**VOLUME 2; CHAPTER 16 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**FAMINE FOR THE WORD OF GOD by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it. In that day shall the fair virgins and the young men faint for thirst.*

*Amos 8:11-13*

TECHNICALLY, THE PROPHET AMOS WAS AN UNTRAINED man. He declared, "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees." In the language of our age, he was a layman. Yet Amos was a prophet in the one and only sense of the word, as again his words indicate in the verse following the one just read, "And the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto My people Israel."

His prophecy as preserved for us is unique in its method. None other of the Hebrew messengers adopted exactly his plan. He spoke finally to Israel. He began, however, far away from Israel, and gradually came nearer, until he spoke directly to Israel. His first message was concerning Damascus. Then in turn he spoke to Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Moab, and Judah. At last he came to Israel, and if his words had been burning words to the nations lying about, they were scorching, flaming words when he spoke to Israel.

The message of Amos had for the men of his time a twofold significance in addition to its direct words spoken to them. First, it revealed the fact that God maintained His government of all the nations, and not merely of Judah and of Israel. In the second place the message of Amos made it perfectly plain to those who had ears open to hear, that privilege creates responsibility, for the mildest things he said were said to Damascus, the farthest away, and the fiercest things were said to Israel.

The words of my text constitute the final statement of the judgment that is falling upon Israel. There is to be a famine, not of bread or of water, but of the Word of the Lord. There is to be consequent upon this famine a great restlessness. Men will travel from sea to sea, from north to east, striving to find the Word of the Lord, and will not be able. There is to be as the issue of this restlessness the absolute failure of the finest and best in the life of the people. "The fair virgins and the young men faint for thirst." This is a new word in the prophetic message. Judgment has been described oftentimes as the coming of a sword, as the coming of a plague; but this man sees more deeply, and announces judgment which is no longer a material judgment, but a spiritual one; speaks to them no longer of the locusts and the fire and the plague and the sword, but of the lack of the Word of God. That, according to Amos, is the final fact in God's judgment upon a guilty people. Not the thunder of cannon, not the march of armies, not the devastation of lightning, and thunder, and hail, but of famine of the Word of God.

We shall think of three things: first, the famine suggested; second, the restlessness ensuing from the fruitless search; and, finally, the issue in the fainting of the fair virgins and the young men.

First of all, then, this famine of lack of the Word of the Lord. I think, brethren, we need to be very careful in reading this message to understand its true meaning, or we may fall into an appalling mistake upon the very margin of our consideration. The prophet did not mean to say that there would be on the part of God a capricious withholding of His Word. He did not mean to say that the famine would be because God did not speak, or because God had nothing more to say to men. That is a surface interpretation, and I believe it to be as false as it is pernicious, and as pernicious as it is false. His description of the famine indicates rather a condition of man in which he is incapable of discerning. The difference is essential and radical. Not that God ceases to speak, but that man loses his power to hear. Not that God withholds His Word from men, but that men hear it, and never hear it.

What, then, is this condition of being without the Word of God? No message from the unseen that man hears or recognizes, or believes in. No word speaking to the deeps in a man's life. No authority laying its command upon the life. That is famine of the Word of the Lord. Think of these things in separation from the line of our study for a moment, and ask whether any men are in that condition. Are there men who say there is no message from the unseen, men who never hear the voice that speaks to the deepest and profoundest thing within them, men who live upon the surface of things? If so, they are men living in the midst of a famine of the Word of God. No consciousness of the infinite, no ear that catches its music, no heart that feels its thrill. That there are multitudes of such it is impossible to deny. What, then, is the reason?

In the case of this message of Amos, what was the cause of the famine? "They that swear by the sin of Samaria, and say, As thy God, O Dan, liveth; and, As the way of Beersheba liveth; even they shall fall, and never rise up again." The sin of Samaria was the worship of the calf. The men who swore by that calf and said, "As thy God, O Dan, liveth," were the men who passed into the place of famine for the Word of God. The substitution of the creature in any form for the Creator, constitutes incapacity to receive the Word of God. If a man shall substitute nature for God, a priest for God, a ceremony for God, then, though the Word of God be speaking to him by a thousand voices, he hears none; though the light of God flash on him from every point of the compass, he walks in the darkness; though all the mystic influences of the Divine immanence are about him; he is unconscious of them. No voice, no virtue, no vision, no victory, a famine of the Word of God, because a man has stayed with something short of God. It is possible there is someone in this congregation who is living in the midst of a famine for the Word of God. It may be even as I attempt to deliver the message there is nothing in it for you. Words, empty words, a meaningless occasion, an opportunity for curiosity. You are in the midst of a great famine, famine for the Word of God; and the reason is that you have compelled the capacity in your life which ought to take hold of God to cling to something short of Him. As Paul puts it in writing to the Romans, you have substituted the creature for the Creator, and having fastened your life upon something short of God you have become hardened to the touch of God, unconscious of the fact of God; and though His Word is living and quick and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword, it fails to affect you.

The sealing of the Bible always follows idolatry, and the issue of such idolatry is famine, and the result emaciated, emasculated humanity. I am sometimes told that the Word of God has been sadly neglected for many years - and, alas, I am sure it is true, but it is declared that the reason is that men outside the Church and within the Church have been indulging in what we speak of as Criticism, Higher and Lower. Nothing of the kind. The thing that has sealed the Word of God to the believer is the believer's unbelief and disobedience and idolatry. If we could rid ourselves of our idols, the famine would be over, and the Word of God would be living to us again. It is our own idolatry that robs us of the consciousness of the living sustenance of the Word of God.

But follow on, and notice how the prophet describes the fruitless search. He says, "They wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; they shall run to and fro to seek the Word of the Lord, and shall not find it." How does that apply in our own day? You may make the statement in another form. Wherever a man has lost his capacity for the Word of God, cannot discern it, does not hear it, does not appreciate it, almost ceases - hear me carefully in this apparent contradiction - almost ceases to desire it, wherever that is true, there results in the life of that man, woman, community, a great ceaseless searching restlessness; and I believe that the restlessness of our own age is due to the fact that our age is in the midst of the famine of the Word of God, a famine following upon its idolatry, national, social, and individual.

But is there such restlessness? Think with me for a moment. I maintain there is an ignorant restlessness. By that I mean a restlessness that does not understand itself in any measure, and I believe that that ignorant restlessness which is unconscious of the meaning of its own fruitless search is that of nothing less than a search for the Word of God. Men do not know it. They would not so name it; but every attempt to satisfy the life without God is in the last analysis an attempt to find the Word of God. I suppose the old illustration, the most familiar perhaps, the most sublime in Scripture, is the natural one that comes to the mind at this moment. Paul's great word to the Ephesians, "Be not drunken with wine, wherein is riot, but be filled with the Spirit." What did the apostle mean? Why link these two things together? Because they are bound together, because in the underlying meaning of the attempt to get some kind of satisfaction out of wine is the cry of the soul after God. And all the restlessness of this ignorant age is the panting of the human heart after the Word of God. There are men and women running from north to south - from north to east, to be true to the figure of my text - from sea to sea, from land to land, in ceaseless, roving restlessness. What do they want? Ask them and they tell you, some new sensation, some new thing, some new thrill. What do they really want? They want the Word of God, they want God Himself, communicating to them through the Word that they may find the sustenance of their spiritual life. Oh, the restlessness of the worldling in London, as understood from the upper spaces, is the panting of the heart, in ignorance, after God. In such ignorant restlessness God is not recognized, and no sin is admitted. God is not talked of. It is a little out of date to talk of God among such people. They dismiss the word. Religion is taboo! God is not named, and sin is never mentioned. There is a great famine in the land.

But then there is a semi-conscious restlessness in this age, and you will find it in all the attempts to substitute something that is seemingly religious for God, and the Word of God. We are hearing a great deal about the new thought in religion. The whole movement, including Theosophy and Christian Science, what is it? It is a fruitless search after something to put into the place of God. It is the cry of the soul after God. It is semiconscious; but do you want to know wherein lies the radical famine of all these new things? I will tell you in two sentences. God without government. Sin without guilt. God, oh yes, we believe in God, but not in the God of the throne, and the God of the white light, and the God of holiness, and the God of government, and the God Who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, and the God Who can by no means look upon sin, and the God Who claims the whole strength and mind and passion of a man. Not that God, but some sickly, sentimental ideal which is the God of these new movements; and the supreme revelation of their idea of God comes in that second sentence of mine, sin without guilt. Sin, oh, yes, it is the under-side of good! It is the necessary shadow cast by light! It is a process in the evolution of the race! It is an infirmity, and the man who is a sinner is more to be pitied than anything else. Sin, oh, yes, but no guilt. The man is not to blame. There is to be no terror in his heart as he thinks of God. There is to be no shame in his face as he thinks of sin. And all these things are the false substitutes of a semi-ignorance, and they leave the heart hot and restless, wandering in the deserts, seeking for the Word of God. But I want to say to you tonight that a doctrine of God that leaves out government never gives the heart rest, and a doctrine of sin that does not admit guilt never heals the open sore of humanity's wound. There is no rest. It is a fruitless search.

But I am afraid I am bound to go further, and say that there is a conscious search after God which yet finds no answer. Our age is full of the lust of people who call themselves spiritual for new things. New preachers, new movements, new setting of truth, forsooth! God is honoured with the lip, but not with the life; and even among these people sin is lightly, slightly treated. You say, "What do you mean by that?" I mean this. I know some people who would have me think of them as being pre-eminently spiritual, who are marvellously particular about the tithe, and mint, and anise, and rue and cummin, who have signed pledges not to touch everything they do not care much about, and yet who are forever-more neglecting love and charity and rightness, and the things which are the things of the holy God. And I think this last state is the worst of them all, because there is more light and less obedience among these people. In the midst of the famine they finger the Word of God, they do despite to it by making it minister to their own preconceived notion, never hear its deepest note, never catch its profoundest sound, never measure their lives by it. It is a poor business, and they are living in the midst of the famine, a famine for the Word of God.

Do you hear what Amos says: "They shall run to and fro to seek the Word of the Lord, and shall not find it"? This is perfectly true. Materialism is a perpetual lust, an unanswered agony of desire. Sensualism is a deadly opiate. Novelty is a pernicious irritant. It is a fruitless search. There is no substitute for the Word of God, directly heard by the spirit of man and obeyed. Restlessness is fever. Fever is a destroying fire.

I turn, finally, for a moment to the last thought. What is the issue of it all? The prophet speaks of the fair virgins and the young men; and you see at once, beloved, that that is a superlative method of treating his subject. He does not say a word of the effect produced by the famine of the Word of God upon the full-grown man, tending toward arrest of development. He does not say a word concerning the effect of the famine upon the aged, merging toward the shadows where the light ceases. He chooses the fair virgins, the young men, those who are the strongest and best, the most hopeful, those most able to endure. He takes them as illustration, and he makes his illustration absolutely superlative by his choice. Not, I repeat, the man who is in the midst of the battle, and presently expects to lay down his weapons. The prophet does not speak of the effect of the famine upon this man or upon the age, but upon the fair virgin, with the bright and beautiful cheek, and the lustrous eyes, and the light of hope. The young man with the strength and vigor of his young manhood upon him, the youth for whom the fingers of morning are ever busy, laying on their gold and vermilion. These, what of them in the day when the Word of God fails, what of them? They shall faint for thirst. If I may venture with all reverence to put the statement of the prophet into another form it is this, that the best without God fails, that the finest capacities lacking their true inspiration faint and pass and perish. It is a superlative illustration, a daring one, an arresting one, one that has appealed to my own heart as I have prayed and thought of my message.

Follow the issue naturally. If this be true of them, what of the rest? Where the Word of God fails, what happens? Morning is overcast, noon is a tempest, and night is starless. And yet - oh, the terror of it! - we tremble if we hear of the possibility of an army's invasion. We blanch with fear if we think that plague is about to visit our shores and our cities. We are afraid of the failure of the harvest. But when we speak of the famine of the Word of God, even we who name His name are in danger of being interested and nothing more. And yet the greatest disease that can come to a nation, the final judgment of a nation, the thing that presages its decay and disintegration and downfall, is famine of the Word of God. Find me a nation largely composed of men and women and little children who do not hear the voice, or see the vision, or feel the touch of God, and I will find you a people marching to ruin, despite their armaments and their policies, and their banners and their boastings. "Lest we forget." It was a prophetic word. "A famine of the word of God," carelessness about what He says and thinks, with a restless search after something, which does not understand the meaning of its own endeavour, and ends only in the hectic flush and the devouring fever. I am bound to say that I think we, as a nation, are living right there. There has been a famine of the Word of God.

Now hear me as I utter my final word. The prophet of today, like Amos, cannot, if he climb the mountains of vision and see from God's standpoint, be blind to the sins of other nations; for he can never forget that God is the God of all the nations. The prophet of today will see quite clearly the cruelty of Russia, the frivolity of France, the rationalism of Germany, the civic corruption of America. But the prophet cannot forget the relation of privilege and responsibility, and he cannot forget the fiery, burning, searching words of his Lord, that it is to be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for the cities that heard His voice, Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida. Russia will have a far better chance in the final judgment of the nations than England, because England has had infinitely more light. Feeling as I do that the thing rests almost as a burden on my heart night and day that we are living in the midst of a great famine, not of bread, but of the Word of God, what is this famine? It is a curse upon our idolatries. Do not forget that, like all the curses of God, it is an effect following a cause. God never curses capriciously. The curses of God are the harvests of man's own wrongdoing. If we have lost our sense of the Word, and our love for the Word, and our confidence in the Word, and our appreciation of the Word, why is it? It is God's judgment, but it is an effect following a cause. To turn from the cause will be to disannul the effect. And how shall we turn from the cause? By turning from our idolatries to the living God. You notice the emphasis I am inclined to put upon this, which I think is the prophetic emphasis. I am not saying we must turn to the Word of God to be corrected from our idolatries. I do not think that is the order. We must turn from our idolatry to find the Word of God. If we are gathered to study the Word of God we had better begin by putting our idols away. The Word of God will be a sealed book to me, though I desire to teach it, unless my idols are set aside. Granting, for the sake of my argument, that the teacher himself has defined his relation to God, and the idols are broken down, and God -reigns in the life, he can-not teach it to you if idolatry remains in your life. Holiness guards the wicket gate to the Word of God. As it is true that if iniquity be in my heart, God will not hear me, it is equally true if iniquity be in my heart, I cannot hear God. The first condition for the study of the Word of God, the fundamental condition, the absolute condition is not the intelligence of the schoolman; it is the clean heart, and the pure soul, and the temple in which no idol lives or hides. If the idols are broken down, if we are governed absolutely in the temple of God by the will of God, then there is no famine in the land. God's Word flames with light, and thrills with power, and is food for the hungry soul as much as ever. But you can read it, study it, analyse it, tabulate it, and remember it, and die for lack of it if in your heart the idols remain, and the impure thing abides. May God in His infinite grace and mercy and power take His own message out of all my words, and speak it to your hearts.