**VOLUME 6; CHAPTER 11 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**JUBILATION IN DESOLATION by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*For though the fig tree shall not blossom, Neither shall fruit be in the vines; The labour of the olive shall fail, And the fields shall yield no meat; The flock shall be cut off from the fold, And there shall be no herd in the stalls; Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

*Habakkuk 3:17,18*

THIS IS AN ARRESTING TEXT. THERE IS RHYTHM IN ITS movement and a vividness in its description which compel our attention, yet that which is most impressive is the contrast between the conditions described and the experience claimed. The conditions are these:

For though the fig tree shall not blossom,

Neither shall fruit be in the vines;

The labour of the olive shall fail,

And the fields shall yield no meat;

The flock shall be cut off from the fold,

And there shall be no herd in the stalls,

And the experience is this:

Yet will I rejoice in the Lord,

I will joy in the God of my salvation.

The earlier part of the text constitutes one of the dreariest pictures man ever drew. To summarize in a word, it is the picture of a scene of desolation. Yet that is preliminary, it is the introduction to something that is to follow. As we read the statement through, we find that the figure in the foreground is radiant and exultant, and all the dreariness in the background serves but to fling up into clear relief this figure in the foreground. As we proceed, we discover that the dirge is but the prelude to a plan, and if we summarize the conditions by the one word "desolation," we may express the experience by the one word "jubilation." This is the mystery, the arresting wonder of the text, that these two things are brought together, jubilation in the midst of desolation. If we were reading this for the first time, or if we found it in any other literature than this, we should be driven to inquire, Was this man a fanatic? Was he deluded? Or did he speak a wisdom of which this world knows nothing when he crowned the song which describes desolation with the song which expresses jubilation? We believe that this is a song of the higher wisdom, and that the singer was a philosopher in possession of the true secret of life.

Let us observe at once that he did not begin on this level. I turn back to the opening of this prophecy, and I find the same man speaking in other terms and in other tones:

O Lord, how long shall I cry, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto Thee of violence, and Thou wilt not save. Why dost Thou shew me iniquity, and look upon perverseness? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there is strife, and contention riseth up. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore judgment goeth forth perverted.

That is the tone with which the prophecy begins; yet it ends with the song of jubilation in the midst of circumstances of desolation. To that matter we shall return again presently.

Having affirmed our belief in the wisdom of this man, let us consider the ground of his confidence as it is suggested in his psalm; and let us consider the joy of his experience as it is expressed therein, and then turn again to a consideration of that process of faith by which he rose to this height from the depth which is revealed in the opening of the prophecy.

First, then, as to the ground of his confidence. At the head of the third chapter of the prophecy of Habakkuk we find these words: "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, set to Shigionoth."

We are at once arrested by this strange, mystic, suggestive word "Shigionoth" at the opening of the psalm. There have been many opinions concerning the meaning of this word. It has been suggested that it was a description of poetry that was almost incoherent, a series of expressions having little connection with each other. In that suggestion there may be an element of truth, but it is by no means finally satisfactory. The word is found in only one other place in our Bible, and that is over Psalm 7, where it appears in the singular form, whereas in this case it is in the plural. In a comparison of these two psalms we cannot now indulge, but such a comparison reveals two qualities which seem to be quite opposed and yet to be an underlying unity. Dr. Thirtle, in a recent volume on the Psalms, has suggested that the title means loud cries merely and that the thought must be interpreted by the nature of the psalm. In Psalm 7 we have the loud cries of a man who had passed through a period of pain and anguish and trial, and was celebrating his deliverance therefrom. If we take the whole of this psalm of Habakkuk we shall find that it is a series of extollations of God.

Its first great note is the uttering of the name of Jehovah:

O Jehovah, I have heard the report of Thee and am afraid;

O Jehovah, revive Thy work in the midst of the years.

The prayer is, "Keep alive Thy work" rather than "Revive Thy work." This opening cry was the prophet's reply to the revelation which had preceded it. Let us go back briefly over the whole prophecy. Habakkuk was confronted by the problem of prevalent anarchy; he declared that there was no justice, no equity, no right dealing; and out of the midst of his overwhelming sense of the iniquity of his own times he cried to God, and, in effect, he said, Why art Thou doing nothing? God answered him in the secret of his own soul, as He declared to him, I am at work, but if I told you what I was doing you would hardly believe Me. I am employing the Chaldeans, people outside the covenant, as My instruments to punish My own people. When the prophet heard this, with new astonishment he argued with God, How canst Thou employ a man more wicked than these Thy people in order to punish them? Then he said, I will away to my watch tower and wait and see! And while he waited God declared to him the true principle of all life: the puffed up soul is destroyed, but the righteous live by faith.

This is the history of Habakkuk's triumph over the appearances of the hour. The man had cried to God, and God had answered him. Now he said:

I have heard the report of Thee, and am afraid:

O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years.

The method of that work I cannot understand. I thought Thou hadst forsaken us. I made my protest. Thou hast told me how Thou art working, and I am still puzzled! But, O Lord, keep alive Thy work, even though I do not understand its method and cannot observe its secret. "In the midst of the years make it known, only in wrath remember mercy."

Then, immediately following this opening prayer, there is a great psalm of worship of God:

God came from Teman,

And the Holy One from mount Paran,

and so in mystic sentences, many of them defying all our attempts at exposition, he rose to the heights of Divine contemplation and extollation; until at last from the heights, turning his eyes again to the desolation, he said:

For though the fig tree shall not blossom,

Neither shall fruit be in the vines;

The labour of the olive shall fail,

And the fields shall yield no meat;

The flock shall be cut off from the fold,

And there be no herd in the stalls:

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,

I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Thus out of the midst of adverse, perplexing circumstances the prophet had been brought face to face with God, and in communion with God he had reconsidered the present in the light of past history and of the presence of God. If you will examine the psalm at your leisure you will find that while there are things in it which defy exposition, this man was clearly looking back, reviewing the way along which God had led His people, even to that hour of darkness and difficulty. As he looked back and remembered the way along which God had led them, he said, in spite of all the desolation, my heart shall be filled with rejoicing, and I will extol God.

Can we not see some of the things that were presented to his mind? Attempting to put ourselves back into his place, to stand side by side with him in the midst of the desolation already apparent, and presently to be even more so, I think we can discover some of the sources of his confidence.

This song is in the future tense; the prophet was describing the terrible desolation that would come with the coming of the Chaldeans. How dare he rejoice? It seems to me that these are some of the arguments which produced his joy.

First, he knew that if everything were destroyed, God is able to create anew all that shall be needed for the sustenance and fulfilment of life. To grant the first miracle of creation is to see that everything is possible, that even the desert may blossom as the rose, that even the high mountains of difficulty may be brought low, that even the deepest valleys of life may be lifted to the height of the everlasting hills. That is the simplest proposition that the man of faith will make when his eyes are turned from the oppressive circumstances of the hour to God Himself.

As this man reviewed the history of the past he was warranted in believing that God was able to send supplies from sources other than he knew. Although the fig tree shall not blossom, nor fruit be in the vine; although there be no promise of spring, although all that we have done shall wither and produce no fruit, God is able to supply our need from resources of which we know absolutely nothing. Habakkuk would remember the way God had guided His people; he would remember how in the wilderness, which the great Leader Himself had described as a great and terrible wilderness, God had hidden resources; that quails were supplied, and water provided from the flinty rock. This prophet would remember also the experience of another prophet, who in the reaction after a tremendous victory sat beneath the juniper tree and said, Let me die, and not live. And he would remember that in that hour of strange desolation angel ministers brought him bread and water. Consequently he said in his heart, God can supply all that is needful from resources of which we know nothing, and this song was the result.

Did he not also know as he sang this song that God was able to multiply the little and make it last through the distress? That was the wilderness experience, in which the shoes of the pilgrims did not wax old. That had been the experience of the widow who found that the little meal in the barrel and the oil in the cruse had never grown less until the distress had passed. Or may he not also have argued that, if there should be no supply of his need, no meeting of the physical need of the people who put their trust in God; if He created nothing new, sent no supplies from sources other than he knew, if He did not even make the little last till the distress were overpast, then, if necessary, God could sustain without food?

Unbelief springs in the heart of this congregation when the preacher suggests that; but it is unbelief! Sight will never believe such a thing possible when faith affirms it. Faith does not affirm that to be the ordinary method of God; faith does not declare that it is likely God will sustain men without food; but faith does declare that it is possible for God to do so. This man would remember how Moses on the mount for forty days had been sustained, how Elijah on Horeb had been sustained, and he would say, Although all physical means of support and sustenance are denied, I will rejoice, for if it be necessary for the fulfilment of the Divine purpose and the carrying out Of the Divine intention, God - and the emphasis must always be there - is able to sustain life even without food.

Yet I do not think that this method of argument created the full inspiration of the song. It was the song of a man who, having seen all these things, yet rose to higher heights. It was the song of a man who had come to the conviction that although all these things should fail, God Himself could not fail. It was the song of a man who but a little while before had imagined that God was inactive, indifferent, but who had discovered in the process of honest communion with God that He was active in spite of the appearances of the hour. He had discovered God anew in communion, and now he rose to the height of this great song, and declared that although material support of life should be withdrawn entirely, yet in God is still found fulness of life, a complete joy, permanently satisfying, and absolute and undisturbed peace. Rising above the surrounding desolation, he extolled God, and chough in different language, expressed exactly the same philosophy as did Job when, in a moment of rare illumination, he exclaimed, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

In the second place, let us consider the joy of this man's experience;

I will rejoice in the Lord,

I will joy in the God of my salvation.

His knowledge of God produced his confidence in God, and that confidence in God immediately and inevitably produced joy. The words he made use of are remarkable words; "I will rejoice in the Lord." I hope I shall produce no shock when I translate them literally. Take the first Hebrew word and express it quite literally, and this is it: I will jump for joy in the Lord. Take the second of the words and translate it with equal literalness, and this is it: I will spin round in the God of my salvation. Does that seem as though I were spoiling a great passage? I think some of these passages need spoiling in this way in these pre-eminently respectable days when congregations are shocked if a man say Amen! Exuberant joy, bounding joy was this man's experience, and in these words we have such joy expressed. This was no cool, calculating word. I will jump for joy in Jehovah, I will spin round with delight in the God of my salvation. Do we know anything of that emotion in the midst of desolation, not when the ordinary activities of everyday life are prospering, but when it seems that there is the most calamitous failure everywhere, no blossom on the fig tree, no fruit on the vine, the labor of the olive failing, the flock gone from the field and the herd from the stall? It is all Eastern; I should hardly know how to express that in the language of London, but you business men know. Perhaps we might employ a modern word, bankruptcy. Everything gone, yet will I jump for joy in the Lord, I will spin round with gladness in my God. I believe that one thing the Church most sadly lacks toay is exuberant, buoyant joy in the Lord God. I do not forget that a woman laughed at a king who danced before the Lord; but I thank God that the king danced before the Lord. This word of Habakkuk was compelled by the joy that sprang within him. This was not imitation joy. It was that of a man filled with delight even in the midst of circumstances of desolation.

If I have thus laid my emphasis on the nature of the joy, let us carefully mark the sphere of the joy. "I will rejoice in the Lord." "I will joy in the God of my salvation," not in circumstances but over them, not in the part that is seen, but in the whole that faith alone can comprehend. Not in circumstances can I rejoice oftentimes, but if I have this clear vision of God it is given to me to rejoice over them; if I simply look at them my heart will be depressed, filled with a sense of sorrow; but if I see the whole, the ultimate, the unveiling of the purpose of God; if I really believe that the bud may have a bitter taste but sweet will be the fruit; if I have seen God and know that His purpose is a purpose of great love, then surely I may triumph over circumstances, not in self, but in God.

That takes us to our last consideration, that to which I referred at the beginning, and on which I have touched incidentally. How did this man climb to this height from the level on which he began? The whole value of this prophecy on the side of human experience is its revelation of a process. As a revelation of the method of God it is a most surprising prophecy and one which we need to study. So far as man's experience is concerned, the prophecy is of value because it shows the process. How did Habakkuk arrive here? First, through doubt in which he was absolutely honest; second, through trial in which he waited; finally, through communion and the revelation of a secret which he obeyed.

First, through doubt in which he was honest. The picture presented at the commencement of the story is that of prevalent anarchy, the silent God and a man doubting. Let no man be angry with Habakkuk for doubting. I would utter a paradox: it is only the man of faith who really doubts. There is no room for doubt unless you believe in God. Blot out God and everything is certain, mechanical, fixed; twice two are four - and you may as well be buried. If the eye has ever been lifted, and the soul has ever been conscious of more than the dust, then there must be the hour of questioning - if you are afraid of the word "doubt." What is God doing? Why is He so silent? That is where this man started. Forgive me if I modernize my story. He did not then start a society of men who had found relief in doubt. He did not talk to other men about his doubts. He talked to God about them. That was his first step toward the heights. If a man is oppressed by the difficulties by which he is surrounded, if he talk to the dwellers in darkness he and they will abide in darkness. If, on the other hand, he will tell the doubt to God there will always come an answer. That is the way of triumph, that is the first upward step, that when a man doubts God he tells God so. That is fine agnosticism. Habakkuk in the midst of doubt, and he said, O Lord, how long shall I cry of violence and Thou dost not answer?

The answer was very surprising, so surprising that we cannot understand the surprise until we get right back into the Hebrew atmosphere and realize the exclusivism of these people. God said, Behold, the Chaldeans; I am bringing them to do My work, I am employing forces outside the covenant. That was the first answer. If some of us will begin in the midst of a dark outlook to talk to God like this, telling Him we cannot understand what He is doing, it is very probable He will give us the same answer: Do not try to measure all My going by the statistics of the Christian Church; find Me at work beyond the borders which you think have confined Me. We still say that God must do everything through His Church. He wills to do so; but if the Church fail, God cannot; and He will then gird some Cyrus outside the Church, and employ the very wrath of men outside the covenant to praise Him, and make the remainder to be restrained. So this man beginning in the depths dared to speak the thing he thought, that God was not at work, and this was the answer.

Second, he found his way higher through trials during which he waited. There was the approaching foe, the Chaldeans actually coming; presently they must sweep over the country, and everything must lie in desolation. He looked on the coming desolation, and saw that God was acting, but he could not understood God's method. What then did he do? The most difficult thing of all:

I will stand upon my watch, and set me up upon the tower, and will look forth to see what He will speak to me, and what I shall answer concerning my complaint.

I have complained that He is using the Chaldeans, I know He is doing it; I will wait the interpretation of events in explanation of the mystery that I cannot fathom. I will wait. I think some of the apparently simple injunctions of the Bible are the most difficult to obey. Take this one: "Be still, and know that I am God." It sounds so simple, until I begin to do it, and then I find that it is the hardest thing in the world to be still. The most perfect exercise of faith is to wait, to wait patiently for Him. That is what this man did. I will look forth to see what He does. I will wait.

In that waiting God came again, and said to him:

Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for the appointed time, and it hasteth toward the end, and shall not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not delay.

God thus said to the waiting man, I will give you a secret that will enable you to wait; I will strengthen you in the process of your waiting. This is the secret: "Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith." That was the secret of all secrets. The final step Co the heights is that of communion with God, and a secret given, which must be obeyed. The righteous shall live by faith. Apply the principle, Habakkuk, to all that puzzles you. Yonder are the Chaldeans coming, the scourge of God; they are coming in pride, their soul is puffed up; know this, they cannot abide, they also must pass and perish. I will make their wrath to praise Me, and the remainder restrain. Let the principle of your life be faith, and you shall live … a great word without any qualification, because qualification almost invariably lessens the grandeur. My righteous shall live by faith.

Immediately the word was spoken the man answered it. He believed and rested on God, with no explanation of the circumstances in the midst of which he found himself other than the declaration of the overruling of God, the abiding government of God. He experienced no amelioration of the conditions, desolation was imminent, but the song reveals him acting on the secret whispered to his soul; and there rose loud cries of rejoicing, extollings of God, and all this out of the rapture of a soul that by faith had taken hold on God, and knew - if I may use New Testament language to interpret Old Testament experience - that "to them that love God all things work together for good."

This is a study of Old Testament times. Let me, therefore, quote to you from the words of a New Testament apostle:

We have the word of prophecy made more sure; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the daystar arise in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of private interpretation.

Peter was here thinking of the vision of the holy mount, and referring to all the ancient prophecies, he declared that in Christ they were made more sure. The great principles revealed in this Old Testament story abide, only to us they have been made more sure in Christ. In Christ we have the ratification of everything we find suggested in this psalm of ancient Hebrew time.

Let us be personal and particular in the case of our own need. This is not a message primarily for those who are in circumstances of prosperity, and who see light everywhere. Let them rejoice in the Lord for prosperity, and walk in the light by His fear. Some are in circumstances of adversity, confronting apparent desolation. I speak with such, and in all tenderness and all reserve, not out of an experience which is in perfect harmony with that of Habakkuk. I do not think I have ever risen to his height, but I see the glory of it. Can we rejoice in the midst of desolation? All the arguments in favor of his rejoicing are made more sure for us by Christ. Suppose all be swept away on which we depend. Our Master is able to create for our sustenance. He has resources of which we know nothing out of which He can meet our need. He can lay His multiplying hand on five loaves and two fishes so that they will meet the need of thousands. He can, if it be necessary, sustain without bread. If all these things are to fail, and by reason of this failing, this transient physical life of ours shall droop and wither and die, yet there will be infinite music in our Master's word to us: "I am with you alway." If Habakkuk of old could rejoice in God revealed to him, as by comparison in the twilight only, how much more may we rejoice in Him as He has been revealed to us in the grace and truth and glory of the only begotten! "Rejoice in the Lord, and again I say, Rejoice."

How shall we rise to this height of triumph over all circumstances? First, by recognition of the fact that amid the prevailing conditions which appall us Christ is at work. Is not our Master making this appeal to us today, that we trust Him even though He seem to be using strange instruments? Let us see the goings and victories of Christ, and dare to affirm them as such, even though we may not have been the instruments in His hands for the winning of these victories.

To summarize our meditation in a final word, What is the value of it? I would state it thus. Our joy is in proportion to our trust. Our trust is in proportion to our knowledge of God. To know Him is to trust Him, To trust Him is to triumph and excel. May we be led into fuller knowledge and so find fuller faith and so enter the fuller joy.

Then shall we be able truthfully to sing:

Though vine nor fig-tree neither

Their wonted fruit shall bear;

Though all the fields should wither,

Nor flocks nor herds be there;

Yet God the same abiding,

His praise shall tune my voice;

For while in Him confiding,

I cannot but rejoice.