**VOLUME 8; CHAPTER 15 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**NEHUSHTAN by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*He brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made; for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it; and he called it Nehushtan.*

*2 Kings 18:4*

WE AT ONCE REALIZE WHAT AN ASTONISHING STATEMENT the Chronicler makes here concerning king Hezekiah. Hezekiah ascended the throne of Judah in the third year of the reign of Hoshea, king of Israel, a young man twenty-five years of age; and immediately - undoubtedly acting under the influence of Isaiah, the great evangelical prophet of the old economy - he commenced a work of reformation. One of the first acts of the reign of the new king was that of smashing to fragments one of the most and historic relics in his kingdom.

So strange an action is in itself worthy of our closest attention, and I think we shall find in our meditation a revelation of some of the great facts of human nature and of some perils threatening men in the region of the most sacred things of their lives; and, consequently, a revelation of principles of perpetual value and of immediate application.

Let us first attempt to put ourselves back into the days when, with what must have appeared to be the strangest disregard of cherished prejudices, Hezekiah commenced his reformation by this act of iconoclasm. I need hardly tarry to remind you of the facts concerning this brazen serpent. In order that we may have our memory refreshed we read the simple story as it is contained in the book of Numbers. However, it may be well to notice one fact. According to the story as there told, it is not suggested, neither was it suggested to the people at the time, if we follow and accept the words as here recorded as being correct, that there was any healing virtue in the brazen serpent. No suggestion was made to the people of Israel that the serpent itself could produce any mystic effect. To read the story simply is to see to its very heart. The sin of the people had been their departure from the attitude of absolute submission to the government of God. In the midst of this rebellious people now punished by God, the brazen serpent was erected, and the word of God which Moses was commanded to speak to them was a declaration that if any man, bitten and in peril, would look at the uplifted serpent he would be healed. That was God's word. No explanation of the relation between the looking and the life was given. We sing, "There is life for a look at the Crucified One," and in so doing we may be singing what is perfectly true, or we may be singing that which is entirely false. What brought these men back to life was the fact that they returned to submission to the government of God, as, for the moment, that government was focused in that wonderful and yet simple provision. The healing virtue came from God, and was operative in answer to that act of submission in which men, no longer arguing as to the wisdom of the method, submitted to the Divine command. Because men in rebellion must be dealt with as children - there must always be a picture, something that appeals to the eye - God in infinite grace said to these men, Take a serpent of brass and set it on a standard, and let the word of My government for the moment be My command to look. Men looked because God commanded, and looking because God commanded, they turned by that act to the Divine government and were healed. This is the history.

It was in itself a remarkable thing that the serpent of brass should have been so long preserved. Between that event in the wilderness and this iconoclasm of Hezekiah at least seven hundred years had elapsed. Think how carefully it had been preserved - by Moses during all the years he remained with these people, all through those tedious and perilous journeys through the great and terrible wilderness; by Joshua through all his forty years of campaign and settlement as he led the people into the land; during the strange and troubled period when the judges as dictators were raised up to govern the people according to immediate necessities; during the splendor of the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon; and through all the troublous and turbulent times of the kings succeeding to Solomon on both sides of the border, in the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Somewhere this brazen serpent had been preserved. I repeat that for over seven hundred years it had been a relic, historic, interesting, and essentially valuable, in that to illuminated eyes and waiting souls it was forevermore a reminder of their own sin in the past, of the judgment which fell on them in consequence of that sin, and of the deliverance which God had provided for them.

In process of time interest grew into veneration, until this very symbol was set up in the midst of the people as an object of worship. At last they actually burnt incense to this brazen serpent. This was the deification of a symbol, the turning from the veneration of a relic for the sake of its essential values to the veneration of that relic on the supposition that it had some virtue resident in itself.

We immediately see that this story is not old, as at first it appears to be. Indeed, almost absurd as it seems, this very idea persists to this hour under the shadow of what is named after Christ. In the Church of St. Ambrose, in Milan, they will show you this brazen serpent. In the year 971 a Milanese envoy in Constantinople was asked to take some treasure of the city as a gift, and he chose a brazen serpent which the Greeks assured him was made out of the very pieces of the serpent which Hezekiah broke into fragments. That certainly is in a country still enslaved by Roman superstitions, but the same things are practiced among us, if in more subtle forms.

Looking back to the ancient story, I ask you to notice that this deification of the brazen serpent, this setting it up as an object of worship, and this burning of incense to it, was in itself a most significant sign of the condition of the people at that time. It was, first, a revelation of their loss of consciousness of God. These people never could have burned incense to the serpent if the presence of God had been recognized and realized. One goes back in memory to the solemn days in the history of these people in the wilderness, when it was necessary to erect this serpent, days when they had before them the outward symbols of the presence of God in the Tabernacle, with all its suggestiveness, and when they had no right to sin. Yet they had sinned, and had been punished by God, and had turned back to Him. We call to mind also the whole history of these Hebrew people, not to dwell on any single detail, but to make this general statement: in hours when they were supremely conscious of God setting up such an object for worship would have been absolutely impossible. It is patent that the sight of these people gathered together around the brazen serpent for the purpose of burning incense to it, making this particular relic of their past history an object of worship, demonstrated the fact that they had lost the consciousness of God.

Yet their action proved more than that. I see a people hungering after what they have lost. An idol always means this. An idol created by the fingers of men, or chosen by men and appointed to the place of a god, is forevermore a revelation of the sense of need, the sense of lack. It is an evidence that the deepest thing in the human heart is its cry after God. This is not to defend idolatry, not to defend the action of these people in the deification of the brazen serpent, but to say that when people lose their consciousness of God they do not lose their sense of need for God. Whereas I look back on these people in this hour and say they have lost their vision of God, have lost the sense of His nearness, have wandered far away from that spiritual communion with Him which is in itself a fire and a force, I say also that having lost the vision and having lost the sense, they are restless. When the one true and living God, having been revealed and known, is lost to consciousness the heart will clamantly cry for that which is lost. This worship of the serpent was certainly a revelation of the hunger of the people after God.

There is one other matter which I think this event reveals. Having lost their vision of God, and still being conscious of the necessity for some object of worship around which their spiritual life could gather, their deification of the serpent was a revelation of the utmost confusion. It was history misinterpreted. A blessing of the olden days was made a curse in the present moment by that misinterpretation of their own history. Setting up the brazen serpent as an object of worship suggested that the serpent itself had been the means of their healing on the past occasion. Their vision of God lost, and the cry of their souls after such a God, and the blundering confusion of a people who, looking back at their own history, emphasized it wrongly, interpreted it falsely, and treated the serpent as though it had been the means of their healing in the past - such was the abuse of the brazen serpent.

When Hezekiah came to the throne he did two things. First of all, he named the serpent "Nehushtan," a piece of brass, or, with fine contempt, a thing of brass. Then he broke it in pieces.

The naming of the serpent thus was intended to be a revelation to the people of their unutterable folly: they were burning incense to a thing of brass! It was intended to be a revelation to the people of their unutterable sin: These people whose worship had been of the unseen and eternal God, Who had demonstrated Himself to them by all the wonder of their history, were actually worshiping a thing of brass! There was a fine contempt in this naming of the brazen serpent, undoubtedly intended by the king to reveal to men their unutterable folly and the absolute wickedness of their idolatry.

Now, what will this king do with this thing of brass? No blame can be attached to the people for having preserved it; there was no sin in their preservation of the serpent; it was something which, coming up out of their past history, ought to have reminded them of God and the spiritual lessons they had learned in that hour of sin and of judgment and wondrous deliverance.

Hezekiah took this sacred relic and broke it in pieces, its associations notwithstanding. This he did because, with true insight, he understood that it was a source of danger to the people and therefore he could make no compromise with it. It was an act of true reform. It was the act of a man who would make no peace with that most sacred thing, a thing which in itself was not an evil thing, which in itself had no virtue and no vice, but which had become a source of danger to the people. It must therefore be destroyed. That is the story. Now let us make certain applications of it to our own day.

The first I suggest is this: God's very gifts to men may be so abused as to become positively injurious. Anything to which we are burning incense merely because of the sacredness of its past associations is a peril to our spiritual life, and ought to be destroyed. Let me be pertinent and practical. What are some of the things to which we are in danger of burning incense to-day?

I have known Christian congregations burn incense to the very building in which they assembled for worship, as though it were sacred in itself, as though to pass its threshold and be under its roof were to be in the very house of God and at the gate of heaven. That in itself is idolatry. We may so revere a building as to make a true worship of God impossible inside it. This is a strange paradox, and I shall ask you to bear quite patiently with me as I give you a very simple illustration out of my own past experience. I remember twenty-five years ago it had been arranged that I was to go to a certain church - of what denomination and in what town is of no matter - to conduct special mission services for fifteen days. As the time drew near I had a letter from the officers of the church saying that while they still felt the need of such services, the church had been recently renovated, and they had decided to abandon the mission in case the paint should be injured by strangers coming in! That is cold history. We may say that we should not do such a foolish thing as that; but we need to remember that the attitude of mind which made such an action possible is a perpetual peril. We call bricks and mortar a church. There is a sense in which that is true; but there is a sense in which a material building may become a grave and a terrible menace to the spiritual life of a church. We burn incense to our buildings and imagine that when we have passed into them we are separated to the worship of God. It is possible for a man to sit in this building from beginning to end of the service and never draw near to the true place of worship.

Then there are the exercises of public worship; we may burn incense to them, and make our form of service so ornate, so regular, so beautiful, that the very Spirit of God Who, like a breath of wind, would pass over the congregation, would not be able to find room to enter. We may burn incense to order, and so create the gravest disorder.

We may burn incense to the ministry considered as a caste. It may be that here we are in no danger of doing that. It may be that those of us who belong to the Free Church are in no danger of that particular form of idolatry, yet the peril lingers even among us. I know men who do not care to take the sacrament unless some ordained man preside. That is priestcraft, I would be quite content to take the bread and wine from the hands of some godly mother in Israel.

We still burn incense to the individual man, and though we have never used the word nor do we think of using it, our attitude is that of the deification of the individual. We have an idea that the whole Kingdom of God will fall if a certain man fails us, or moves to some other sphere of work. A subtle idolatry threatens us in spiritual things, sacred things. The danger that threatens us is that we may worship that which is the means rather than the God Who reaches us through those means.

It is possible to burn incense to a creed, to systematized theology. It is possible to crib, cabin and confine spiritual growth by loyalty to some dead hand of orthodoxy. I venture to say with all boldness that I am the right man to say that kind of thing. This Divine Library is final in authority; but not your interpretation of it, nor mine, nor that of any man. No creeds that have been drawn up by honest souls in the past are final interpretations of the literature of the heavens. This Bible is as wonderful as the Spirit of God, forevermore breaking, annulling, destroying human interpretations, and blossoming into new beauty, singing itself out into new poetry, making poor the finest utterances of past interpretation. Yet there are men who ask me to sign a creed, and subscribe to a dogma, and contribute to systematized theology. They are burning incense to a creed. They are making a creed, which is a thing of men's hands, devout and sincere in itself, an object of worship.

I have even known men to burn incense to a trust deed and allow the work of God to be interfered with and spoiled because of the terms that lie within some such deed, drawn up amid some conditions that long since have passed away. There was a need for a certain wording of the trust deed at the time; but that is no warrant for saying that a trust deed must hold men today and prevent them from going forward and doing the work to which God is calling them, work which the age demands and which the mental mood of the hour is calling them to do. In many ways we are doing what these Hebrews did, lifting a serpent of brass and burning incense to it.

It is possible to be idolatrous in the matter of prayer, and in the matter of the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism. It is possible to treat all these things which are means of grace as though they were grace. It is possible to treat these things which are Divinely appointed ordinances, symbols, signs, sacraments, outward and visible signs of the inward and invisible grace, as though they in themselves were channels of the invisible grace. That is sacerdotalism. Not merely the claim of the priest of Greek, Roman, or Anglican ordination, but the worship of the sacrament by men who profess to have escaped from all such bondage. That is burning incense to an idol.

I have known men who were worshipers of the day of their conversion. I know men who tell me that ten, twenty, or thirty years ago, here or there, they were born again; and today they are dead in trespasses and sins, but still burn incense to the old experience, imagining that to be true worship. The memory of an hour of illumination, of clear shining, may change the volition and transfigure the life, I admit it; but such a memory has no value today unless today the light is shining, the soul is poised toward God, and the attitude of the life is what it ought to be toward our fellow men. Yet we burn incense to these dead things. They were living things at the moment, they had their place and their value, they were God's own means of blessing to us; but today we gather about them and worship them and have no dealing with God.

Of all such action, looking back at the ancient story, I will say that such abuse of things in themselves sacred and right and God-appointed can come only out of spiritual degeneracy. Loyalty to God will maintain all these in their true place and true proportion. The serpent was never the depository of virtue, nor is any one of these I have mentioned.

The only way of virtue, using the word in its broadest and best sense as meaning strength and sanctity - the only way of virtue is the way of immediate dealing with God. So surely as men are burning incense to the brazen serpent, to creeds, to human instrumentalities, to ordinances, even God-appointed ordinances, so surely it is because they have lost the power of commerce with heaven and communion with God. No man will ever burn incense to any of these things who lives and works in the light and hears the voice of God within his own soul. The man who hears the voice of God within his own soul can find Bethel in the railway train, on the highway. It is loss of the vision of God that is demonstrated by the deification of anything less than God.

Yet, blessed be God, this deification of the little is demonstration of the fact that man cannot find rest except in God Himself. If you have lost the vision and the true spiritual communion, then you must worship something, you must put something back in its place. That, as I said before, is not to defend idolatry, it is not to say the final word concerning the activity, for if it be true that idolatry demonstrates capacity for God, it is equally true that idolatry ultimately destroys the capacity for God. If it be true that having lost God, I put this idol in His place, so surely as I do I shall presently become like the idol I make, and having eyes I shall see not, and having ears I shall hear not, and having hands I also like my idol shall not be able to feel, I shall become insensate. Deification of anything less than God demonstrates the capacity for worship and is a revelation of hunger; but it issues in the destruction of the very capacity it demonstrates.

What is the right attitude toward all such things? I suggest that our right attitude is first to name the things rightly. Look and see that this cunning artifice of brass is not a serpent, it is brass. Then name it Nehushtan, a thing of brass. Call the church a building of bricks and mortar. Call the minister a man, and remember that he is none other, and if he is other he ought not to be in the ministry. Call the exercises of worship forms, remembering that form without power is in itself a curse. Call creeds and systematized theology human opinion, and respect it as human opinion and in no other way. Call the trust deed paper or parchment, as the case may be. Call prayer words. Call the day of your conversion past.

If any or all of these things are coming between your soul and God Himself break them in pieces. Not merely the idols which your fathers had before the flood, not merely the idols which you found in the land, but the idol which is one of your sacred things which in a past hour of need was God's provision for your well-being. If it has become an idol, then must it be broken in pieces.

Let us bring our most sacred things to the test, and let us remember that to whatever we burn incense we must destroy if the burning of the incense has resulted in the loss of the vision of God and issued in inability to commune with God. Infinitely better to be stripped of every means of grace, and to come to worship as a naked spirit with God alone, than to allow these things which He has instituted to help us to such worship, to stand between us and Himself. That is the teaching.

Yet a final word is this; the true attitude of the soul is that of the retention of all these things in their true place and in their true proportion. The true attitude of the soul is that in which it looks back to the day when life began in Christ and rejoices in it, but immediately brings that past experience into expression in the living present. The great autobiographical passage of the Apostle Paul in the Philippian letter has often been quoted; let us hear it once again. Writing to his Philippian children from prison and reviewing the process of his Christian life, looking back to the hour on the Damascus road when he was apprehended by his Master, he said, "Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ." That counting was at least thirty years before, but there was no virtue in that. A little further on he added, "Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss." The "I counted" of yesterday is of no value unless it be carried into the "I count" of today. If today I count all things but loss, then I shall never undervalue that past experience on the way to Damascus; but the light that shone on me on the way to Damascus, or in the midst of that revival of thirty years ago, is of no value today unless there shines on my soul this morning the light of God, and I answer it.

So with prayer. Savonarola declared on one occasion that when prayer reaches its ultimate height words are impossible, that when the soul has come to terms of communion with God words are left behind. I think every Christian man and woman who knows anything of the secret place knows how true that is. There is another application of the great truth concerning prayer that we often lose sight of. In my experience the prayers that have most profoundly touched my soul and moved me, the prayers that I have felt have most perfectly taken hold of God, were prayers that broke down in the middle, that could not be continued, but ended in blundering articulation and half-finished sentences, and then a sob and silence. That is prayer. If the sense of God that produces such an attitude in the soul of man is absent, then elegance of diction is blasphemy, and beauty of phrasing is impertinence, and we are burning incense to a thing of brass rather than worshiping God. The true attitude of the soul is that which - to use the word of the old economy - brings with it words, and pours out thought in speech before the throne of God, setting no value on the form of the words, but all value on the grip of the soul on God, and the touch of God on the soul.

Not to proceed further with these things already referred to, the final thing is this; let us keep this serpent of brass, let us learn to keep it by making the necessity for its destruction unnecessary. Let us retain it and let it speak to our hearts its true lesson. Let it say to us forevermore: I remind you of the hour of sin; beware of sin; I remind you of the hour of swift judgment which must come again if you sin; I remind you of the hour of deliverance. If we so keep it, and let it thus speak to us, we shall never burn incense .to it, but when it has thus spoken we shall forget it as we worship God.