**VOLUME 7; CHAPTER 21 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE NEARNESS OF GOD UNRECOGNIZED by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not.*

*Genesis 28:16*

A PREACHER OF A GENERATION AGO INTRODUCED A SERMON ON Jacob's dream by saying, "A long journey, a hard pillow, an uneasy conscience, and a heavy heart. These are the things that make men dream." If that be the natural explanation of the dream of Jacob, the supernatural value of the story is that through the medium of the dream God impressed Himself on the mind and the heart of this needy man.

I see no reason to doubt the suggestion that the dream of Jacob was very natural. After the long journey he was weary; the locality in which he halted for the night was characterized by lack of beauty, by rocky fastnesses, and barren, almost desert, expanses; the hillside swept up in terraces. As the man laid his head on the hard pillow of stone, the only kind available, what more natural than that, as he fell asleep, the strange stuff that dreams are made of should borrow the appearance on which his eyes would most likely last rest, and people the terraced hillside with angelic beings? And what more likely than that a man who believed in God as Jacob did and never ceased to do, whose father had believed in God as Isaac did and had never ceased to do, and whose grandfather Abraham had been a man of venturesome and heroic faith, what more likely than that such a man in such an hour in such a dream should imagine that God Himself stood by his side?

I say the dream is perfectly understandable and quite natural, for in every dream there is the foundation of previous experience and an added something that we cannot account for by previous experience. We can always find the first reason for our dreaming in the things through which we have been passing, and in our dreaming we always find matters introduced which seem to have no relationship to anything through which we have passed.

That recognition of the naturalness of the dream does but make it the more remarkable that God used that which was thus a perfectly natural process of the human brain, and made it the medium through which He impressed Himself on the soul of a man, and brought him to new comprehension of the fact which I venture to say he had always believed in intellectually.

It is not with the dream itself that we are proposing to deal now, but with the waking consciousness of the dreamer, especially with that aspect of it which was new and resulted from the dream. If, however, you will allow yourselves to call up this old story, which I venture to imagine is one of those which you remember most clearly, because in all probability it formed one of the foundation stones of that Biblical structure which your mothers gave you in the days of long ago - if you will recall the circumstances, you will see what I mean when I speak of the new consciousness of the man. When Jacob lay down to sleep that night he had no immediate, direct, actual consciousness of the nearness of God. When he woke in the morning he said, "Surely the Lord is," not was, "in this place; and I knew it not," not I know it not. Mark the tenses, they are all suggestive. The new consciousness was of the fact, not that God had been there the night before, not that God had visited Jacob in the night, but that God was there at the moment: "Surely the Lord is in this place," The new consciousness, moreover, was one of Jacob's past ignorance, "I knew it not." On arriving here last night after a long and weary journey, tired and lonely, homeless and exiled, wondering and perplexed, I did not know God was here. I lay down to sleep without knowing it, without any thought of it, without it playing any part in my final resolutions or adjustments of life. "I knew it not."

Now let me invite you to follow me in a meditation on some of the thoughts suggested by this exclamation of Jacob when he awoke in the morning after the strange and wonderful dream of the night. First let us consider the fact which Jacob discovered that night, "The Lord is in this place." Second, let us consider the unconsciousness of the fact which he confessed, "I knew it not." Third and finally, let us think of the discovery of the fact to him, how it came about, and what it meant.

First, then, as to the fact discovered. The whole matter may be stated in a very brief sentence. That night, by the impression made on his soul in a given locality and in certain clearly defined circumstances, Jacob came to discover what we speak of as the omnipresence of God. That is a phrase with which we are all familiar. It is a phrase of the theologian which has become a commonplace phrase in Christian experience. This was the hour in which Jacob came to actual, practical consciousness of the fact of the omnipresence of God, and it found expression in his case in language that spoke of God, not as omnipresent, but as being right there where he was.

That is the Biblical doctrine of God. It is impossible to conceive of the God revealed in the Bible without at once admitting the fact of His omnipresence. As is the case with every great essential truth of revealed religion, there is one classic passage in the Bible in which it is most clearly set forth. All the great doctrines and truths of revealed religion are expressed somewhere specially in the Bible; if we desire to know poetically and truthfully the relation of God to creation we turn to the book of Job and read there the theophanies of its later chapters; if we would know the value of the whole revelation of God in the sacred writings we study Psalm 119; if we would know all that can be said concerning love we turn to the thirteenth chapter of the first espistle to the Corinthians; if we would comprehend the full force of faith in the affairs of men we study the eleventh chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. So the great doctrine of the omnipresence of God is declared in that psalm which constitutes our lesson:

Whither shall I flee from Thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven,

Thou art there: If I make my bed in Sheol, behold,

Thou are there. If I take the wings of the morning,

And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall Thy hand lead me,

And Thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall overwhelm me,

And the light about me shall be night;

Even the darkness hideth not from Thee,

But the night shineth as the day:

The darkness and the light are both alike to Thee.

And so on through all the majestic language of the psalm as it sets forth the omnipresence and the omniscience of God, that He is everywhere, and that no secret can be hidden from Him.

I repeat, this doctrine is the common faith, not merely of definitely Christian men and women, but of all those who intellectually receive the Christian faith as the Divine revelation to man. Yet it is a truth which men are not easily mastered by. It is a truth which is held in the upper reaches of the intellect, but which strangely fails to reach down to the volitional powers of the life, and rarely affects, even among Christian people, the emotional capacities of the life.

This fact of the omnipresence of God, what a fact it is! To state it in general terms like this is to fail to make it impressive. Even the reading of Psalm 139 is too mighty an exercise for the mind of man, and the only thing that any man can say who attempts to read that psalm is what the psalmist himself does say in the midst of its rhythmic beauty:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

It is high, I cannot attain unto it.

To speak in general terms of the omnipresence of God, even though the mind accepts the truth, is to fail to be impressed by it. Let us take two Biblical illustrations as illuminating the Biblical doctrine. I take the two which perpetually impress own heart and soul. The first is in Daniel's prophecy, the story of Belshazzar's feast. It is the story of a night of carousal, drunkenness, debauchery, and ribaldry; the story of how in the midst of revelry there came the semblance of a human hand and the mystic writing on the wall, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin." Then I listen to the prophet's interpretation of that great message to the king, and among the things he said this arrests my attention: looking fearlessly into the eyes of that drunken, debauched king, the prophet said to him, "The God in Whose hand thy breath is, and Whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified." I do not quote the passage at this moment to deal with the declaration that the man had failed to glorify God, but to ask you to observe the conception of God that filled the mind of the prophet. "The God in Whose hand thy breath is, and Whose are all thy ways." Belshazzar's breath at that moment was foul with drunkenness and obscenity; nevertheless, that breath was in the hand of God! To speak of the omnipresence of God in all its vastness is to declare that which must be accepted intellectually if the doctrine of God which the Bible presents be true; but it does not impress the individual, it is too great; but when I see a drunken king, obscene and vulgar, and I watch the heaving of his breast and recognize the operation of his frame fearfully and wonderfully made, fashioned according to the plan of the most high God, and when I recognize that man's breath is in the hand of God, then I begin to understand the doctrine of the Divine omnipresence. Passing from the Old Testament into the New, I find myself in Athens with Paul and hear him saying to those Athenians - those decadent philosophers who knew nothing of a living philosophy or a vital idea, but were trading on the memory of past philosophies - that he has come to make known to them the God they ignorantly worship, and then declaring that "He is not far from each One of us: for in Him we live, and move, and have our being," Thus in language of the simplest I am brought face to face with the sublimest of all truths, and am brought face to face with that truth in such a way that the general doctrine becomes a personal arrest. It is that great doctrine of the nearness of God which became reality in the life of Jacob through that dream.

How, then, do men come to the consciousness of this truth which makes it powerful and prevailing in their lives? Take the case of Jacob. It was the consciousness of the presence of God in an unexpected place. I have already hinted at that. Let us consider a little more carefully the unexpectedness, first, as to the place itself. Jacob was near Luz. Hugh Macmillan has described Bethel thus: "At Bethel the natural landscape is so bare and exposed, that it opens no door into the supernatural." There was nothing there to suggest God to man. It seems to me there are signs in nature that must suggest God to the mind of the intelligent man. During the past week, in different parts of this country, I have looked at the autumn tints and felt as though in spite of myself I was being reminded of God, for the flaming fires of autumn, cleansing the floor and preparing for the new springing of life, seemed to me to suggest the altar fires of Deity. But there are places so barren that no such suggestion seems to be made, and Bethel was such a place. Jacob was far away from his home, far away from anything that spoke to him of religion. He said presently, "This is … the house of God";., but there was no temple there, for the temple was not yet erected; no tabernacle was there, for the pattern had not yet been given; there was no shrine, no altar; these he had left behind in the tents of Isaac in Beersheba. He was away from the things of worship and religion, away from everything that would be likely to suggest God to him. Yet God was there with him. That is the truth to which he awoke in this place near Luz, away from Beersheba, a place barren and bleak, away from the fruitfulness of the valley and the beauty of the hills. In this unexpected place he found God.

Take the case of Belshazzar: in the hall of sensuality and carousal God was present; He could not be excluded.

Take the parable of the rich fool, which came from the lips of the Lord Himself. He said, My fields, my fruits, my barns; and suddenly, in the midst of his calculations and his commercial enterprises, all perfectly legitimate (for I pray you notice whenever you read the story that this man was not guilty of fraudulent getting), God said, "Thou fool." God broke in upon him suddenly, Where was God? Right there in the man's fields, and in his harvests, enwrapping him more closely than the atmosphere he breathed, enabling him to get wealth. God was forgotten, but He was there.

This truth of the omnipresence of God means that God is where man is; man never escapes. My brother, you faced some stern duty to-day, and you were obedient thereto with a sense of almost unutterable loneliness possessing your soul until, perchance, you said, with Elijah, I only am left true to the ways of God. But you were not alone in that hour. When you stood firm, four-square to every wind that blew, God was with you. It may be that even today you have come to the sanctuary hot from sin; when you sinned you were not alone; God was with you. He is the God in Whose hand your breath is, and Whose are all your ways. There are those tonight who are in the midst of pain and suffering; they are not alone. "In this place," the chamber of physical torture, God is. "In this place" of mental anguish God is. Someone has come into this congregation lonely. Oh, the tragic, agonizing loneliness of London! Hardly a week passes over my head in this ministry but that someone talks to me of loneliness. You are alone; you know no one who sits by you tonight, you are away from home and friends and all old associations, appar ently you are alone; but God is with you!

Jacob did not say, God came to me in the night, God has visited me, God was here yesternight and now has gone. He did not awake to the consciousness of a visit; He awoke to the consciousness of a presence. The thing that he found out that night was not that God visits man, but that God is with man wherever he is. We expect to meet Him in the sanctuary; but He is near us in the market place. We look for the gleaming of the glory of His face at the holy shrine; but he is as surely with us in the den of wickedness. Not alone in the sanctuary, but where the multitudes gather in defiance of His law, He is there. This is the truth to which Jacob awoke.

Consider, in the second place, this man's unconsciousness of the fact of the nearness of God. The note of tragedy in my text is this, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not." God is here, but I did not know it. How are we to account for the fact that Jacob did not know that God was there? It may be accounted for by intellectual limitation. It may be declared that he had not come to the consciousness of this great truth of the omnipresence of God. It is said by some that to these men of the past Jehovah was merely a tribal deity, one of a number of gods. That I will not argue. It may be true; but I do not believe it for a moment. I believe that what took Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees was a conception of God as One, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent.

I think we must go deeper if we are to find out why this man was not conscious of the presence of God. Not intellectual limitation only, but spiritual dullness. Remember, a man never finds God intellectually if he be spiritually dull. Man is more than matter, Man is more than mind. Man is spirit. If the spiritual fact in man's life be atrophied, dead, inactive, he cannot find God. He may be an intellectual giant. His mind may be trained perfectly, it may act with remarkable precision in every department of human life; but he never finds God. The great inquiry of the book of Job can be answered only negatively until this hour:

Canst thou by searching find out God?

Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?

As I look back at Jacob on that night I see that he was spiritually deadened, dulled. God was there when he chose the stone on which to put his head. God was nigh when he rested his head on his chosen pillow. God was with him, but he did not know it, he had no sense of it. Intellectual limitation. No, something profounder: spiritual deadness.

But why the spiritual deadness? Because of moral failure. In the past lay trickery and baseness, meanness and deceit. Remember, this was not a man whom you can describe as godless. He was a godly man. He believed in God. The trouble with Jacob was never that he did not believe in God. The trouble was that, believing in God, he did not believe God could manage without his help. He was always trying to hurry the Divine economy by his own wit and wisdom and cleverness. That is the story of Jacob: in doing that he had descended to baseness, meanness, evil courses; and moral depravity had dulled the spiritual sense. That night he was not conscious of God.

This unconsciousness of the Divine nearness is widespread - how widespread who shall tell? In the case of men generally it is true that they do not know the presence of God. There are thousands of men today who, if you were to ask them as to their belief, intellectually, in God and His omnipresence, would affirm both; but they do not know God as near, they have no immediate consciousness of God, they have no commerce with God. The scientist as a mere scientist is unconscious of God. I want that statement to be correctly understood. It is quite possible for a man to be a Christian man and a scientist, and to have perpetual consciousness of God. When I speak of a scientist merely, I mean a man who is dealing with things that are of this earth, and who has no traffic with heaven. Here is the marvel of all marvels, that he will touch and handle, analyze and synthesize, examine and re-examine, investigate and re-investigate, and continue to investigate the stuff which has come from God, and yet never recognize God, never find God. We have had a remarkable exhibition of that during this autumn in the meeting of the British Association in Dundee. If anyone shall ever refer to what President Schafer then said, let it be remembered, what- ever he may have meant by it, that he declared he was dealing with life and not with soul. I think that he should always have the benefit of that admission, though I do not profess to know what he meant, and I have a shrewd suspicion that he did not know himself. One of the most highly trained scientific minds of the present day, a man of intellect, culture, refinement, reverence, is seen dealing with matter itself, recognizing the marvel of it, observing its mutations, changes, differentiations, and yet never finding God, having no consciousness of God.

It is equally true of the philosopher. That is why that man is sorely mistaken who finds his refuge in modern philosophy. The most modern philosophy will be the laughing-stock of the philosophers of a generation yet to come. I make that affirmation in the light of the history of philosophy. Every philosophy has made its contribution, and has at last broken down, and been respectfully dismissed, while new philosophies have been introduced. This will continue so long as man is simply thinking on the level of the finite and the immediate and material. Yet here is the marvel of marvels: men will attempt to deal with wisdom, and yet be quite unconscious of God. They will argue for Him or against Him, but they do not feel Him, do not know Him, have no sense of Him.

Come to quite another illustration. There are men and women to whom I am preaching tonight to whom travel is a perpetual revelation of God; they cannot stand and gaze on the sun-capped heights of Alpine splendor without being conscious of God; they cannot cross the mighty sea and look at the wide expanse of rhythmic, orderly waters without feeling the presence of God. But there are multitudes of men who see no gleam of God's glory in the light of Alpine snows, and hear no thunder of His presence in the roar of Atlantic billows. I have crossed the Atlantic now forty times, and often have I stood and gazed over the sea, and always as I have done so, sometimes in the silence of the night, able to see little in the darkness, or at other times able to see much by the light of the moon and the stars, or as in the day I have looked at it stormy, or lying sweet and placid as though kissed to sleep - always the great word of the Bible has come back to me,

Thy way was in the sea,

And Thy paths in the great waters.

I have turned from the contemplation of the sea to the contemplation of men and women, and I have found people who have never looked at the sea for six days, they have been so busy playing bridge! God is close at hand, but they do not know it, they have no sense of it, no consciousness of it. They burn incense on Sunday, not to God, but to the respectable notion that they manifest their belief in Him by attending morning service; but they do not know Him. Yet He is there - in the sea, and in the ship, and in the cabin where they play bridge, the God in whom they live and move and have their being. Their breath is in His hand.

Closer is He than breathing,

Nearer than hands or feet.

But they never know it.

It may be equally true of the statesman. He may deal with national things and international things, and be busy with policies, diplomacies and arrangements; with frontiers, and readjustments, and partitions, even today at this very hour, and yet be entirely unconscious that God is abroad in the Balkans, and that business long deferred is being done in the resistless will and economy of God, Who will not be trifled with forever! No consciousness amid the clash of war of the presence of God and the overruling of God! "I knew it not"!

Or a commercial man watching the markets, lamenting the fall of consols, speculating on the effect that war will produce, waiting for news of the success or failure of the harvest in the distant parts of the world, may have no consciousness of God. God is there, but he does not know it.

Or even a physician, passing in and out of homes of sickness, and perpetually in the presence of pain, may not find God. God is there, but he does not know it.

Men everywhere, busy here and there through all the busy days, and wherever they are, God close at hand; but they do not know it. That is the tragedy of all tragedies. The supreme, ultimate tragedy of human life is unconsciousness of God. The supreme fact of human life is that in Him we live and move and have our being. The supreme tragedy is that we do not know it.

"I knew it not." Why not? We speak of intellectual limitation, that we cannot comprehend the fact. That is not the answer. The answer is spiritual deadness, spiritual dullness, the atrophy of the essential glory of life; for if man be spiritual he will discern the spiritual. There are very many who do discern God. In science and in philosophy and in statecraft and in every other walk of life there are men who have "endured as seeing Him Who is invisible." In these lives God is seen, and God is known, and God is recognized.

Behind all spiritual dullness are moral perversity and failure. It is sin that dims my vision of God. It is sin that atrophies my spiritual life and makes me unconscious of the nearness of God, so that I may live and move and have my being in God and yet not know Him. This is of all tragedies the supreme tragedy, that men live and move and have their being in God and do not know Him.

There for tonight I leave my message, broken off and unfinished for lack of time. We will attempt to return to it, that we may consider what that forgetfulness of God really means in human life, that we may speak of His method of discovering the fact of Himself to the soul of man, and also of what that means.