**VOLUME 8; CHAPTER 24 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**BE STRONG - AND WORK! by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Be strong ... saith the Lord , ... and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts.*

*Haggai 2:4*

THESE WORDS WERE UTTERED ABOUT TWO THOUSAND FIVE hundred years ago, yet they come to us and to our day with a pertinence which is almost startling. This is not surprising, for our times have much in common with those of the old Hebrew prophets. There are certain senses - the statement must be made guardedly, and received guardedly - in which the prophetic writings make a profounder appeal to us than do the apostolic writings. Men today know so much more than they do, with the result that they begin to question the things they know. That was the condition in the time of the prophets. Therefore these prophetic writings are powerful in the conditions addressed, in the principles recognized, and in the appeals made. So from this ancient writing we take out these words and find that they are living and powerful words, coming to us not faint and far from that Eastern land and that bygone time, but with an immediateness that gives us to feel they are verily the word of the Lord to us.

In the book of Ezra we have the account of the laying of the stones of the second temple. A decree forbidding the work having been obtained from Artaxerxes, for fifteen years the house of God lay waste, with that almost appalling aspect of desolation, not of a structure battered and bruised and beaten, and in some senses made beautiful by the tempests and time, but of a structure commenced and never finished. At the death of the king this edict lost its authority, but the people did not proceed with the building, urging difficulty, danger, and poverty as reasons. Yet all the while neither danger nor difficulty nor poverty prevented them from building their own houses, and cieled houses withal, houses of beauty and luxury. To such a people the messages of Haggai came, and this brief prophecy of only two chapters tells the story of how he delivered these four prophecies in conjunction with Zechariah, and how the people arose and built the house of the Lord.

In our text three things are found with which I propose to deal: first, the need revealed by the command to "work"; second, the responsibility resting on the people in view of the need; finally, the encouragement which was given to them in order that they might take up that responsibility and meet that need.

The need was to build the house of God. The responsibility was that they should be strong and work. The encouragement was the promise and covenant which God made with them: "I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts," The house of God has been neglected. We can imagine men saying: Why build this house? Why not wait? Why not leave the building to our children? The question was answered by the prophesyings of Haggai and Zechariah. One supreme answer was given to all such inquiry. It was the answer of the final, fundamental fact of all human life, the fact of God. In one of his sermons at our Mundesley Bible Conference my friend John A. Hutton said something which those of us who heard him will never forget, and said it in such a way that we shall never forget. Speaking of the spies who went out to spy out the land of Canaan and afterwards described themselves as grasshoppers, Mr. Hutton said that those men thought they were looking at the facts of the case, but that they were not looking at facts, but looking at circumstances; and he declared that there is but one Fact, and that is God. All other things are circumstances related to that Fact. That is the underlying truth which made necessary the building of the house of God in that bygone age. God is the age-abiding Fact, the ever and everywhere present Fact, and men who forget Him are leaving out of their calculations the supreme quantity, and therefore their findings are inevitably doomed to be wrong. A science that forgets God is blind, seeing only that which is near, and at last boasting itself that it has no interest in anything that is far. The philosophy that excludes God is equally incomplete, and therefore incompetent. Science starts with emptiness of mind, a perfectly proper attitude. Philosophy starts with a question, What is truth? a perfectly fair method of operation. But science proceeding to the discovery of the facts will inevitably finally touch God. The question is whether it will dare to call Him God when it finds Him? Philosophy attempting to account for things and to give us the true wisdom of life must take God into account. The question is whether it will ultimately do so or not. The one fact from which there is no escape is the fact of God. God is not distanced from human life. In Him we live and move and have our being. God is not uninterested in human life. If the great revelation of these sacred writings is to be trusted, there is absolutely nothing in which God is not interested. In passing, let me urge very seriously those of you who have not been reading the Old Testament recently to read it once more, without prejudice, simply to see it as revealing God's interest in the common things of life, the commonplaces of life. It is the Old Testament that teaches you that God puts human tears into His bottle. It is the Old Testament that tells that God knows whether the garment you wear is a mixture of wool and something else or not. The Old Testament tells us that God is interested in the fringes that people wear on their garments. Trivial things, you say. That is our God! He is the God of the infinitely small as well as of the infinitely great, not alienated from any part of human life, knowing our downsitting and our uprising, our going out and our coming in; near to us in the casual as well as in the critical, numbering the hairs of our head. That is the supreme fact of life, and the fact from which there can be no escape.

Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit?

Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven,

Thou art there: If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there.

What unutterable folly, then, on the part of humanity or of man if it or he leaves God out of calculation.

Because God is the final and fundamental fact in human life, therefore He is the supreme obligation. To do His will is individual salvation, is social salvation, is national salvation. One human life perfectly poised toward God and adjusted toward His good and perfect and beneficent will is a human life realized, fulfilled, and progressively glorious. A society, which the Church of God ought to be, discovering His will, walking in the way of it, obedient to the light that ever shines more and more unto the perfect day, is a society within the boundaries of which there is no lonely soul, for when one weeps, all weep; when one laughs, all laugh. A nation seeking righteousness rather than revenue, eager to glorify God rather than to maintain its face in the world, is a nation great, secure, impregnable, mighty with essential might.

The supreme obligation on human life is its relationship to God, therefore it is important to build His house. In the days in which Haggai exercised his ministry the building of the house was entirely material. The house was the true rallying point for the people, the place of worship, the place where men gathering together did not seek the presence of God, but remembered His presence, recognized His power, reminded their own hearts anew of the abiding fact of His covenant with them and of His perpetual care of them. Moreover, in that ancient Hebrew economy, the house of God was essentially the house of prayer for all nations, as our Lord Himself did say in the days of His flesh, quoting from the ancient prophecies. Then how supremely important it was that the house should be built. There, for fifteen years, having been raised but a few feet in all probability from the ground, the first few courses laid, it had stood desolate, overgrown with verdure, moss-covered, a perpetual revelation of the fact that people who bore the name of God had largely forgotten Him. The supreme need in that hour was not the rearrangement of policy with surrounding nations, not the rediscovery of a lost art, not increase in commerce; the supreme necessity was that the house of God should be built, the sacramental symbol of the nation's relationship to Him.

Today the house of God is no longer material; it is living, it is spiritual, it is the Church of God, the Church of God which is the house of the living God. In this world of ours the Church of God in the Divine economy is an institute of praise and prayer and prophecy. An institute of praise, a living temple of living souls whose eyes are toward the light, whose faces are irradiated with joy, who are living in the midst of the sorrows and desolations of time as men and women who have found mastery over sorrow and desolation in their fellowship with the unseen and eternal. That is true of the Catholic Church, the whole Church, and in that function of the Church all the things that divide us cease to be, and we realize that the building of the Church of God is of supreme importance in order that there may be maintained in the midst of the sorrows and sins of humanity a living testimony to the gladness and holiness which are possible to men as they live in right relationship with God. Nothing, therefore, can be more important than this building of the Church, the building of it stone upon stone, of living stones brought into touch with the Living Stone, Whose preciousness is made over to them that they may share that preciousness and bear testimony in their glad, pure, consenting life to what the Kingdom of God really means in the world.

Whereas the house of God today is no longer material but spiritual, the material is still a very real symbol of the spiritual. When the Church of God in any place in any locality is careless about the material place of assembly, the place of its worship and its work, it is a sign and evidence that its life is at a low ebb.

Let us not, however, lose sight of the larger matter, the necessity for the continuation of the building of the spiritual house of God. There is nothing this nation needs more than that the Church of God itself should be more clearly seen. Therefore there is no work more important than that of the continuity of the building of that spiritual house which, in the life of the nation, is not to be dictated to by the nation, but to exercise its threefold function of praise, prayer, and prophecy, and so contribute to the true essential strength of the national life.

These words spoken in the olden days by the prophet indicated, not only the need, but the responsibility. The spiritual value of this old-time story is here most marked, most definite. These people were to "be strong"; that is the first thing. And they were to "work"; that was the second. These two things cannot be separated. There can be no work apart from strength; there can be no strength, such as the prophet referred to, which does not express itself in work. "Be strong … and work."

This charge to the people was a suggestion of their weakness, the weakness that had prevented, and still was preventing, them from building the house of God. We discover the elements of the weakness in the most simple way by looking at the prophecy. In the first place their weakness consisted in the fact that they were careless about this matter. They said: "It is not the time for us to come, the time for the Lord's houses to be built." That is so startlingly modern that I hardly know what to say about it. It is not the time! The modern man will not speak so simply; the modern man will say that it is not the psychological moment. That means the same thing. Whenever, in the presence of superabounding need, man says, It is not the psychological moment, know well that the cleverness of his argument is revelation of the carelessness of his heart. The time is not come; we are waiting for the time, for some moment electric with inspirational opportunity. People who wait for that moment never find it, and do not want to find it.

Another element of weakness to which the prophet drew attention is revealed in the question he asked: "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your cieled houses, while this house lieth waste?" The second element of weakness in the life of the people was luxury and comfort; they were dwelling in their own cieled houses, and perchance discussing ever and anon in their social gatherings the neglected condition of the house of God. The set time had not come to build it; but the time had come to build their own houses, and to ciel them with beauty.

There was yet another element of weakness. We discover it by another question: "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? And how do ye see it now? Is it not in your eyes as nothing?" The third element of weakness was contempt for that very house which lay unfinished, and contempt for any man who suggested that it ever could be restored to its ancient glory. This contempt was born of a great past, of which the people were always talking, and in which they rejoiced, to the neglect of the present, with its terrific responsibility and its glorious opportunity. The collateral writings to this prophecy reveal some of the reasons for the contempt. The sacred fire was no longer burning, the shekinah glory was no longer manifested, the ark and the cherubim were no longer in their places, the urim and the thummim had been lost, and the spirit of prophecy was silent. All these things were absent. The people looked back to the days when these things were there in all their glory, and they held the present in supreme contempt, both as to its conditions and as to the idea that it was possible to restore the lost glory.

I say again, the picture is wonderfully modern. We still have the carelessness which says, The time has not come. It expresses itself often in prayer for revival. The revival is here, if we will but have it so. I pray you talk no more about the indifference of the nation; talk if you will of the indifference of the Church to its own evangel, its own gospel, its own living powers. The set time has not come, so men still say.

Then there is the weakness resulting from comfort. The Church of God today is suffering from material prosperity within her own borders. Things which our fathers spoke of as luxuries we speak of as necessities. For all spiritual service we are being rendered weak, anemic, enervated by the cieled houses and the comforts of our lives. The old Spartan heroism of our fathers, the simpler life, and the great poverty, have largely passed away. It is not the time to build the house of God, but it is the time to build our own cieled houses and dwell in them.

Another element of weakness present with us is our perpetual looking back and sighing for departed glories, for the voices of preachers of other days, for the prayer meetings that once were held, for all those peculiar manifestations of the presence of God in past days. The old men are sighing for these, and looking with contempt on the present hour, disbelieving in the possibility of revival and the building of the house of God.

Said the prophet to these men, and now says the word of our God to us, "Be strong." If we would know what our strength is we may know it by examining our weakness. Over against every element of weakness we are to place an element of strength. Over against carelessness what shall we put? Listen to the voice of the prophet. "Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. Thus saith the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways." One of the first conditions of real strength will be obedience to that command, the consideration of our ways. The people were living in cieled houses, in great material prosperity. But look more carefully: "Ye have sown much, and bring in little." But they had brought in very much, they were wealthy! "Ye eat, but ye have not enough"; but they always had enough to eat! "Ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink." But they always had enough to drink! "Ye clothe you, but there is none warm." But they always had plenty of clothing! "He that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes." But they had not discovered the holes! Mark the satire of it all. The prophet was declaring that in spite of all their getting they lacked the supreme possession; in spite of all their eating, there was hunger never satisfied; in spite of all their drinking, there was thirst never quenched; in spite of all their clothing, there was chilliness of soul that found no warmth; in spite of all their earning, there was a lack which nothing out of the bag into which they put their wages could provide! How true it all is today! The consideration of our ways is, indeed, the first necessity if we would be strong.

The second element of strength under such conditions was consciousness of the weakness of the house of God in its ruin, its devastation, of the fact that it stood there unfinished. Twice over the prophet said with infinite pathos: "This house lieth waste." I wonder when the one hundred and second psalm was written. It seems to me it must have been at a time in connection with this exhortation, or else the prophet was remembering it:

Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion;

For it is time to have pity upon her, yea, the set time is come.

How did the psalmist know the set time had come? what was the sign for the arrival of the set time?

For thy servants take pleasure in her stones,

And have pity upon her dust.

In that hour, when these men really looked at the ruins, and the ruins entered into their heart and created great contrition, the set time came; they were then beginning to feel the element of strength.

Yet one other element of strength is revealed in the story. It is confidence in the promise and power of God: "I will fill this house with glory saith the Lord of hosts … The latter, glory of this house shall be greater than the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts." When they believed that, they arose and built.

The second part of the responsibility is revealed in the words: "and work." Work was to be opposed to idleness. That needs no argument. Work was to take the place of theorizing. I think that needs, if not argument, at least careful consideration. Far be it from me to speak with disrespect of efforts that may be in themselves most sincere; but sometimes I am appalled at the time we waste in considering things and theorizing about things, calling conferences to consider the situation, attempting, on the one hand, to express Christianity in terms suited to the modern mind forsooth, as though the modern mind mattered; and, on the other hand, to consider the difficulty of the situation.

"Work" is the word of the Lord to us. We cannot travel a hundred yards from this place without finding some opportunity, if our eyes are open, to build the house of God by the capture of a soul, by a kindness, by a word of love, by a ministry of immediate help. In the work of building the house of God nothing is mean; the whole glorifies every part. That least thing you are doing, apparently so unimportant, is of supreme importance when you place it in relationship to the whole.

The last note of the text from the ancient prophecy is one full of encouragement. The prophet not merely drew attention to the need, not merely called to strength and to work; but in the name of God spoke to them this word of God: "I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts." Therefore, the things missing did not signify. These things also might be restored, the very things over which men were lamenting.

All this is most immediate and pertinent. "I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts." There is no need for us to gather together and pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. There is no need for us to cry in our agony, "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord." They did that also in the days of Isaiah, and God answered them: "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion." If I may reverently say so, it is as though God had said, Why do you call on Me to awake? I have never been asleep! It is you who are asleep. When today we gather together to pray to God to come among us it seems to me He would say, I am with you, even though you are unmindful of Me; even though you are not responsive to Me, I am with you. If we can but come to a new realization of that living presence and know that we have not to ask or wait for His coming, but that He is here waiting for us, then we shall arise and build. It is not true to say we need more of the Holy Spirit, but it is true to say that the Holy Spirit needs more of us. In that realization of the nearness of our God we shall find strength for all He is calling us to do.

The prophet named God by one of the great titles of the Old Testament, "The Lord of hosts." He is the Lord of all hosts. He is the Lord of His people who are called to work; He is Lord of the enemies who would attempt to prevent them from working, making the wrath of men to praise Him. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" He is the Lord, not merely of the hosts of the earth, but of the hosts of heaven also, the hosts of the spiritual world. He is Lord of all angels, all unfallen ones, and of the spirits of just men made perfect. Angels, and the spirits of the just made perfect under His dominion are filled with praise of Him and inspired by His love, and in some strange mystery which we may not understand are co-operative with His purpose even now. How many of us need the vision that was given to the young man with the prophet of old? Said he, "Behold, an host with horses and chariots was round about the city … Alas, my master! how shall we do?" And the prophet said, "Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see." And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire.

So to Faith's enlightened sight

All the mountain flamed with light!

He is also the Lord of the fallen ones. When He was incarnate, how often they cried out to Him: "What is there between Thee and us, Thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art Thou come to destroy us? I know Thee Who Thou art, the Holy One of God." Then came the answer of the One of supreme authority and almighty power: "Hold thy peace, and come out of him." All the spiritual forces of the spiritual world against us are held in check by the power of God; or to put it as I have so often put it here, for I love the truth, I joy in it: Satan cannot touch a single hair on the back of one of Job's camels until he has asked permission of God. If what the nation and the world supremely need is the building of the house of God, what the Church supremely needs is a new vision of God, a new consciousness of His nearness.

Hell is nigh, but God is nigher,

Circling us with hosts of fire!

The Lord and Master said to His disciples ere He left them, "Lo, I am with you all the days." In the lonely island washed by the waters of the sea John heard a voice, and the voice said: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, saith the Lord God, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty." Then he "turned to see the voice which spake," and this is what he saw: "I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the candlesticks one like unto a son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breast with a golden girdle. And his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters."

That was the last appearing of God to man, figurative, symbolic, suggestive, and that to help us to understand Him when He says, "I am with you all the days."

The command and the promise were alike enforced by the words, "Thus saith the Lord." "Be strong ... saith the Lord ... and work; for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts." That is overwhelming in compulsion and confidence. The story has often been told of Livingstone. When all alone, hemmed in by hostile tribesmen, waiting apparently for death, he wrote:

I read that Jesus said, "All power is given unto Me in heaven and earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations … and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

Then follow these significant words:

It is the word of a gentleman of most sacred and strictest honor, and there's an end on't. I will not cross furtively by night as I had intended. It would appear as flight, and shall such a man as I flee? Nay, verily I will take observations for latitude and longitude tonight, though they may be the last.

When the morrow came he crossed without harm from the midst of hostile multitudes.

With all reverence, may we not say, as God says to us, "Be strong ... and work; for I am with you"? "It is the word of a gentleman of most sacred and strictest honor, and there's an end on't." So God help us:

To the work! To the work! We are servants of God,

Let us follow the path that our Master has trod;

With the balm of His counsel our strength to renew,

Let us do with our might what our hands find to do.