**VOLUME 7; CHAPTER 23 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE PERILS OF PROCRASTINATION by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*As the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts.*

*Hebrews 3:7,8*

THE LETTER FROM WHICH OUR TEXT IS TAKEN DIFFERS from the majority of the New Testament epistles in that it was written to people who had been born in the special light of revealed religion, and who had been brought into the larger, fuller, final light thereof as it came to men through Jesus Christ our Lord. It was a letter to Hebrews, the people who had lived in the light of hope and anticipation and confidence in a work of God to be accomplished according to covenants made with their fathers. These Hebrews were addressed by the Christian writer in the course of the letter as "holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling," and thus they must be counted among the number of those who had not merely had the light of the Hebrew economy of hope, but also had received that of the Messianic fulfilment of that hope. Every difficulty of those to whom the letter was addressed was one of apparent rupture between the old and the new. Profoundly convinced of the divinity of the religion of their fathers, constrained by the presentation of the evangel of the Christ to accept Him as Messiah, in the early days of their Christian experience they trembled and were afraid lest perchance they had made some mistake. That is quite understandable, for what a change was wrought by the coming of Christ! The types and shadows of the ceremonial law were all fulfilled, and gradually they were withdrawn.

The purpose of the writer of this letter, from the intellectual standpoint, was to show these people that the rupture between the old and the new was but the breaking of the shell so that men might find the kernel, the passing beyond the chrysalis stage, in order that the fully developed life might spread its wings. They made their boast in the ministration of angels in the leadership of Moses and of Joshua, in a divinely appointed priesthood and ritual; and the writer of the letter declared to them that none of these things was to be denied, but that in Christ all their suggestions had been fulfilled.

The purpose of this letter was far more than intellectual, however; it was spiritual. This wavering of faith, expressing itself as it did in disobedience, this halting in the presence of intellectual difficulty, expressing itself as it always does, sooner or later, in moral deflection, was a grave spiritual peril which the writer of these words saw threatening these Hebrew Christians. In order to bring them back again into living touch with the living forces which alone could realize the deepest in themselves and fulfil the Divine purpose, he wrote this letter; for he knew that unbelief always expresses itself in disobedience and that disobedience inevitably issues in death.

In order to discover the real force of our text it is important that we should observe that it is partly the words of the writer, and partly a quotation from a psalm. The first five words, "As the Holy Ghost saith," are the words of the writer of the letter, while the couplet which follows was a quotation:

Today if ye shall hear His voice,

Harden not your hearts.

The particular purpose of this quotation from one of their own psalms was to urge on these Hebrew Christians the necessity for immediateness, and to warn them against the grave peril of procrastination. That is our theme at this time. I do not propose to dwell any further on the details of the passage of which this word of my text is the keynote. We may take the spirit of it in order to emphasize for our own times and circumstances, and for our own profit, the tremendous importance of immediate response to Divine impulses; and to emphasize also the subtle perils of procrastination in such matters.

This subject is of the widest application and might be illustrated on every plane of human activity. Here we are immediately halted and hindered by the fact that the supreme difficulty of all spiritual consideration is that men do not bring to that consideration the same acumen and earnestness and sincerity as they bring to the ordinary affairs of everyday life. In every realm of serious life we grant the absolute importance of immediateness and the grave peril of procrastination freely granted is the need for caution, that, first there must be careful consideration, the winnowing of evidence. Such sane and calculating caution is of the very soul of courage. While that is recognized in every department of life, it is also immediately conceded in political life, in commercial affairs, and indeed in all active life, that when once conviction is reached, response must be immediate. Some of the most hackneyed phrases of our common speech bear evidence of that widespread conviction: No time like the present, Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today. In these and many other similar proverbial utterances which pass our lips quite carelessly we express our profound conviction on the importance of immediate action in response to complete conviction.

I propose now to confine our attention to the application of this matter to the call of Christ. "Today if ye shall hear His voice harden not your hearts." Is not such a message necessary? What multitudes of men and women there are who lack but one thing, a personal and actual surrender to Christ! What multitudes of men and women there are who have been attracted by Him who do most honestly admire Him, and do most seriously in the deepest fact of their lives desire to be conformed to His likeness, but are disobedient, have never taken the one step of handing over their life wholly and absolutely to His control! I have said there are multitudes of such. I believe that to be true. I believe there are multitudes of such in this audience. I preach as the years run on to multitudes of men and women who I believe are exactly in that situation, reverent in their demeanor, willing to listen to the messages I endeavor to seek from God and bring to them with a patience that gladdens and strengthens my own heart. I have seen their eyes light up as the vision of the Lord Christ has come to them in many an hour of worship, and yet they are not Christian. Men and women attracted by Christ, genuinely and honestly admiring Him in that inner secret of the heart's depth, desiring to follow Him at some time, yet persistently disobedient! In this message, which it is my responsibility and holy privilege to deliver to this audience, I have but one thing to say. I want to speak of the awful peril of this prolonged postponement of decision. I shall attempt to say it in different ways. I shall attempt to illustrate the theme. By the help of the Holy Spirit, I shall, so much as in me lies, argue for the accuracy of the message I utter. But this is the one thing I now want to say:

As the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts.

I want to speak tonight with all love and earnestness of the grave peril of postponing a decision which in the deepest conviction of your life you know ought to be made at once.

In attempting to understand this message, we shall consider first, necessarily, certain assumptions of this text, certain things which the words of my text take for granted. We shall consider centrally, and principally, the inferential warning of the text. Finally, we shall listen once more to the suggested gospel of the text.

First, as to the assumptions. Before I can make any appeal which is warranted by the text it is necessary that we should recognize that two things were assumed by the writer of the psalm, and by the quoter of the psalm in the letter; or may I not say, in harmony with the declaration of the text, these two things are assumed by the Holy Spirit in this text: first, that human responsibility begins with the hearing of the voice, "Today if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts"; and, second, that when the voice is heard man is left free to obey or to disobey. These are the assumptions of the text which must be recognized, or we shall lose the accuracy and urgency of its appeal.

First, that responsibility begins only when the voice is heard. It is the man who knows his Lord's will and does it not who is to be beaten with many stripes. It is the disobedient man, who is the sinning man. It is not the man to whom the light has never come who is blamed for stumbling through the darkness; it is not the soul who has never heard the call who is accounted a sinner for not walking in the way which the voice indicates. Responsibility begins with the hearing of the voice. Here let us make no mistake. God speaks in many ways to human hearts as God fulfils Himself in many ways in human lives. I can imagine that a reservation such as I have made, a perfectly fair reservation - namely, that responsibility begins when the voice is heard - I can imagine that such reservation may seem to open a door of escape for some who will be inclined to say, We have not heard the voice. I pray all such to think again. How may I know when I hear the voice? It may not come to me with the articulation of human utterance. It may not come to me in any sudden blaze of glory, even mental, intellectual glory. How may I know the voice of God and the voice of Christ? The nature of the message determines the question of whose voice it is that speaks within the soul. The voice may seem to be of the mind alone; the voice may seem to man to come out of a man's own thinking. Indeed, it must come out of his own thinking. There is a sense in which, in a degree which is to my own soul growingly appalling and majestic, every human being stands absolutely separated from every other. There is a value not sometimes recognized in the great apostolic word: - "Work out your own salvation … for it is God which worketh in you." These are blessed words of hope, for in them dynamic is added to injunction. They have another value, however: "Work out your own salvation … for it is God that worketh in you"; that means the inclusion of God and ourself, and the exclusion of every other human being. The voice of God never comes finally through human lips. We may have heard the voice of God in the sermon preached; we may have heard the voice of God as we have read the page; the voice may have come to us in the silence of our own home, in the loneliness of our own chamber; but it always comes ultimately in our own thinking. We may discern between the voice of God and the voice of Satan by the nature of the thought and the thing which is spoken. There came to us a call to higher life, to nobler endeavor, to the consecration of the powers of our beings to holy ventures; there came to us the voice that rebuked our sin, there came the moment of illumination when we saw the unutterable folly of our own passionate attempt to satisfy our lives with the things of dust. That is the voice of God finding utterance ultimately, as the voice of God ever must, not through the lips of the preacher, not through the written word, but in our own thinking, in our own conception. So the voice of God sounds in the soul of a man. He does in His great grace consent to use messengers whom He sends to utter truth; but we may hear sermons by the score, and never hear God. It is only when in our own souls we say amen to the truth uttered by the preacher that God has spoken to the soul. God does so speak to men.

Dare any man attempt to escape the call of this text easily by declaring that he has not heard the voice? Let him think again! Let him honestly review the years that have gone. Has not God spoken to him? Did there not come to him in a moment of wrong-doing, a high rebuke out of his own thinking? That was the voice divine. Did there not come to him some great vision of the loveliness of the Lord Christ? Did there not come to him consent of heart to the beauty of holiness? Did there not come to him a great sense of the awfulness of sin? Did there not come to him in some hour the longing to escape its power? Then by all these impressions, aspirations, desires, God has spoken to that man. These thoughts and conceptions of the human mind are divinely inspired; none of them has come from the underworld of evil, none of them has been generated within the heart of man apart from the direct illumination of God. Have not all of us at some time or other, and repeatedly, heard the voice of God speaking thus directly to our souls?

Here is another test. The voice of God always creates in the soul of a man the consciousness of responsibility. Therein is the difference between the voice of God and the voice of man, even at its best and highest. Therein, if I may say this in passing, is one of the final arguments for the divinity of this Biblical literature, We cannot study this Bible without being brought face to face with personal responsibility. I can study Shakespeare without that sense. I can lecture on the moral drift of Macbeth, and then be immoral; and yet again on the next day lecture on Shylock and the defilement of greed, and continue myself to be covetous, I cannot preach on the word of God out of my own experience, and then disobey its teaching and continue to preach on the Word of God. That argument concerning the Bible illustrates the fact that the voice of God in the soul creates responsibility. A man stands confronting two possibilities of action in his business, in his friendships, in his recreations; a voice within says to him, That way is right, that way is wrong! That is the voice of God compelling him to see two paths stretching out before him, and convincing him that in his choosing he must choose definitely between right and wrong, light and darkness, good and evil. So we hear the voice of God, and we know it to be the voice of God by the nature of its suggestion, and by the fact that it forever creates responsibility.

The second assumption of this text is that of the freedom of the will when the voice speaks, "Today if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts." This assuredly means that we can harden them if we will; we can disobey, we can see the light and choose the darkness; we can gaze on the high and admire it, and then turn our face to the depths. It is equally true that the heart can yield, that there can be obedience. When the vision comes, if the heart of man is set on the realization of it, he will find virtue sufficient to enable him to translate the vision into victory. These are the assumptions of the text: responsibility is created by the voice of God; when the voice of God speaks, man's will is free to obey or to disobey.

Now let us solemnly attend to the warning of the text, "Today if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts." By that initial word, "Today," which is the supreme word of the text, we are brought to a sense of the immediate, and consequently to a revelation of the peril of procrastination. The call is heard, and he who hears intends to obey that call, but other matters are pressing and there is postponement. To obey that call will involve a change of plans. That call came to me three months ago, some man is saying; it came clearly, definitely. I heard it, felt its power, consented to its reasonableness; I determined that I would obey it, but to have obeyed it then would have been to rearrange all my life, and therefore I have not obeyed it yet.

Let us not go back. That call is coming to some man now. It has come already. While the preacher has been only arguing for the fact of the call, the voice has been heard. To obey now will be to change all the plans he has made, even for tomorrow! To obey will be to reorganize all his life around a new center. Therefore he says, There is time enough yet; I will postpone obedience. This thing must be done, it shall be done, but at some more convenient season!

Oh, my brothers, if the material walls of this sanctuary had ears and tongues what tragedies could they tell of that description! I do not think any single Sabbath passes but that within this house men and women go through this business of postponement, procrastination! I want to utter this as a personal conviction; let it be received as such, and weighed, and either rejected or accepted, according to personal conviction; I give it as personal, after over a generation of preaching; I am convinced that in this way, more men miss the highest and descend to the lowest, than in any other way. Not by antagonism to the high, but by admiration, and postponement of decision, more souls are lost, wrecked, spoiled, ruined, than in any other way I know.

In order that we may understand this let us consider carefully what are the perils of procrastination. To refuse to obey is presently to lose the sense of urgency. To fail to walk in the light of the vision is presently to fail to admire the vision. To linger when the gleam would lead us is to lose the constraint of the glory, and at last to imagine that the shining of the gleam was the creation of the imagination. Spiritual tragedies of that kind are to be found all over this land today. There are thousands of men who have come into the presence of Christ, who have felt the attraction of Himself and of His message, who have entertained admiration of His high ideals, who have earnestly desired to follow Him, who have determined that they would; but they have halted, waited, postponed. With what result? The attraction has passed away, and today they see no beauty in Him that they should desire Him; their admiration for Him has ceased, His name is but an idle story, the desire to be conformed to His high ideal is dead within the soul. And sometimes even worse, those old days are laughed at, days when they were moved toward Him.

This attitude is not always the result of the vulgarity that can be arrested by a policeman, of the bestiality which human society casts out. It is produced by procrastination, by postponement; it is the reaction on the soul of a high ideal refused, the deadening influence of disobedience to a high call. Thus the opportunity passes and the voice is no longer heard. There are multitudes of men who once were arrested by the claims of Christ, attracted by the beauty of His ideal, affrighted by the solemnity of His warnings, strangely moved by the infinite tenderness of His wooing; but today they are without any of these emotions; they are even cynical concerning Him, and have descended so low that they can be guilty of the vulgarity of laughing at their own experiences of long ago. In the terrific, appalling, awe-inspiring word of my text they are hardened. That is the peril of postponement, procrastination.

But, finally, let us hear the gospel of this text. If its argument proceeds on assumptions, and if its appeal is in itself the inference of a peril, the whole message suggests a gospel. What is the gospel? It is all suggested in one word, today. There seems to be no music in that word. There is much, to those who know their Bible. The world's dark night is hastening on; but it has not yet come, it is still today.

When he made this quotation from the psalm, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews was conscious of the glorious light of the day in which he wrote, "Today if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts." The very word is full of hope. Today is a gospel of immediate possibility as well as a warning of consequent peril. Today! The voice of Christ is speaking to the sons of men. His voice is the one voice that comes clear in human articulation out of the infinite mystery of the being of God. His is the one voice that rings down the centuries of time with the finality and restfulness and strength of eternity. It is the voice of essential, eternal wisdom. The things He said are the things He says; and the things He said and the things He says are the things of truth and grace whereby, if a man live, he shall live indeed and not die; by which, if a man obey, he shall come to realization of all the infinite wonder of his own being as he finds himself led into fellowship with God and conformity to His will.

The voice of Christ does not speak speculatively to the sons of men. Christ is not suggesting to men a new philosophy which they may discuss and then receive or reject according to the calculations of their own minds. He speaks the final word with authority, with such inherent truth that when a man ceases to listen to human interpretations of the thing He says, and allows Him to speak directly to his inner life, that man immediately recognizes the authority of His word. The voice of Christ is the voice of all-sufficient might, and of final love. It is the voice which calls men to high duty, and promises the ability to obey. It is the voice which commands men to sacrifice, and provides compensation for all their losses. It is the voice that speaks to men out of perfect love. Oh, this voice of Christ! Do not listen for it from the lips of the preacher. I mean that. I am not degrading my office. I magnify my office. I glory in my office. But do not listen for His voice from my lips. He really begins to speak when I have ceased. When my words are over, and you have properly discounted the accent and intonation of man, then the truth out of the words that gripped the heart and soul and conscience is the voice of Christ to you! The voice that tells you that you dare not do the thing of evil you had intended to do in the coming week! The voice that calls you to something higher! The voice that commands you to the Cross! The voice that says, "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off; if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out." The voice that says, in the deepest secret shrine of your inner life, "Come unto Me." That is His voice. Today if ye shall hear that voice, in the name of God, harden not your heart.

These are superlative facts. To parley is to blaspheme. To delay is to deaden the power to appreciate. Therefore there is but one reasonable time for action, and that is today. Oh, there is infinite music in that word today! It is still called today! The voice is speaking; heed it, answer it. Your first steps may falter through mists, but the pathway you begin to tread if you obey that voice will shine more and more unto the perfect day.

You may have listened to me and by that very activity be in danger of missing the Voice. Let Him speak! He is speaking! What He is saying to you generally I know right well. What He is saying to you particularly I cannot tell; but you know. I know what He is saying generally. He appeals to you: "Follow Me." But there is some particular secret between Himself and your soul. To the young ruler it was, "Sell all that thou hast, and distribute to the poor … and come, follow Me." Not to every man does He say that. What is He saying to you? Almost invariably there is at the crisis one last thing between a man and a decision. What is it in your life? I do not ask to know. I do not want to know. I will not be a confessor. Ah, but you know. He has put the finger of His justice and His mercy on the thing that must be abandoned, on the new duty that must be faced, on the new attitude that must be assumed, on the restitution that must be made. "Today if ye shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts."