**VOLUME 8; CHAPTER 12 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**BORN BLIND by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE DISCIPLES PROBLEM THE MASTER'S ANSWER**

*As He passed by, He saw a man blind from his birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, Rabbi, Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind? Jesus answered, Neither did this man sin, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. We must work the works of Him that sent Me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.*

*John 9:1-5*

THE STORY OF THE HEALING OF THIS MAN IS IN ONE SENSE peculiar. It is the only case on record of Christ's healing of congenital disease. The Greek phrase which is translated "from his birth" occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. These things immediately fasten our attention on the healing of this blind man as being one of the singular and outstanding signs recorded by John.

It presents one particular phase of the complex problem of suffering, and this fact is made evident by this opening paragraph which is the subject of our meditation. The problem was stated in the inquiry of the disciples, "Rabbi, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind?" That was a surface inquiry, suggesting the problem, but not explicitly stating it. In that inquiry some solutions of the problem were referred to which evidently did not satisfy the disciples. In their question there is evidence of their assumption that there was some connection between sin and suffering. They were trying to account for the fact that a man was born blind, and attempting to square the fact with their assumption of the relationship between sin and suffering, "Who did sin, this man or his parents?"

To that problem we turn in order to consider Christ's dealing with it, and therefore in order that we may learn lessons of practical value to ourselves.

The problem is rendered concrete in the case of the man. Here was a man suffering the disability of blindness through no act of sin on his own part during his lifetime. If there were some connection between sin and suffering, why was that man suffering, seeing that he had not sinned?

The problem is a persistent one. We face it every day if we have eyes to see and hearts to feel, this problem of humanity handicapped from the beginning. I surely need not argue it. If some of you would have an illustration of it you may call here on Wednesday next at six o'clock and find your way into the Cripples' Parlor. There you will see little children crippled from birth. It is only the careless man who has never faced the problem in the presence of a little child twisted, deformed, from birth. In our national life we are attempting to face the problem of the mentally deficient. The profoundest manifestation of it, one, by the way, to which, perhaps, we give the least attention, is the fact that there are people who are born spiritually inefficient. Over against that, let us say in passing, the vast majority of people born into the world are not born handicapped. Sometimes it is well for us to remind ourselves of this when we are looking at a dark picture.

The same problem comes to us in another aspect: humanity not only handicapped, but humanity imprisoned. Vast multitudes are born into material surroundings which are against them from the very beginning. Naturally there comes to one's mind that strange, weird, terrific word of Bishop South, in which he declared that there are children in London who were damned at birth by the material environment into which they came, that thousands of children are born into a moral atmosphere into which had we been born we would have been other than we are. Save for a miracle of the Divine grace, such children as these are doomed from birth.

But why is this a problem? Why does that little twisted, crippled child create a problem in the mind? Why does that mentally deficient boy put your soul in revolt? Why does the spiritually inefficient girl or boy create within us a sense of protest? Our problem is created by our faith. The man without faith has no problem of this kind. Apart from faith - and by the word faith I now refer to that Christian faith which is conquering the world - apart from that faith, Marcus Aurelius will suffice us. Marcus Aurelius will tell us that in the workshop we are not to look at the shavings but at the perfected article. That will never do for the man whose eyes have seen the light and glory of the Christian revelation, even though he may not have been obedient thereto. Men who have faith in the God of the Scriptures, the God of our Christian faith, have come to another understanding of the dignity and glory of humanity. In their apprehension of the dignity and glory of humanity is created a protest against the physical, mental, spiritual cripples. The problem is a problem of faith. It challenges our conception of the goodness and justice of God. That is to state it with almost appalling frankness, but that is the problem. Here is this little cripple, deformed from birth, and the problem is, how are we to square that cripple with a good and just God? Whether those disciples meant that or not, that is what we mean when we speak of the problem of evil, the problem of suffering in any form.

Some attempts at solving the problem have been made. The disciples suggested that this man had sinned before his birth, or that his parents had sinned. It is an interesting fact that our Lord did not deal with the suggestion that this man may have had a previous existence, for it lurks in the question. He did not deny it, He did not affirm it, He did not correct it, He left it. There we must leave it. Their question suggested that the man was suffering in this life for some sin committed in a prior life, or else was suffering as the result of some sin of his parents.

Again, there is the suggested solution of the charge of injustice against God, formulated in the soul if never expressed by the lips; expressed by the lips only by men who will immediately correct their statement by denying their belief in the existence of God at all. That is in itself a significant fact. This is one of the untabulated triumphs of Christianity very seldom referred to. Wherever Christianity has come it has at least succeeded in making it impossible for men to think of any God other than a good God. This result is not produced by other religions. At the base of the majority of other religions is a slavish fear of God. The concept of a God who can be unkind, cruel, unjust, cannot live where Christianity has come. It is possible in the light of Christianity to deny the existence of God. It is never possible to believe in the existence of an evil God. Consequently, if we try to solve this problem by declaring that the child is crippled physically, mentally, spiritually, because God is unjust, we shall find ourselves unable to accept the solution. Another solution of the problem that has been attempted is denial of the existence of God. A man face to face with this problem eliminates God, and by doing so may end his problem; but there is one thing he does not do, he does not eliminate children crippled physically, mentally, spiritually. If you are in the presence of this problem in any form - the problem of suffering apparently undeserved, unmerited, out of place - and your soul is in revolt against the doctrine of a just God, and you deny His existence, do not forget that you have not escaped from the horror of the suffering, you have only attempted to find mental ease by denying the problem, and you are still face to face with the crippled child.

All attempted solutions are unsatisfactory. The disciples question proves it. The fact that they asked the question proves that they were not satisfied. The others, as I have said, ending the problem as faith is destroyed, leave the fact in all its horror, and there is no light on it. Blot God out of the universe and you retain human agony without light and without hope.

So let us at once say that from our standpoint the problem is unsolved because we do not possess all the data. If our Christian doctrine be true Christ does possess all the data. He does know the whole story. What, then, has He to say in the presence of the problem? What did He say to these disciples?

Following the story through, I shall ask you to observe three things:

When His disciples named the problem our Lord first replied to them by denying their suggestions. His denial was clear, explicit, definite, "Neither this man nor his parents." This denial of Christ admits the fact of suffering for which neither the sufferer nor the parents of the sufferer are to blame.

Then He made a statement, and here I am going to ask you to be patient, as I so often have to do, while we try to see what He really did say - to be patient, moreover, because I may run counter to a good many prejudices. I certainly shall run counter to almost universal interpretation of this passage. I am going to base a doctrine on punctuation. If you are inclined to object to that I pray you remember that it is already done, as you will see whenever you read this passage as it stands in the Bible.

The first matter is a simple one, and preliminary. The Authorized Version reads at the fourth verse, "I must work the works of Him that sent Me"; the Revised Version reads, "We must work the works of Him that sent Me." I draw attention to this simply to observe that the value of the teaching is not changed. I accept the scholarly consensus that the change is warranted. What Jesus really said was, "We must work the works of Him that sent Me." In the old rendering, the singular pronoun "I" agreed with the singular pronoun "Me," and emphasized the mission of Christ as the Son of God. In the new rendering, the plural pronoun "we" still recognizes the mission of Christ, but suggests the fellowship of His disciples in that mission. To that I shall return in conclusion. For the moment it is enough to observe that the superlative value is the revelation of the mission of Christianity as working the works of God.

Now we come to that which to my own mind is supremely important in an understanding of the statement of Jesus. Two readings of this text are made possible by a change in the punctuation, without the alteration of a single word.

"Jesus answered, Neither did this man sin, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him. We must work the works of Him that sent Me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." That is the punctuation as it stands in the Revised Version. That is in harmony with the punctuation of Westcott and Hort in the New Testament in the Greek. That reading places a period at the close of verse three. Let us now read it, changing that period into a comma:

Jesus answered, Neither did this man sin, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him, we must work the works of Him that sent Me, while it is day.

We immediately recognize that this is a great change. While examining the problem, knowing my own incompetence in many ways, I submitted the passage with my suggestion to an eminent scholar. In his letter replying to my inquiries, he said:

He would be an exceedingly bold scholar who would undertake to prove the punctuation to be one way or the other on the mere ground of the Greek itself. It seems as if the question would have finally to be decided on doctrinal grounds, for it is plain that the difference in punctuation of the verse would change the meaning altogether. If one reading would be more in spirit with the tenor of Christ's teachings, as seems quite probable, that would be quite naturally preferable.

I accept that dictum and on the basis of it have come to the position of personal assurance in this matter. If we leave the period where it is in our version, the whole statement is: "Neither did this man sin nor his parents; but he was born blind that the works of God should be manifest in him." As an elliptical sentence it demands the insertion of the words, "he was born blind." That means that suffering is caused or permitted as an opportunity for the display of the works of God; it means that a little child comes into the world twisted in order that God may have a chance of showing how He can heal it. That I do not believe.

Read the passage as I have suggested, and Jesus simply denied the suggested solutions, and gave none; but over against the problem He stated the central fact of Christianity, and gave the man sight. The problem was not solved but the disability was removed; the mystery of evil and pain was not unveiled, but the fact that Christ had come into the world to deal with evil and to banish pain was made manifest.

What, then, are the values for us of such a meditation as this, for it is quite conceivable to me that it may be said that I have raised a great question which I am not answering. I have not raised a question, I have voiced one. It is my question as well as yours, yours as well as mine. I have attempted to voice it in this narrative as did the disciples, who were my representatives long ago, and I have done so in order to see how Jesus dealt with it. He said to His disciples: Your suggested solutions are not solutions; you are all wrong. Come with Me, and you and I together will remove the disability which creates the problem. That is the inclusive teaching of the story.

Let us now attempt to gather up some of the values. The first value is that the fact that the Son of God is sent to remove disability demonstrates another fact, that such disability is not the will of God for men. Said Jesus, He hath sent Me to do His works. What are they? To open those blind eyes! Therefore those blind eyes are not the will of God for a man. I think this discovery is a gain, for even in Christian circles we hear a great deal - I was going to say blasphemy, I will amend my word and say nonsense - about suffering being the will of God. Every crippled child is contrary to the will of God; every mentally deficient man or woman is contrary to the will of God; every spiritually inefficient being is contrary to the will of God. There may be a sense in which it is in the will of God that they should continue to suffer disability. That is not a contradiction. I go into the room where my little child is in bed tossing with fever. It is entirely against my will that my child should be in bed tossing with fever. My little child says to me, Take me out! I answer, No, darling, you must stay here! Am I contradicting my original intention? God's will is not human suffering and disability, but human perfection, glory, and beauty. Yet, in that larger discipline of life the meaning of which will break upon us from the other side, He allows us to remain in circumstances of affliction, the meaning of which is postponed. The deepest fact in the story is that when Jesus opened the blind eyes He said in the midst of the world's history, God is against all human blindness.

Because God is against all human disability, disability is part of sin. We must not narrow the meaning of sin at this point. Sin is failure, missing the mark; sin is coming short of the glory of God. Sin does not necessarily include the idea of human responsibility and guilt, but it is always failure. Thus we are bound to face the problem of sin.

Involved in that conception of sin as failure is the Christian doctrine that the possibility of such failure resulted from the volitional element in the spiritual nature of angels and of man. We are compelled to recognize in this and in other ways the fact of the self-imposed limitations of God. It is inconceivable that God could create beings with the grandeur and greatness of volitional power without also creating the possibility of sin - not the necessity for it, but the possibility of it. So that if a man in his heart rebel against God for permitting sin, he rebels against God for creating man, or any intelligent being having the gift of volition. God can create no being with volition without creating the possibility for sin. Therefore, the man who is in rebellion against God for permitting sin in his life can rectify God's blunder only by destroying himself. Only let him remember, this is what he cannot do. Thus we are shut out of this infinite mystery; it is impossible of final solution by finite minds, and God has given us no solution of it. Christ did not attempt to explain it. From beginning to end the Bible offers no solution. Over against this fact of sin, however, God has placed the fact of ransom, redemption, a mystery profounder than that of sin, and yet so beneficent and mighty in its working that I am compelled to believe, "That cannot end worst which began best," and that "though a wide compass first be fetched," there must ultimately be the infinite triumph of the God Who created.

If still there be in the heart of the thinking man a sense of protest, then I shall say to him that the vindication of God is twofold. Our theology is our theodicy; or, in other words, our doctrine of God is in itself a vindication of God. Our doctrine of God is that He is love, and that, consequently, He is righteous and true and just. Therefore, whatever there may be of mystery or of problem in the things on which these eyes are looking, I rest assured as the years run on, and I suffer pain and watch the suffering of others, that the Judge of all the earth must do right. Oftentimes I cannot understand the meaning of the things on which my eyes may look; but hear me patiently, not clearly, not finally, but actually, Mine eyes have seen the glory of God, and there I rest.

But there is another line of vindication. The redeeming activity of God, in all its manifold applications, is a vindication of God. I came across some striking words the other day in a sermon by Baldwin Brown:

The preacher will best help that consummation by letting the light of the gospel shine clearly, and troubling himself for the present little with theodicies. We are not God's advocates, we are His witnesses. We have no case to establish for Him or for His truth. We have simply to bear witness to the truth.

It was a great word, and I affirm that the light of that gospel of redemption in Christ Jesus is God's vindication. Without any reservation, I say, If this great God had created man with this volitional capacity, knowing that he might use it to entail on himself limitation and misery, and had made no provision for such catastrophe, then I could not have loved Him, I could not have believed in His goodness. But oftentimes perplexed by this mystery of evil, I stand in the presence of the dignity and majesty and glory of humanity and watch its achievement, its struggles, its failures, its risings and pressings forward; and, watching, I see not only the crippled child, the mentally deficient, the spiritually inefficient; I see also the cripple healed, the mentally deficient enabled to understand, and the spiritually inefficient born into new realization of the true, and so I find, operating in the midst of humanity, a redemptive force that remakes; and I hear Jesus saying: Your solutions are wrong, but in order that God's work may be manifest let us go to His work, open blind eyes, unstop deaf ears, open the prison houses and make possible the reconstruction of the humanity that is limited and spoiled by sin. That is my ultimate resting place.

There are men to-day who deny our faith and so escape our problem. They are not troubled today about the prob lem in this form, because they have denied this God. And yet as I watch them I see them striving to remove the disabilities, and I say to them, Remember, my brothers, remember, this work also is Christian work. You may have denied my faith intellectually, you may have tried to find rest for your troubled heart by denying the government of God, but you still look with pity on the cripple and try to heal him. That is the unconscious, but very definite, result of the very faith you are denying. Sometimes I have said that England is not Christian. There is a sense in which that is perfectly true. Christian England, no! And yet, yes! England is far more Christian than pagan, thank God. There are thousands of men in this land of ours flinging themselves against disability in its material and mental forms. That also is Christian. I am not now dealing with their individual responsibilities and relationship to God, but with the passion and activity of their lives. There was a day when the disciples would fain have called down fire from heaven to destroy men who were casting out devils. Jesus said, "Ye know not what Spirit ye are of." "He that is not with Me is against Me; and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth." He that gathereth, even though he name not My name, is with Me. Do not forget that.

Now I come to a narrower circle as I conclude. I would do it with carefulness. I may be speaking even in this audience to those who are sufferers, perchance from birth, and who suffer still. It may be that I am speaking to some who, with personal pain of heart, have thought of some loved one in their home. I would like to say some word to them about the light that comes from this story on all such suffering. I would remind them, first of all, that their disability is retained within the realm of the Divine activity by redemption.

I would remind them therefore that they may be - who can tell? - fore-ordained workers together with God in the very fact of their disability. Not that such disability was fore-ordained by God or caused by God, but that because they would suffer this disability and limitation, they were fore-ordained to afford opportunities for the manifestation of the works of God.

At times His purpose is served by the removal of the disability, at other times by the temper in which the disability is endured. It is a long stretch of time and of country from the days of His flesh to the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and thirteen, and from Palestine to the United States. Yet let us not separate these places; let us keep them together! Here in Palestine was a man born blind, suffering disability through no sin of his own; the work of God in him was the immediate opening of his eyes. We have all read the almost matchless story of Helen Keller. Have we really read that story? I read yesterday, for my own spirit's help as I thought of this passage, The Chant of the Stone Wall. Helen Keller was blind, deaf, dumb; yet today, through Christly ministrations, she positively speaks. She cannot see, she cannot hear; yet, refined, Christian, beautiful, she has felt her way by the rough stone wall, and interpreted its music for the world. Not all her disabilities have been removed; but the glory of God is manifested in the temper in which she has endured and won her victory through the ministry of Christly souls on her behalf.

These are superlative illustrations, I grant you, and for that reason I like them. They constitute the boundaries of illustration, and somewhere between you comes, my brother, my sister, with your persistent weakness, a glorious opportunity for the display of the tone and temper of the Master. Or perchance there may be, even in this house, someone from whom disability has been removed by the ministry of medicine, for I decline to have medicine and surgery put outside the government and Kingdom of God. All activity that makes toward the removal of disability is Christian. Christ did not come to solve mental problems immediately, because He knows I am unequal to grasping the meaning of the things He could say. That is Christ's own teaching. He stood and looked at the group of His disciples - and do not minimize His words, take them in their fulness - and He said, "I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now." He has them to say. We shall know the meaning of these things. Light will flash from the heart of Deity on the last dark problem that perplexes the soul, but we could not bear it yet. Therefore Christ says to us, That man did not sin, neither did his parents; postpone your discussion of the problem and come with Me and help to open the blind eyes and heal ruined humanity. That is My mission in the world.

Finally, accepting this reading of our text, "We must work the works of Him that sent Me," let us observe that according to the interpretation of this matchless story His works are those of ending disability, physical, mental, spiritual, and bringing individual men and women, and all the race, to the full realization of the meaning of their own lives.

Let us remember, therefore, that we are workers together with God in all such endeavor.

When into the Cripples' Parlor you pass, to make glad the life of a little child, or perchance by deft fingers so minister to its pain as to ease it, you are a worker together with Him! When, teacher in the day school, you take extra time and patience with the boy or girl somewhat mentally deficient to enlarge that child's outlook, you are a worker together with God. When you take time and prayer and patience to lead dead spiritual souls toward the light of eternal truth, you are a worker together with God.