**VOLUME 8; CHAPTER 20 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE PRESENCE NEEDED by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*If Thy presence go not ... carry us not up hence.*

*Exodus 23:15*

IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD THERE HAS BEEN NOTHING comparable to the creation of the Hebrew nation and its attempted realization of the theocratic form of government. Moreover, in the history of that nation no time was more wonderful than the period during which Moses was dictator. He was a man of vast learning and singular force of character. To him the greatness of the nation consisted in its relationship to God, and his greatness as a leader lay in the wonderful way in which he was able to keep alive among the people during the period of his oversight this conception of their greatness.

The occasion of the words of my text is to be noted, and that with some care. Three months after the exodus the people came to the wilderness of Sinai, and there encamped, and Moses ascended the Mount. In those lonely heights he saw and heard that before which all former sights and sounds were as nothing. The pomp and splendor of Pharaoh's court, in which he had been nourished, paled into insignificance before the glory of the great King as it was unveiled before his wondering eyes.

During a period of months he spent his time passing backward and forward between the people and God, and during this time he received the Divine constitution of the nation, its laws and its ritual. The Sinaitic peninsula became the theater of revelations that were to affect humanity to the end of time, and Moses was the medium of revelation.

After his last sojourn of forty days in the Mount, he descended to find the golden calf, to find the people hankering after a representation of God - for the people had made the golden calf, not as an attempt to supersede God, but to represent Him. We know the story of this man's fierce anger and sorrow, how he smashed the tables of stone to fragments and instituted most drastic methods of dealing with the people. Then we see him returning from those terrible hours to God, and in God's presence breathing out his soul in a petition that was never finished, and is all the more eloquent and forceful because it was never finished, He said, "If Thou wilt forgive their sin …" and the sentence is unfinished; "and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written." In that hour of solemn and awful communion between Moses and God he was commanded to return to the people and resume his position as leader. God said to him, I will not go up in the midst of these people lest I consume them. I will send an angel. Then follows one of the most wonderful of all Bible pictures, the picture of this man mediating between God and the people, arguing the case with God. We are to remember that the very argument of Moses was inspired by God. At last God said to His waiting servant, "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest." Then all the pent-up agony of Moses' soul expressed the resolution inspiring all his mediation as he cried out, "If Thy presence go not … carry us not up hence."

I want to lead you, so far as I am able, or rather so far as I may be helped, in consideration of this story, and then to leave it to make its own application, to speak its own message to us. We fix our attention on that word which was the response of Moses to the word of God's grace, that word in which there is revealed all the terror which had assailed his soul at the thought that God was about to withdraw Himself from His people. "If Thy presence go not ... carry us not up thence."

Let us inquire, first of all, the reason for that word. Why did Moses say such a thing, and how did he come to the resolution which expressed itself in that word? Then, second, let us observe the definiteness of his decision, and inquire the reason for it.

First, then, the reason for the decision itself, and the way by which Moses reached it. He took this position because he realized that the presence of God met the people's needs. This is the simplest of all statements, and I have made it so, in order that we may come face to face with the great teaching. Let us go back with this man and find out what he had been learning concerning God that made him decide that progress without God was impossible, for that is the meaning of the declaration, "If Thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence." We cannot go back on the past, it is too glorious. We decline to go forward on any conditions other than those which have made the past. Progress without God is impossible; retrogression is out of the question. What revelations had Moses received of God that brought him to that decision? For the moment I am going to confine myself to those latest revelations of God that had come to Moses during those months in which he had been holding communion with God on the height of the mountain. I shall go further back presently to find out the process by which he came to the ultimate decision. What did he know of God as the result of those recent revelations?

He had discovered that God was a God of law. He had discovered that He was a God of order. He had discovered that He was a God of gifts. He had discovered that He was a God of love.

He had discovered that He was a God of law, that He was a God of law because the people needed law. In that wonderful code which, according to this record, he had received in the solemn and high hours of communion he had found a law perfectly adapted and adjusted to the needs of these people. It was a Divine law, coming from One Who knew the whole need of these people, and it was perfectly adjusted to that need. It was a human law in its image of man's weakness. We read these Old Testament Scriptures somewhat carelessly. At least, we are in danger of doing so, and there is a reason for this in that we have grown away from some of the incidental things of these laws; but to read them carefully and intelligently, and in the atmosphere of the hour and in the midst of the conditions of the people, is to realize what Moses realized - as they were whispered in his soul, spoken to him with a voice articulate perchance, or more probably in the high altitude of communion with God - that these were the exact regulations and requirements that these people needed. Think of the people, semi-barbarous, vulgarized by over two centuries of brutal slavery, suddenly led out of slavery into freedom. Is there any more perilous situation? With profound respect, and making no claim to an understanding of the problem, my friends in the United States, men of the North and men of the South, will agree with me that the most terrific hour that came in their history was the hour when the Negroes were freed - and still the problem of the Negro is not solved. Think of these people, then, as freed from two hundred years of slavery. They had never lost the sense of relationship to God and of some Divine purpose in their history; but, nevertheless, they were vulgarized by the brutalities of human oppression. At your leisure, read again the whole code as you find it in Exodus, and observe its perfect adaptation to the needs of these people. Moses had discovered that God was a God of law, adapting Himself to the needs of men, speaking words to regulate their conduct and their relationships, of infinite wisdom.

He had discovered, moreover, that God was a God of order. All this had been revealed in details which seem to us to be so trivial that we read them carelessly, "Let them make Me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show thee, the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the furniture thereof, even so shall ye make it." Then instructions were given, such as, eleven curtains of goats' hair, the length of each, thirty cubits, and the breadth of each, four cubits; and thou shalt couple them with clasps of gold and loops on the edge! This is the kind of thing which we read hurriedly, and sometimes even smile at, saying, Did God really say all that? He said all that, and I venture to affirm that Moses had been supremely impressed with the orderliness of God, with the fact that when He gave instructions to a people in this stage of development, He descended to the details of loops and clasps and couplings and lengths and breadths and materials. He is not only the God of the infinitely great, He is also the God of the infinitely small, careful not only concerning constellations, but also concerning the order of the leaves on the branches of the trees, so that, if we examine it, we cannot discover anything irregular in nature. If a tent is to be made for a people to worship in, God knows the materials and the couplings. At last, in the final chapter, we find the majestic music of the seven- fold repetition, "According to the pattern."

Moses discovered, moreover, that God was a God of gifts. "And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, See, I have called by the name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship." What for? "To devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones for setting, and in carving of wood." Men inspired by the Spirit of God to be goldsmiths and silversmiths, workers in brass and stone, and carvers of wood. Moses had heard that wonderful word. God would take hold of Bezaleel and fill him with the Spirit to make him cunning to work a work of delicate beauty to which he was called. Fingers hardened with the brutality of brick-making were to be made delicate enough for fine gold work. Moses had found that if God is indeed particular that the order He chooses be observed, He is also One Who gives a new and mystic power by which fingers shall become deft to do the appointed work.

Finally, Moses had found in that agony of argument that God was a God of love, for he had heard God say amid the fiery indignation of His holiness against the failure and sin of the people in the valley, "I will not go up in the midst of thee … lest I consume thee by the way." The inspiration of the anger was the tenderness of God's love; the threatened withdrawal was the evidence of His patience and longsuffering.

Thus Moses came into the presence of God knowing that if God remained in the midst of His people to direct, control, suggest, then all their need was met; he was convinced of this thing also, that if God were absent, then only need remained.

There is no suggestion in the story of the withdrawal of God actually, for God never withdraws Himself from humanity, and, speaking within the limitation of human expression, God cannot withdraw Himself from humanity, for in Him men live and move and have their being. The thought is of the withdrawal of the consciousness of God, - withdrawal of the sense of His presence. The angel proposed to lead them did not mean the absence of God, but the absence of the consciousness of God in the minds of men; and thus the terror that seized the soul of Moses was that this God - Whose presence had been made known to him, and was symbolized to the people by the thunder and the cloud and the lightning on the Mount, and was now to be evidenced in this very law and ritual - should withdraw the consciousness of Himself, and there should be between Him and His people the intermediation of an angel. This terror was born of his profound conviction of the need the people had of God, and of the fact that God perfectly met that need.

How did this man come to this conviction of the sufficiency of God? My inquiry may be answered briefly by declaring that successive revelations of God had been given to him to which he had been obedient, and by obedience to which the capacity had been created within his soul for new revelations. If the story of this man be pondered, it will be seen that God was ever breaking in on him with new methods and with new light. After forty years of shepherd life, forty years of preparation, forty splendid years of loneliness in the wilderness, God appeared to him. When next you think of Moses do not pity him when he leaves the glitter and gaud of Pharaoh's court. It was a great hour when he left all that behind and reached the essential grandeur of the loneliness of the wilderness, and that high sense of the nearness of God that always comes to a man when it is possible for him to escape from the tinsel and show of earthly things. After forty years, one day, as he was leading his flock as a shepherd, he saw a strange sight, a bush that burned with fire and was not consumed, and he heard within his soul a voice that said to him "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." This was a mystic and inclusive revelation, but not the perfect explanation, of the fact revealed. The suggestion was that God is a fire, which does not necessarily consume, but, drawing near to which a man must put the shoes from off his feet, or, in the language of our own day, recognize the need for reverence and submission and awe. Then Moses heard speech, the condescension of God as He took the speech of man and spoke to Moses' soul, revealing the fact of God's consciousness of what had bruised and broken Moses' heart forty years before in Egypt; "I have surely seen the affliction of My people, which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their task-masters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians." Trembling and afraid, Moses had shrunk from the great mission to which he was called, and said, I am not eloquent; and had been rebuked as God said to him, "Who hath made man's mouth?" Following on blindly, blunderingly, yet heroically, Moses had watched the power of God destroy the great nation and deliver an oppressed people. During those three months between the escape from Egypt and the arrival at Sinai, he had found that this God was a God of resource. Draw a contrast, for the sake of the light that comes from it. Think, first, of that night of the crossing of the sea, the sweeping of the wind of God, the holding back of the waters, the mystic awfulness of the stress and strain and storm, the march of the people through the sea; and the breaking of the morning and the music of the great song of victory. Then think of Marah, the bitter well, of the healing tree close beside it, and of God discovering the natural secret to His servant, so that the water was healed. Thus God was discovered as a God of resource, not merely the majestic might that breaks the yoke of the oppressor and divides the sea, but as a God of hidden secrets of healing, and of springs among the rocks, so that waters gushed forth for the quenching of His people's thirst. At last Moses came to Sinai, the culmination of everything that preceded it, where the burning bush found explanation, and all the secrets that lay behind the operation of the Divine power were unveiled. Do you wonder that in this hour of national failure and national sin, when it seemed as though God would withdraw Himself from the people He had so wondrously made, that this man cried out in the agony of his soul, "If Thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence?"

Now, observe the definiteness of this position. In an earlier chapter of this book we find the word concerning God's personal guidance of this people: "The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light," and, again, "And the angel of the Lord, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them." Such had been the experience of the past, the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night: symbols, merely, necessary to meet the need of that peculiar people. We see no cloud by day, no pillar of fire by night. We have never seen cloven tongues of fire sitting on the heads of assembled saints. Why not? Because we live in a day of greater light and privilege, when signs that are natural are unnecessary because of the fulness of spiritual illumination. Remember, we are now thinking of that dim and distant time, when these people were, as I have already described them, semi-barbarous, vulgarized by slavery. God fulfils Himself in many ways, always adapting Himself to the immediate need of His people. The supreme fact was the presence of God, and this was suggested to them, and kept before their minds, by that mystic cloud which burned and gleamed in the darkness of the night. The deeper truth is that the Angel of Jehovah was there, not seen but present. We must ever draw a very clear distinction in reading the Old Testament between "The Angel of the Lord" and "An angel of the Lord." Wherever we find the phrase "The Angel of the Lord," we discover that it has quite a separate significance, and refers to an entirely distinct person. It is difficult to say so much without saying a little more. To my own mind, there is no doubt whatever that the One spoken of as "The Angel of the Lord" was the Son of God Himself, Who thus appeared in many a mystic manifestation in the olden days, and Who must never be confused with the angel ministers. Through that figurative, poetic language of the time, the truth is revealed that God had been actually leading, overshadowing with the cloud by day, and shining in the gleaming fire by night.

In this hour of peril and of sin God said to His servant, I will send an angel, and Moses declined to accept an angel, he declined to go forward if there was to be some substitute for God, even in the form of an angel. That would have been retrogression, a going back. That is the meaning of one of the things that Moses said in the course of his praying, "See, Thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and Thou hast not let me know him whom Thou wilt send with me." It is as though Moses said to God, I have come to know Thee, through these unveilings and revelations, but I do not know the angel. I know nothing in all literature more wonderful than this, a man saying to God, I decline angel guidance after having known Thy guidance. God answered this man - appalling as seems his daring, so appalling that we almost tremble to put it in that way - by saying, "My presence shall go with thee."

Observe now, most carefully, that to which I referred by way of introduction. Moses did not suggest that they should go back. Retrogression was impossible, the past was too glorious. A little while after, the people suggested that they should go back: "Were it not better for us to return into Egypt?" There was no such thought, however, in the mind of Moses. It was impossible to go back on that glorious past. That I do not now dwell on, but this I do want to insist on: he did not dream of progress without God, "If Thy presence go not with us, carry us not up thence." Better to die here, underneath all the magnificence of this mountain in the wilderness, and be buried, than to cross the Jordan and enter the land that flows with milk and honey without God. "If Thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence." The deliberate choice of the lawgiver was that, having arrived at that point in the glorious history when the onward march was checked by sin, if God was withdrawing Himself, the best thing was to die in the wilderness. All this is the language of high faith and clear belief.

How terribly we fail here, oftentimes, in individual, church, and national life. If in very deed God has departed from us, then let us cease. Oh, the agony of attempting to go forward along a line of the Divine pathway when God has withdrawn Himself. What insufferable agony - if you will permit me the superlative illustration, as it seems to me - would be that of the preacher who, having seen the vision and heard the voice and known the thrill and power of the Spirit's presence, should try to preach after he had lost his vision and the sense of the presence of God! Can there be anything more terrific, as we look at things in this atmosphere, than a Church of Jesus Christ from which Jesus Christ is absent. That is what Moses meant. The glorious past, the watchfulness over all the long years of slavery, the mighty hand stretched out to work deliverance, the divided sea, and the march, all the glorious past; but if God is going, then let us die here! There lies the land of the future, the program of God, the crossing of the Jordan to the land flowing with milk and honey; but we cannot go if He is going to leave us: "If thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence."

That supreme conviction and resolution made Moses the man of power that he was, and led him in all the steps he immediately took. I watch the process. What is this strange thing he is doing now? He is striking his tent, the tent of meeting - not yet the tabernacle, that was not yet erected, but his own tent, which had served as a center for their whole life, to which they could come for judgment, the very place from which God had spoken to Moses, and pitching it outside the camp, going away from the people and pitching his tent outside the camp. What was this man doing? Ex-communicating a whole nation in order that he might re-admit it on true terms! If the people will go back, they must go back by way of confession, and by way of putting away sin. He will receive them in the name of the God with Whom he has been holding communion. That is the way back. Believe me, there are moments when a man can excommunicate a church as surely as a church can excommunicate a man. In this, Moses pitched his tent outside the camp; but the camp was reconstituted around that tent by the way of return and the way of confession.

It was because of his profound conviction of the necessity for God, if the program of God was to be carried out, that he had adopted this method. Notice, again, the argument between God and this man. God said to him: "Thy people, which thou broughtest up out of the land of Egypt," and, reverently yet definitely, Moses flung the burden back on God: "Thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt."

Such a meditation as this enshrines its own application. Today we face life with its crowding and overwhelming opportunities of service, and, thank God, the past is full of glory and triumph. The present is difficult. Problems are confronting us. I am speaking, not of the larger outlook of the Christian Church, but of the narrower one of this church. We are all conscious that the hour is electric with difficulty and strain, and yet there lies a future before us, a future grand and glorious in the purpose of God, for His Church is to march victoriously until the very gates of Hades surrender. The program is clear and plain and definite, but for the moment we are halted. What is the supreme need? Finances? No! Numbers? No, a thousand times no! What, then? God. He has been with us; we have known His presence, His power; the demonstration of it has been found in lives renewed, remade, desolate men comforted, hopeless souls made courageous, impure men and women rendered pure. I stand here tonight, ere I go away, saying this: "If Thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence." I am not suggesting that the presence is withdrawn, but I tremble sometimes lest it should be, lest we run for a time by the momentum of past victories while God is absent. If I could lay a charge on my own soul as I leave this pulpit for eight weeks, and if I could lay a charge on my people, it would be this: Discover whether the glory is passing away. Is it moving out from the threshold as Ezekiel saw it go? Is there a danger that God be withdrawn? I am not going to answer the question. I want to find out. I propose to do it. Will you join me? "If Thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence." Let us end there. Blessed be God, the past cannot be undone. The one thing you cannot take from me is yesterday, with its glorious revelations of power. The future can be undone, and it is well for us sometimes to pull ourselves up like this, and to deal with God. There I leave it.