**VOLUME 8; CHAPTER 19 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**OUR ALTAR by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*We have an altar.*

*Hebrews 13:10*

THE MAJORITY OF DAYS IN THE LIVES OF THE MAJORITY OF men are ordinary days. Nevertheless, all men have extraordinary days, red-letter days; and whatever may be the nature of the experience which makes them stand out from all the rest, these are the days that give character to all the rest. Men mark or celebrate such days in different ways. We very often reveal ourselves quite unexpectedly by the manner in which we celebrate them, and we reveal our God almost unknowingly. This fact may be illustrated in very many ways. There are men, quite irrespective of their educational advantages or social position, who celebrate any day that stands out from the rest by a drink or a feast. They are revealing themselves, and in the biting, scorching satire of the great Apostle we may say of them, "whose god is their belly." There are men of a much higher type who will celebrate the day of emotion, whether it be of joy or of sorrow, by a great song, a treatise, some expression of the inward life that others may know it. There are men who celebrate a day of tragic sorrow, a day of ecstatic joy, by a bequest, or by raising a memorial.

The men of the Old Testament turned all such days into opportunities for raising altars. It is very interesting to run through the Old Testament and see in what varied circumstances these men raised altars. According to the record, when Noah found himself in possession of the world he raised an altar. When Abraham, after some tarrying, found himself at last in the land to which God had directed him he raised an altar. In that ultimate and final experience of his soul, when after long processes and much fellowship with God, groping after Him and finding Him and coming ever nearer to Him, he at last reached the spiritual experience which was higher than that of desiring privilege, namely fellowship in suffering, Abraham erected an altar on which to offer his son. And in after years that son, a man of quietness and peace who stands out on the pages of the Old Testament as celebrated for digging wells and living by them, when at last he was left in peace after a commonplace quarrel between herdsmen concerning wells, he too raised an altar. When Moses had prayed all day with uplifted hands, and Amalek was defeated, he built his altar and called it Jehovah-nissi, the Lord our Banner. When at last Ai was reduced, after the defeat of the hosts of God as the result of the sin of a man, Joshua built his altar. When Gideon was going through the process of preparation for delivering his people from the oppression of Midian, he built an altar. When God had wondrously appeared on behalf of His people, and through a thunderstorm had discomfited the foe, Samuel built an altar and called it Ebenezer. When David sinned, and the people were visited by plague, and when the plague was stayed, right there, where it halted at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, David built an altar.

These men were always building altars. At a time of great joy they built an altar, in the time of sorrow they built an altar, if they were defeated they built an altar, if they were victorious they built an altar, if they sinned they built an altar, if they triumphed over temptation they built an altar. This rearing of altars by the old patriarchs was revealing. When the Mosaic economy came, careful instructions were given for the private raising of altars. Such was the instruction we read in the book of Exodus. In the ceremonial system the altar had its place, its central place; but the idea that was suggested by the altar was larger than the ceremonial system. For what we see in it is God accommodating Himself to, and answering, the human heart in its great need; and that which thus sprang out of the human heart came originally from God. So deep answered deep in the provision of the law.

The writer of this letter to the Hebrews took up the sacred things of their religion in order to show how all found fulfilment in Christ. In all this letter there is a theoretical value; it is a defense of the faith; there is also a practical value, for it is a revelation of the conduct resulting from that faith. From beginning to end the writer sees in the Son of God the effulgence of the glory of God, and in all the ministry and mission of the Son he sees the fulfilment of those things which humanity had been groping after. Almost at the end of the letter he said, "We have an altar."

Our meditation is intended to deal with the idea suggested by the altar rather than with the particular ritual to which the writer was referring. When he said, "We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle," he was dealing with the putting aside of all ritual method of the past; but he retained the altar, and thus retained the idea of the altar, and claimed that while the veil of the tabernacle had been rent in twain and all the Mosaic ritual had been superseded, the essential thing which the altar always symbolized remained, "We have an altar."

I have made this somewhat lengthy reference to the place of the altar in the Old Testament in order to say that in proportion as we are finding our way back into the habit of these men, the habit itself being cleansed, purified, fulfilled, made glorious in the light of the Christian fact, we are finding the true attitude to the day of crisis, to the day that stands out, to the day that casts its light or its shadow on all other days. Just such a day came to some of us last week, when all the light of life went out, or when suddenly there broke on a pathway that long had been shadowed a new and glorious light in which we rejoiced. There was that one hour last week in which, in spite of all professions and protestations, and sincere they were, we fell into sin, and the dark horror of it is on our soul, and all the days are threatened by the shadow of it. What are we to do in these days? These men of the olden days built an altar, and laid on it a sacrifice, and watched the material fire devour it, and forced their souls into the spiritual conception suggested by the fire, and so got back to God. There are days when we feel we would like to do exactly the same thing, get away to some quiet desert place and slay something and see it burn for the readjustment of spiritual things. But we do not do these things today. Nevertheless, as this writer says, "We have an altar."

Keeping in that atmosphere of the past, I want this morning to find out for my own soul's sake what these men meant, in order to discover what my attitude ought to be to the day which stands out, black or radiant, in order that neither the darkness nor the light may affect the other days in such a way as to spoil them. "We have an altar." Let us get back to these great men of the past. When they built their altars, what did they mean? Fundamentally the action was one of worship; actively, it was sacrifice; experimentally, it was readjustment and new beginning.

First it was worship. The erection of an altar was an expression of belief in God. The erection of an altar was the expression of the sense of need of God. The erection of an altar was the expression of desire for God. The erection of an altar was the expression of submission to God. If that analysis seems almost unnecessary, as though having said "worship" we have said all; yet these are elements that we have to remember. When that man is building his altar, watch him at his work; forget all that surrounds him, forget the immediate occasion of the building, and inquire quietly while he builds his altar what he is doing and why he is doing it. Building an altar means that a man believes in God, not that he knows God perfectly, not that he understands God adequately, not that he has anything like final fellowship with God, but that he believes in God. It means more; it means that the man not only believes in God, but is conscious within his soul that what he needs is that very God in Whom he believes. Whether for his joy or his sorrow, his darkness or his light, he needs that God. Not only does it mean that he believes in God and feels his need of God; it also means that he desires God. If one could listen to the deepest thing in the life of any man who is seen building his altar we should hear him say, One thing I desire, it is that I may find God and order my way before Him! There are occasional singers who actually utter words, words which became the inspiration of pilgrims through all the ages; but for the one man who sings the actual words there are a thousand men who are acting in harmony with the song which they cannot express.

The altar means more than belief, more than confession of need, more than desire. Whenever a man builds an altar he is expressing, imperfectly, inadequately, but nevertheless sincerely, his desire to submit himself to the God to Whom he thus builds. As I find my way through these pages of the past, with all their magnificent revelation of contradictory things in human life - passion, prejudice, pride, lust, love - and I see these primitive men, rough, unhewn men, building altars in all sorts of circumstances, making every new occasion in life the opportunity for building an altar, I see men worshiping.

But observe carefully that it is an altar each man builds, and that the meaning of the altar is always sacrifice. An altar built by a man who believes in God, needs God, desires God, and submits to God, is a confession of his consciousness of distance from God, and a confession, moreover, of something within him that speaks of the possibility of restoration to nearness, which must be based on some mystery of sacrifice and pain. Every altar means sacrifice.

Experientially, the altar as these men of the past raised it, meant as I have said, readjustment in all circumstances. The events giving rise to the altar were set in the light of the altar. The joy that fills the life and makes man raise his altar is now to be conditioned by all that the altar stands for. The sorrow that has overwhelmed him, out of the agony of which he has built his altar, is now to be put in the light of these essential things which the altar suggests to him. The altar forever speaks of the readjustment of life in the presence of God through the mystery of sacrifice.

The altar always meant more than that experientially in those Old Testament narratives. After the altar, there was the move forward, according to the things of the altar. I will not stay to illustrate it. Take your Bible and spend an hour or two going through the story of individual altars, and you will find in every case that after the altar there was a move forward, a line of progress; and everywhere the forward movement was the result of the readjustment of the life in the presence of the altar. The men who moved forward from the altar which they had raised in the hour of their solemn, sacrificial approach to God carried with them in the forward move the things which gave occasion to the altar. Joy, sorrow, light, darkness, defeat, victory - the values were wrested from all these in that hour of the altar's worship; and the men marched forward, stronger for these very experiences as they were found and sanctified in the hour of worship in the presence of the altar.

"We have an altar." I need not stay to remind you that the whole subject of the letter to the Hebrews is that in the Lord Christ we have found all that men were seeking after, and seeing dimly by the altar and the priest and the sacrifice. In the Lord Christ we have that coming near to us of God, which means the discovery of the meaning of defeat, the answer of the desire of our heart after God, and the removal of all those things which prevented our realization of fellowship with Him. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, "We have an altar," that is, an abiding altar, which in some senses we have not to erect, for it is always erected; yet an altar which in some senses we must ever erect, erect again and again, and bring to its measurement and its correction every crisis in life that appalls the soul with fear or joy, with trembling or with a sense of triumph.

Let us go back again for a moment to the old story. Not without profound significance were the instructions which Moses gave concerning the erection of these altars. We have no means of knowing the form or fashion of them in those patriarchal days before these instructions. Moreover, we must not confuse the instructions of Moses here concerning the altar with those instructions on the great altars of the ritual which he received in the Mount. The instructions here were quite clear and simple, and, indeed, most astonishing, for they were for the man who desired to erect an altar for himself. It must be of earth, or if perchance it should be of stone, then it must be of unhewn stone; and, further, no steps were to help him in his ascent to the altar.

The altar was to be of earth; that was the first simple command. If some man should desire to raise his altar amid rocky fastnesses where perchance no earth could be found, then let him build it of stone; but he must not grave or polish his stone, or set any tool on it; he must erect quite simply a heap of rough stones, and he must not under any circumstances approach it by steps. Without any interpretation, we all realize the wonderful significance and suggestiveness of these simple requirements.

The altar is to be of earth, it is to be of the commonest, it is to be of that which every man or woman could find close at hand, earth, common earth. Build your altar of that; just make a heap of earth, that is all! Is that all? No! There is more. Listen: "In every place where I record My name I will come unto thee and I will bless thee." Wherever a man shall thus erect his altar of earth God will come to him, and from that moment of revelation, man would understand the meaning of the altar he had erected in the twilight. Wherever a man gets earth together and erects an altar, God comes there, heaven touches earth, God is nigh at hand. His approach to the human soul is dependent on that desire of the human soul for Him which expresses itself in the sacramental symbol of the heap of earth. There, says God, I will come to him.

If the altar be of stone, then let it be of unhewn stone. No tool must be lifted on it; there must be nothing of artifice in the symbol of approach to God, nothing to create self-consciousness in the worshiper, no human workmanship. Note the appalling severity of the word. Who can doubt the accuracy of it: "If thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it"? No steps to the altar, no approach by climbing, "that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon." How appallingly human nakedness is discovered when by its ornate ritual it attempts to get near to God. This man says - nay verily, let me be true to the context - this Church says, "I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing," and the Watcher with eyes of fire says, "Thou art the wretched one, and miserable and poor and blind and naked." That is a Church climbing to the altar by steps carved and beautiful, by a ritual which is self-conscious and self-assertive. In these ultimate matters of the dealing of the soul with God, the altar must be of the earth or of unhewn stones, of such things that man can find in them nothing that ministers to his own pride. There will I meet with thee, says God.

"We have an altar." If the altar shall be seen to be the Lord Christ, then let me say the things that are in my own heart. The wonder of God's revelation of Himself in Christ is the simplicity of Christ, the humanness of Christ, the fact that in all the brief period of His revelation in human history He walked the plane - I hardly like the word, but let me use it - of the commonplace. If some of us had lived with Him as He then lived, we would not have spoken to Him. He had no social position. He was of the earth, the lowest of all the low, and the lowliest of all the lowly! That is the marvel. There are some of us to whom others will not speak, and we are angry. He was not angry. It is not only true that in that human life of His He was beneath the notice of some people; it is also true that He was perfectly happy there. If in His presence those who hold their fellows in contempt are rebuked, those who in turn hold in contempt those who hold them in contempt are also rebuked. Do not forget this. Again forgive the phrase - there is no meaning in it in this connection in Ruskin's sense - but here we find the true ethics of the dust! Christ is an altar for me of the common dust, the clay of my humanity! Yet, so help me God, I would not speak irreverently of that common clay of my humanity; that is the only glory I have. All other things are accidental trappings, to be destroyed in the fire, that eremacausis, the slowly burning fire of God, that is always destroying effete things. The accidental things that separate men are being destroyed in that fire, blessed be God!

When a man in the hour of crisis readjusts things his first business is to find himself anew in Christ in the common fact of his humanity, and to strip himself of all the ornaments and accidentals by which he thinks he rises - and by which he does seem to rise a little way above his fellows. Do you remember what Mr. Dooley said about the skyscrapers of New York? They are called skyscrapers, by everything except the sky! Let that be a parable, and there I leave it. When I want to readjust things in hours of crisis, of sin, or sorrow, or tragedy, my first business is to get to the altar of Christ which is of the earth, and, stripping myself of everything else, put my manhood by the side of His Manhood. That is the first thing, the great thing, the sublime thing. I never climb to God on the steps I have carved. I climb to God when I descend to the dignity of my naked humanity on the earth and in the dust; and when, lying there, I find the Son of Man, for there also I find heaven opened, for He is also Son of God. He will interpret my problem and heal my wounds and illuminate my darkness. There is no approach to God by climbing.

Heaven comes down our souls to greet,

And glory crowns the mercy seat.

I glance back once more over all the pages of the past, and find the altar was the symbol of human conditions. When the altar was neglected there was individual, social, national weakness. One of the first signs of true revival was repairing altars and erecting new ones. When the altars were whole, and used, there were times of prosperity.

I leave these larger applications this morning, for I am more occupied with the individual. Unless I take this crisis to which I have come to the altar which is also an altar of sacrifice, then it is going to harm me, whatever its character may be. A new joy having come into your life, my brother - a joy of God, and from God, and intended for you - which does not make you erect your altar, a joy in the experience of which you do not go back for readjustment to the altar, will work you harm, however beneficent it may seem. Let me now speak tenderly, but as faithfully as I know how. Some of you are brooding over a sorrow, nursing it persistently; you have never taken it to your Lord, you have never erected your altar, have never stripped yourself in the presence of the Man Christ Jesus and found in Him the solace of grace, and through Him your way to God. Sorrow like a bird of evil omen, with its black wings outstretched, is blighting your life, and, more, it is spoiling the lives around you. Let us fulfil the symbolism of the past in the light of the new, and erect our altar and find our way into that fellowship with God that comes through Christ.

We have an altar, not in Jerusalem, not in any official place, but outside the camp and on the earth. This altar is for every occasion of life, and especially for those that are marked as special, an occasion of joy or of sorrow, of victory or of defeat, of holiness or of sin.

I have said nothing of the appeal of this passage. I conclude by referring to it and asking you to consider what the writer of the letter said. There are two kinds of sacrifices which we are to offer on our altar. First, praises to God, and, second, "to do good and to communicate forget not," that is the giving of benefits to other men. To erect this altar is always to be constrained, first, to praise God, and then to be driven out on the pathway of beneficent helpful service.

If in this hour of sudden crisis, on this day that stands out from the rest by reason of sudden joy or swift sorrow, I cannot do that which sometimes one feels would be helpful, erect an actual altar and slay a victim and watch the fires burn it, still, let me remember that all the spiritual things suggested by that act are mine in Christ. He is the sacrifice, through Him burns the perpetual fire, and in Him the elemental things of my soul may be restored, purged, lifted, renewed, satisfied. Then let us who have the altar use it to the glory of His name.