**VOLUME 3; CHAPTER 17 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE PROBLEMS OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE: IS THE RELIGIOUS LIFE POSSIBLE? by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

THIS IS THE QUESTION OF ONE WHO DESIRES TO LIVE THE religious life, but who is afraid. I do not think that a man who sees nothing attractive in the religious ideal will ever ask that question. It is rather the question of one who considers that the teachings of Jesus constitute, to borrow the great Roman Catholic phrase, counsels of perfection.

The question is the result of conviction: first, of the ideal requirement of God, that what God requires of a man is the perfecting of his life; and, second, of the strength of the forces that oppose. Such a man, standing between the ideal and the opposing forces, asks, Is it possible to be what God would have me be in the presence of these forces that are against me?

The question is not only the result of a conviction, it is the result of doubt. It is the result of doubt as to the power of Christ. I am not saying that such doubt is sin. It is honest, sincere, but it is doubt of the power of Christ when a man says: There is the ideal, here are the forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil; you, Christian preacher and Christian people, tell me that Christ is able; well, honestly I am not sure! It is doubt of the power of Christ.

Sometimes the doubt, while being of the same nature, is of another accent. It is doubt of the salvability of man. That is an awkward word, an old theological word. We can do very well without it, but we cannot do without the idea that it suggests. Doubt as to whether it is ever possible for a man such as the inquirer feels himself to be to reach the height of the Divine purpose and plan. Can I ever be what God wants me to be? Is it possible for such as I am? I say it in order to touch a sympathetic chord in the heart of those who are asking the question, there are hours in my life today when that doubt comes to me. I can believe for other men more easily than I can believe for myself. Sometimes it seems far more possible for God to deal with other men than to deal with me. There are hours of heart-searching and examination, when I ask myself, Is it possible that I shall ever be what God wants me to be?

Our answer to the inquiry is, first, that the Bible teaches that the religious life is possible, and also that human experience agrees with this teaching of the Bible.

Let us take that general statement and deal with it from two standpoints. I first affirm the possibility of living the religious life by declaring that in the economy of God it is made possible. Second, I affirm that because it is made possible in the economy of God it is possible in the experience of man.

The religious life is possible in the economy of God because of the nature of man, and because of the nature of God. In a previous address we came to the conclusion that man has something to do with God because God has everything to do with man. In other words, that man is in nature such as to make possible the religious life, that God is in nature such as to make possible the religious life on the part of man.

When I speak now of the nature of man I am not referring to it as I find it today. I am speaking rather of essential human nature, human nature according to the Divine creation. Such human nature we know only as we know Jesus of Nazareth, "Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness," was the Divine word, according to the Genesis story. Where is this being? I cannot find him in London. I cannot find him the world over. I cannot find him in human history, read it where I will. Yes, I find him, but not as God made him, not as God meant him to be, not according to the pattern. Once and once only I meet Him in the process of the centuries. In lonely, superlative, imperial splendor, one figure rises above all the rest, the archetypal Man, that which was in the heart of God when He said, "Let Us make man." I am kin of that Man. My humanity is His humanity. I prefer to put it that way than to say His humanity is my humanity. My humanity is His humanity. In Him I see most clearly that man has essential capacity for the religious life. Man is capable of knowing God. Man is capable of loving God. Man is capable of obeying God. Let me examine these matters a little more carefully.

Man is capable of knowing God. There is in every man the capacity for the knowledge of God. If you question that, let me begin upon a very low plane. I will come to the very lowest of all. The consciousness of the supernatural is in every human being, the consciousness of that which is over the natural, above the natural, beyond the natural. That consciousness expresses itself in some of the races of men as we know them today in the strangest ways, in ways that we may look upon with contempt. Here is a man in the heart of Africa who has travelled hundreds of miles driving cattle before him to trade with a white trader, and suddenly in consternation he refuses to trade. Why? Because he finds out he has left behind him what we call his fetish, a little piece of stick, a bit of leather, an absolutely worthless thing, but it is that man's symbol of the supernatural, of that which lies beyond the material. That poor African says, I cannot trade with you, I must go back; and he will tramp back, hundreds of miles, in order to obtain his fetish. And we laugh at him! I would that people who believe in God had always the same honesty of conviction. The trouble is that a great many professing Christian people will trade cattle without God when the African will not trade cattle without his fetish. That is a low level of consciousness of the supernatural, ignorant and foolish, and the cultured man laughs at it, pities it, holds it in contempt; but it is evidence of an instinct which goes far out beyond the base, and beyond the material. Let me put the same thought in other words: every man knows the infinite! You deny me that at once. You say, No, that is what no man knows. Finite man cannot know the infinite. What is the infinite? Your answer is that the infinite is that which has no boundaries, no limitations. In that answer you reveal the fact that you have thought it; and in your thinking of it you know it. No dog knows the infinite. The moment in which you have gråsped the conception of that which is limitless, boundless, as to time or place, your mind has encompassed that which you can never understand, fully and finally, but you know it. Listen to the word of the old writer, "God hath set eternity in their heart." That is the capacity for knowing God Himself. Jesus said, "This is the life of eternity, that they should know Thee, the only true God, and Him Whom Thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." I am not suggesting for a single moment that all men know God. I am affirming that in every man there is capacity for knowing God. Man can talk to God and hear Him speak, hold communion with Him and know in the deepest of his inmost soul the fact of His being. Man is made for God. That is the light that lighteth every man. It is the strange, mystic, inward capacity for God which is of the very nature of God.

So far I have only spoken of the lowest evidences of light. What is the highest? "Our fellowship is with the Father." The man of the world is just as ready to smile at the fetish of the African; but his smiling does not alter the absolute fact that in this house there are men and women who know experimentally the meaning of that word, "Our fellowship is with the Father," men and women who still, to use the figurative language of the ancient writing, talk to God face to face as a man speaketh with his friend. Although you deny the assertion, you cannot deny the light that sometimes lingers on the face, the light that never was on sea or land, the light that made the face of your mother gloriously beautiful in spite of all your cynical scepticism. Men and women hold fellowship with God. I am not describing that fellowship, but only affirming that the capacity for it exists.

There is also capacity for love. The lowest form of that capacity in religious application is selfish love of safety, the thing that makes a man say, "What shall I do to be saved?" That is the lowest form of love. The highest is the selfless love of sacrifice. Here is the lowest form of love to God, "He loved me and gave Himself for me." You say, That is very high. It is indeed infinitely higher than any other love we know of, but it is yet selfish love, quite proper, perfectly right, but self-centred. God generates it in the heart by dying for men, therefore it is worth generating, but it is the lowest form. If you want to know the highest form of that love here it is, "I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake." That is the ultimate form of love for God. Every man is capable of this love, of this going out of the soul in adoration. Give any promiscuous audience today one hymn to sing - whether North, South, East, or West; in city, or village, on land or sea, I care not - you will find that hymn will touch a responsive chord in the heart, even though it be forgotten a moment afterwards;

Jesu, Lover of my soul,

Let me to Thy bosom fly.

I never hear that hymn sung by a great crowd of men, women and children - hundreds of whom sing it without understanding it - but that I am conscious for the moment they are singing it on wings uplifted. Without their knowing it, they are giving supreme evidence by that emotion of man's ability to love God. There is capacity in man for love of God.

Then there is capacity in every human being for obedience. The lowest manifestation of it is duty, and the highest is delight. I say the lowest is duty. Duty is high, noble, beautiful, but it is the lowest relationship that the soul bears to God. We have been told often, and rightly, of the nobility of duty; but after all is said and done, we have never entered into the highest heights of spiritual experience until we have cancelled the word "duty" and substituted the word "delight." "I delight to do Thy will, O my God" - that is infinitely more than duty. Duty, yes, but duty transfigured on the holy mount until it becomes delight, the delight of doing the will of another. The capacity for that is in every human being.

Thus to see man in the essential fact of his nature, capable of knowing God, of loving Him, and of obeying Him, is to be convinced that it is possible for man to live the religious life.

That, however, is finally demonstrated by a consideration of the nature of God. What is the nature of God? You may express the whole fact in one word, and I choose so to do, and then to take two thoughts in elaboration thereof.

"God is love." That sounds very commonplace because we have said it so often. It has become so familiar that no preacher can say it and hope to move an audience by the declaration of it, unless as the poor sounding words fall from his lips they are baptized into power by the presence of the Holy Ghost. "God is love." Love is not attribute. Love is essence. Love is to everything else in God what character in a man is to the characteristics of a man. Do you ever write a character for a man? Some man has left your employ, and you say you will give him his character. You cannot write his character. You do not know his character. You can write two or three characteristics, you cannot write his character. You may have a very accurate estimate of a man's character. That estimate is formed by the observation of his characteristics, the different expressions of his essential nature. As are the characteristics of a man to his character so are the attributes of Deity to His essence. Mercy, beneficence, holiness, righteousness, are all expressions of love.

The religious life is the life that is bound to God, the life that is obedient to God. Is it possible? It is possible because He, being Love, seeks on the part of man for such action and attitude as is for the best and highest for man himself. What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. My dear old friend, Margaret Bottome, the founder of the order of King's Daughters, told me of a child who was asked that question and answered it accurately, and then the teacher said, I wonder if you can tell me what the chief end of God is! To glorify man and enjoy him forever, answered the child. Rarely have theologians come so near the truth! What glorifies God in me? All the best that can ever come to me. It is when I reach the highest in my own life, when my intellect takes in the widest sweep and most accurately knows the details; when my emotional nature is under the sway of the mightiest love; when my volitional nature is most full of authority because most perfectly under control; that God is glorified in me, because He is Love. He never forgives in man anything that harms the man. What is that which you have to give up to be a Christian? Something which is spoiling you. God is as fierce as lightning against it. Why? Because it harms you. At the back of the thunder are the tears. Behind the awful fire is the tremendous love. If only we can get to know God we shall see the possibility of the religious life, because we shall find that He is Love and is set upon our well-being.

Take out of that great essential and final fact these two matters. First, because God is Love He is patient; and if you want to understand that, think of the relationship between father and child. Second, because God is Love He is reasonable; and if you want to understand that, think of the ideal relationship between the perfect king and the subject of such a king. Patient. A father is interested in the development of his child, and therefore is patient with the feeblest effort of the child toward the ultimate perfecting; and is gentle in his method. The feeblest little child in your home is the one who interests you most. You are interested in it as you see it growing up, developing, and, oh, the delight of your heart at the strange, mysterious sounds that it makes when it tries to talk. Mothers can always understand the baby language. I will tell you something if you will not tell the mothers. I do not believe babies say half the things mothers say they say! But that is a man's ignorance. If I have got some of you back home, face to face with your youngest child, that is what I wanted. Do you know that what you feel toward that child is in kind what God feels toward us? There is nothing elegant in the walk of a child before it can walk; but is it not the most beautiful thing in the whole world? I have been watching a wee bit lassie trying to walk on my lawns at Mundesley. There was nothing elegant in it, but there was poetry in it, music in it. All that I feel about my bairn is a dim shadow of what God feels about me. There is nothing elegant in my walk as a Christian man. It is clumsy, awkward, bungling in the sight of heaven, but "like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him." Patience with the feeblest effort issues in gentleness in method. That was a great word of the psalmist, "Thy gentleness hath made me great." What is gentleness? George Matheson once wrote a little article in one of the religious periodicals. I cut it out and still have it somewhere. I cannot remember the exquisite, poetic wording of it, but the thought of it is with me now. Said George Matheson, we speak of gentleness and often do not understand it. We speak of the gentleness of the brook as it ripples through the summer fields. There is no gentleness in the brook. It is going as hard as it can, and all the strength it has it is exerting to make the pebbles rattle. You may speak of gentleness when you stand beside the mighty sea on a summer day, and when in its mighty strength you see it kiss the shore and bathe the feet of the child who is paddling. Gentleness is strength held in reserve. God's gentleness makes men great. Think what He could do and think what He does. Think how He lays His hand upon us in our feverishness as tenderly as the sunbeam falls on the face of a sick child. The sun could blast to a cinder, but it kisses to health. "Thy gentleness hath made me great," That is God.

Then there is the reasonableness of God. He has perfect knowledge of every one of us and He demands only that we fulfil the real purpose of our own life. He never asks anything that we are unable to give Him. The trouble is that we set up false standards and imagine they are God's standards. The first great word of the prophet to the sinning people of old was, "Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord." He never makes demands upon man that man is not equal to answering.

By the nature of man who is capable of knowing God, of loving God, and of obeying God; and by the nature of God Who is love, and has patience, and is reasonable, I submit to you that it is possible to live the religious life.

In conclusion, let us mark the conditions. Look at man as he is. His nature is perverted. He does not know God. He does not love God. He does not obey God. You say, Ah, now you are coming to the real difficulties. These are the real sources of the question, Is the religious life possible? Very well, let us face them. Man does not know God. The carnal mind does not know Him, neither can it. Man does not love God. He is afraid of Him, hates to hear His name, escapes from the man who talks about Him, avoids the places of His worship, and taboos the subject of religion at his dinner table. Man does not obey God. He does not take God into account when he goes into business.

Yet to such men there come voices of truth concerning God, visions of the ideal concerning themselves. Then they find not only that their nature is perverted, but that it is paralyzed, and each exclaims, "When I would do good evil is present with me." Is the religious life possible to a man like that?

The answer to the inquiry now is the answer of the Christian evangel. First of all, how does God answer that inquiry? I go back to one of our earlier subjects. Can a just God forgive sins? Without going again over the arguments, I repeat the affirmation that He can. He can be just and the Justifier of him who believes in Jesus. If that once be accepted I want you to see what it leads to. God can pardon sin. What does that mean? The pardon of sin means a new vision of God. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." In the moment in which a man's sins are forgiven and he knows his sins forgiven he sees God as he never saw Him before. You can listen to me if you like quite theoretically, but I make this affirmation on the basis of experience and testimony. There has fallen asleep this week a man whom I loved with my whole heart, a man who has been an inspiration to me in this chapel over and over again as I have preached. Ned Wright, as you know full well, forty years ago was a prize-fighter and a burglar, and, as he himself would have admitted, just about as low down as it was possible for a man to get. I cannot tell you all I am thinking about him. I have seen him sit over yonder on Wednesday afternoons, and in the Institute Hall, as I have lectured on John's Gospel, and on no face has there been a more glorious light; and when one came to speak of God, and the love of God, and the ways of God, his face shone with the brightness of an angel. When did all that begin? Forty years ago, when he knew his sins forgiven. Up to that moment he had feared God and hated God's people, and kept away from them; but with the forgiveness of sins came a vision of God and he came to love Him. Have you had that vision of God? It was that vision which made Scheffler write:

O God, of good the unfathomed sea,

Who would not give his heart to Thee?

That is where the religious life begins. The forgiveness of sins always means a new vision of God. You have thought of God as a King, a Potentate, mighty, awful, terrible, exacting; but He says in your deepest soul, when you have put your trust in Him, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," and you find He is tender, gracious, loving. Out of that knowledge comes the religious life.

Pardon not only means a new vision, it also means as a result of it, love. To see God is to love Him. Then it means desire to obey Him, for to love God is to desire to please Him. Mark the order and see how everything comes out of that first fact of forgiveness. Man knows his sins. The forgiving word is spoken in the innermost recesses of his soul as he submits himself to Christ. He sees that God is love and he loves. Then he desires to serve and obey. That is the passion of the religious life.

The answer of God is not merely pardon. It is power immediate and progressive. The moment in which a man yields himself to Jesus Christ and receives pardon of sin power is at his disposal. It does not work mechanically, however; it must be appropriated. Whereas there is all power at my disposal, it is only at my disposal as I make adjustment. God puts power at the disposal of the soul that trusts in Him, but we have to make contact, to obey, to put ourselves in line with His condition.

That leads me to the last word I want to say. What are the conditions on which the religious life is possible, in view of the pardon God gives, and in view of the power He provides? First, an act of abandonment to Jesus Christ. Then an attitude of abiding in Christ. There must be a moment in which I take my life and hand it over to Christ, God's Son and my Saviour, sent forth from the Father for the doing of this work. After that I must abide in that attitude of abandonment. I am not saved today because I believed twenty years ago. I am saved now because I believe now. There must be not merely the act by which the life begins, but the abiding by which the life continues.

The religious life today in the midst of present limitation is the life which has found its true centre, and which is adjusting the circumference to that centre. There is a great deal to be done, a great deal to be learned, many disciplines to be passed through, a great deal to be accomplished ere the work is done. There are tenses in the Christian life. It is perfectly accurate to say we were saved then, pointing to a date, an hour, a place. It is perfectly accurate to say, We are being saved, the continuous process, It is quite accurate to say "Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." The final stage is yet ahead.

In the presence of limitation, the life religious is the life which has found its centre in God, and which through struggles, through strain and conflict and stress, is adjusting the circumference to that one centre.

The psalmist said, "My soul followeth hard after Thee: Thy right hand upholdeth me." I sometimes think, in some senses, that is the most wonderful verse in the Bible. "Followeth hard" is one word in the Hebrew. It quite literally means, impinges upon Thee, clings, adheres, abides fast, clings! It is the strongest of words, indicating tremendous effort. Now listen, "Thy right hand upholdeth me." The Hebrew word "upholdeth" means sustains, holds fast. I can take these two Hebrew words and translate with perfect accuracy, "My soul clings fast to Thee: Thy right hand clings fast to me." No violence is thereby done to the text. That is the real thought. That is the religious life. The soul clingeth fast - conscious of perils, the world, the flesh and the devil, all the forces that are against it - clinging fast to God; and all the while this great assurance, "Thy right hand upholdeth me." Remember the religious life is life centred in God, and occupied earnestly, definitely, about the business of putting the circumference into true harmony with the centre. That is not done in half an hour. It will never be complete until in the rapture of the morning of the second advent He will fashion anew even the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of His glory. I cannot yet be perfect at the circumference, but I can be right at the centre.