the text a revelation of the fact that it is God's purpose that boys and girls shall play together. I can quite imagine that some very good people out of this age, if they could be preserved until that day dawns, and came to this city and saw boys and girls playing together, would think everything had gone wrong, that some catastrophe had happened. I walk round among our schools today and I see over one door "Boys," a little further on I find another door marked "Girls." Presently I come to the "Young Men's Christian Association," and a little farther on I see the "Young Women's Christian Association." We have been doing all we can to keep them apart. We are all wrong. God said boys and girls are to play together. Wherever you find that they do so, naturally, purely, perfectly, you will find that the strength of manhood strengthens womanhood, and the refinement of womanhood refines manhood. That is the perfect family in which brothers and sisters grow up and play together. That is God's ideal. The streets of God's city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.

If that be so, we may go yet a step further, and upon this foundation truth of God's purpose for the child and God's ideal for the child build the conditions of public life. This text is an index to the conditions of public life in the coming Kingdom. If in God's city boys and girls are to play in the streets of the city, then the streets of the city will be fit for the boys and girls to play in. Think what that means in the very simplest way. As Christ makes the child the type of character in His Kingdom, so the child comes to be the test of public life in the city of God. Everything in the life of the coming city will depend upon the little child. Everything will be carried forward in the interests of the little child. Among other things, the streets will be fit for children to play in. Said Isaiah, another of these prophets, "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain." What a city that will be where there will be nothing in the streets to harm little children, physically, mentally, or spiritually! When you have a city with streets fit for children you have a city with streets fit for adults. If the child is safe everyone is safe. Let us walk in imagination through some of the streets of the city of the King. I shall find nothing that can harm the child physically. In that city the drainage will be perfect, and the traffic and everything else will be watched by vigilant eyes for the sake of the children. You can dream your dreams around that. You tell me this is not the Gospel. Then what in the name of God is it? These children whom God loves and speaks of in the terms of playtime in His coming city are to be safe, and the measure in which children are safe in our streets today is the measure in which we have seen this ideal, and are working toward it.

As we walk through the streets of the city of the King, I notice in the next place that in no single shop window can I find any impure literature. On no placard station can I see a bill announcing an amusement, the very bill suggestive of evil and calculated to inflame the passion of a child or youth. No unholy picture can be found. The love of the child will be greater than love of gain. That is the truth about the city of God.

As I go through these streets of the city I find no man ready to pollute, young life, no man standing in the shadow of the sanctuary or of the public house watching for his chance to lead a boy who is hardly a youth into the ways of betting and gambling. By no means. In the city of the King the dictum of Jesus will be in operation and the man who is found causing a little child to offend will have a millstone hung about his neck, and be drowned in the depth of the sea, while angels rejoice. There will be nothing anemic and sickly in the city of the King. Righteous wrath will be manifested if anything is done to offend, or cause to stumble, one little child. The streets of the city are to be fit for the children.

Let us go one step further. It seems to me that my text not only reveals to me the purpose and thought of God for children, not only reveals to me what the conditions of public life are to be in the city, but it casts its light upon the home life in the coming Kingdom. It is not only true that the streets are to be fit for the children, but equally true that the children are to be fit for the streets. There are children who come from very respectable houses who pollute the streets by their presence. There are children, proud, despotic, selfish, and, alas, too often impure, to turn whom out to play in the streets would be to defile the other children. I am not blaming the children, for wherever you find such children the blame must be put back on the home from which they come. A child always reflects the home from which it has come. That legend which you hang up in your homes, "Christ is the Head of this house, the unseen Guest at every meal, the silent Listener to every conversation," will be a living reality in that Kingdom. In homes where these things are believed and acted upon from break of day until the sun has gone westering you will have children that you may turn out into the streets who will not harm the streets or pollute them. In the city of the King the home life will be what it ought to be, and out of the homes will come children whose obedience has been won, whose trust has been inspired, to whom high ideals have been presented, not so much by precept as by the practice of those who have had charge of them, children who know God because they have seen Him in the fatherhood and motherhood which has been round about them. Coming out into the streets they will live and walk in the power of all that home has meant to them - children fit for the streets.

If there is one thing tragic in this city it is the picture of the children who have no playtime. What you call their play-time is for some of them opportunity for deeper debasement. Why? Because our streets are not fit for the children, because we have never yet put a little child in the midst of us in our civic affairs and set everything else round the necessity of the little child. I am perfectly well aware that we are struggling toward it, but it is so slow because we have never seen it clearly. Sometimes one's heart is gladdened spiritually, religiously, by things that seem to be very far away, and yet are near to the heart of God. I remember seeing a while ago what came to me as a vision of God's coming glory. I was at the very end of Cheapside, close to the Bank and the Exchange, and suddenly I saw a policeman, a great, strong, muscular representative of the force of the law, raise his hand and hold up all the beating, surging traffic to take a wee bit bairnie by the hand and lead it safely across the street. By so much as we have learned to do that we are coming nearer to the Kingdom. But, oh, my masters, how much there is still to harm the life of the child in our streets. You who listen to me tonight dare not turn your children into the streets to play, but there are children playing in the streets who have no other place to play in, and in the hearts of all children there is capacity for good and the love of the beautiful just as much as in the hearts of your children, if you will find it.

I will tell you a story at second hand. A month or two ago the first Minister of Works of the present Government was walking in St. James's Park. Two or three children were playing there, one of them a girl with tousled hair, dirty and unkempt. The minister of works looked down at this child and said, "Why do you stay here? Why don't you go over there into the Green Park, where you can play on the grass?" The bright eyes looked up into his, and she said, "There are no flowers there." Oh, if we could hear these things! I am not arguing for flowers over there, or if I do argue for them it is that they may gladden the children. Let us see deeply into this thing. You and I have a responsibility about our streets for the sake of the children. You care nothing for political parties? So much the better. You care nothing about Moderates or Progressives or Municipal Reform? So much the better; but do you care for the bairns? I have figures and statistics which we have been gathering, for we are trying to find out what we ought to do. Do you know such things as this? Right here under the shadow of this church - I begin there for this is our responsibility - there are at least 132 houses in which, on an average, three or four families are crowded together. These bairns must come out into the streets to play, and the streets are not fit for them, and the homes from which they come are not homes that make it likely that their coming will be a blessing to the streets. Are you content to say you have nothing to do with all these things? Say at once you have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God. Say at once you have no interest in the bringing in of that great and glad golden age toward which seers have been looking, and of which psalmists have been singing. You like to look on to that great day and to sing of it, but I think that the men and women who have not shared the travail that makes His Kingdom come are very likely to be shut out of the Kingdom when it does come. I want to lay upon you the burden of this great and terrible responsibility.

I am told there is nothing we can do, or that what we can do is so little. You are not responsible for all that has to be done. You are responsible for the thing that lies next to your hand. You are responsible, first of all, to see to it that whatever you have of influence, whatever you may have of influence, whatever lies at your disposal by way of influence, you ought to take hold of and use in the interest of, I will not say the Kingdom of God as a far distant thing, but of the little child in the streets. What about the children who are not orphans but are worse than orphans? What about the children who are in sorrow and sore need round about us in our own parish? In our parish there are thirty-four public houses, every last one of them a centre of death, an instrument for spoiling childhood. There are portions of these streets of Westminster close to us which are nameless as to their condition. You put the blame upon the police. I put the blame finally upon the Church of Jesus Christ.

These men of old, these prophets, how they toiled and strove, how they entered into every department of human life with their messages and their fire, and inspiration, and daring and suffering and blood. What matters it that they never saw the city, if they saw it from afar? They set their faces toward it and died in faith, not having received the promises, and yet the promises would be much longer postponed if they had not so suffered and toiled, and had not so striven. So I say we are working, not merely for the present hour, but for all the future. We are working with the little child before our eyes, determined as the moments come and go to strive and toil and suffer to make the streets fit for the children, to see to it that they have homes out of which it is possible for them to come with some suspicion at least of what morality, cleanness, and uprightness really mean. There is no bairn in all this crowded district that is not as near to the heart of God as the little child you laid to rest in its cot at home. There is no boy who is not protected from the rain and hardly dare go home, and who will become a sharper on the street, robbing you on every hand - there is not one such who is not referred to by Jesus when He said, "It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish."

I say to you tonight that our responsibility as a church and as Christian people for this district must begin there. I am not saying all that is in my heart. I am not saying all I know, but I am making an appeal to you for your interest in prayer, and presently in very definite work. Under the shadow of this church close at hand stands a man day after day, a bookmaker. He has been fined again and again, and he pays a fine as I pay a license to keep a dog, and comes back and carries on his nefarious practices. I am told that we must let these things alone. My answer is that the devil said to Jesus, "Let us alone." Christ's answer is our answer to all these things. We will not let it alone. It is our business not to let it alone. A way must be found by which these men shall be removed, and it be made impossible for them to stand around luring our children to destruction. It is very little we can do. In a few years at least the majority of us will have gone out to the great Beyond, but let us do something. Let us, at any rate, come to close grips with the devil. Let us leave the impress of our fingers somewhere on him, or else let us be ashamed to look into the face of Jesus Christ when the day breaks and the shadows flee away.

Our city is not the city Zechariah saw. The streets of our city are not ready for the boys and girls to play in. It is our business as we take our way through this life of probation and toil and discipline to see the ultimate, and to consecrate ourselves to that great and holy conflict which at last is to issue in victory. I pray that we may make what application of the study of this verse is necessary for our own new inspiration to new consecration to the thing that lies very near at hand.

"Where shall I begin?" says some man. in your own home. "How shall I begin?" Set the millennium up in your own home. "How can ""I do it?" Crown Christ there. I do not mean theoretically, sentimentally. I do not mean by singing about Him or praying to Him, or reading the things He said; but by the realization of His ideal there for your own children, and by realization of His ideal in your home as Master and Lord and King. Every home so consecrated, and so realizing His ideal, is a contribution toward the building of God's city. We may begin there, and yet to begin and end there is not to fulfil our responsibility. We must go beyond and what we cannot do singly we must do together. As the host of God we must say to the civic authorities and to all the powers that rule the city's life, "These rulings and governings of yours must be in the interest of the child." If that can be established then I have no further care about the youth and maiden, man and woman, about the aged and in-firm. We will begin with the child. God help us to hear His call to us about this district through the plaintive need of the child as it expresses itself to all who have eyes to see, and ears to hear, and hearts to feel.