**VOLUME 8; CHAPTER 26 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE FIRST-BORN by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*And she brought forth her first-born son.*

*Luke 2:7*

*Who is ... the first-born of all creation.*

*Colossians 1:15*

*Who is ... the first-born from the dead.*

*Colossians 1:18*

*The first-born among many brethren.*

*Romans 8:29*

WE CELEBRATE AT CHRISTMAS THE SUPREME EVENT IN HUMAN history, the central act of God in that cosmic order in the midst of which we live. Its importance in the affairs of men is demonstrated by the accumulated results of two millenniums, by the spiritual conceptions which it has created, the moral standards which have resulted from it, and, what is more wonderful still, by the renovation and reconstruction of things spoiled and ruined which have followed. These results, however, are but the beginnings. If we would realize the stupendous meaning of the birth of the One of Whom we speak as Jesus of Nazareth, we need to detach ourselves from the merely local and historic, and endeavor to see it in its place in the economy of God. In order to do this no single word in the New Testament is more helpful, perhaps, than the one which is common to these passages of Scripture, the title "first-born"; and no group of passages is more illuminating.

Before proceeding to the consideration of the teaching of these texts it is of the utmost importance that we most carefully recognize the exact meaning of our word "first-born," and of the Greek word of which in each case it is the singularly apt and beautiful translation.

We may divide our word into two parts, as indeed it is, in its very nature, already divided: first, and born. In so doing we are at once helped to a true understanding of the Greek word of which it is a translation. The word "first" means fore-most, and is variously used in reference to time, place, order, or importance. This we need to recognize, or we may think of it as referring to time only in these particular passages, whereas, as a matter of fact, it has a far more spacious value, and in some cases the reference is not to time at all, but to that which is beyond time, the timeless and the eternal. The root of the word "born" literally means to produce from a seed, but it must be remembered that it always signifies to bear, or to bring forth, never to beget. The word has no reference whatever to those profounder matters of being associated with the function of begetting. Therefore it does not necessarily give any revelation of the nature of the one born. It always refers to that hour, or event, or method, by which something already in being is manifested.

The compound word is used of Jesus of Nazareth in our texts in different relationships, but always with the same significance, as of One born or brought forth, and of His being born or brought forth in order to take a permanent place in relation to the subject under consideration. The statement that Mary brought forth her first-born Son does not necessarily mean that no son had been born of Mary before that, although, in all probability, that was true. That, however, is not the significance of the statement. It means, rather, that the Son born of Mary in that mystic hour was the foremost Son, the One taking precedence of all her other sons. The description, "the first-born of creation," does not mean that He was the first of the creation in time, that He existed before all other creations. It means rather that He is the ultimate of creation, that toward which all creation moved, its goal, its consummation, its final glory. "The first- born from the dead" does not mean that He was the first raised from the dead in human history. Lazarus had preceded Him, and if we are to trust our Biblical record, men in the old economy had preceded Him. It means rather that He was the foremost, taking precedence over all others who rise from the dead, and in that sense was the "first-born of the dead." "The first-born among many brethren" suggests not merely His priority in point of time, but rather His eternal supremacy over even all those who are brought into new life as the result of His great and gracious mission.

The profounder questions of being and of begetting are dealt with or referred to in the context in each case. The first-born of the virgin mother was fore-announced by the angel as "The Son of the Most High," "The Son of God." The first-born of creation is described as "The Son of His love," "The image of the invisible God"; and in His own essential being as the One Who is "before all things," the One in Whom "all things consist." The "first-born from the dead" is the same Person, as the continuity of the apostolic argument proves. "The first-born among many brethren" is with equal clearness described in the context as the Son of God.

Thus in every case the Person referred to is the Son of God in the fullest sense of that term, and the very fulness of the term necessitates limitation in our understanding or interpretation of the word. If that statement appears to be of the nature of a paradox let us consider it carefully. "The Son of God" is a term so full that, when we use it in order to explain it, we must limit it. We must limit it as a figure of speech by declining to limit it as we are compelled to limit the term "son" when we use it on the level of our own experience. As God can have no essential beginning, neither can His Son, Who is of His very nature. Therefore the only sense in which the Son of God can ever be spoken of as begotten is in reference to some new manifestation or activity of Deity.

We celebrate at this season the beginning of the central age in the history of man, that which was initiated when the Son of God was manifested. It is an age of consummation and of initiation, and in both cases the Son of God is declared to be first-born.

The four texts I have selected fall into two groups. The first two deal with consummations: the first-born Son of the virgin mother, and the first-born of all creation. The second two deal with initiation: the first-born from the dead, and the first-born among many brethren.

The first two have reference to the original creation of God. "Let us make Man" was the crowning word of that creation. It was preceded by all the lower forms of being. Jesus, as the first-born of a woman, was the first-born of creation, that is, in the sense of being its goal and its glory.

The second two have to do with redemption. Jesus became a man, a member of the race, involved in sin, and as such He passed to death. Suddenly appearing out of the darkness and mystery of death, He was the first-born from the dead. Man having lost the scepter and possibilities of his own being, a new race is to be created by the process of the Divine activity, and Jesus is the first-born among many brethren.

In the first two the redeeming purpose is seen operative in the realm of creation; in the second two the creative purpose is seen as realized through redemption. Thus the movement suggested by these four passages is one, and cannot ultimately be divided. For the purpose of our meditation, however, we may follow the suggested division, being careful so far as possible to observe the relation maintained between the creative purpose of God and His redemptive work, between the redemptive purpose of God and its fulfilment of the meaning of His creative activity.

Let us, then, consider these four passages, not in anything like full or exhaustive treatment, but in order to think of what they suggest concerning the Son of God as the first-born in regard to creation, and as the first-born in regard to redemption.

First, then, the Son of God as the first-born in regard to creation. The words written by Luke in his gospel are full of simplicity, and yet full of sublimity; "She brought forth her first-born Son." In that birth we are brought face to face with One Who is the crown and glory of humanity. According to these Divine records and revelations, man was made in the image and likeness of God. Whether it is necessary for us to accept the interpretation of the Biblical statement which affirms that man in those earliest experiences had come to the fulness of that image and likeness may be a very doubtful and debatable question. Personally, I should say that Adam did not realize that great ideal in all its fulness of experience, but potentially only. In the Bible, before the story of sin, we are face to face with primitive man, with man, that is, in his probationary state, not yet having come to full realization of the dignity and glory of his being, not yet realizing within his own experience what it is to be in the image and likeness of God. Whether that be so or not, the declaration here is that one "born of a woman" - l quote Paul's words from Galatians - is a Son Who is first-born, that is, One Who realized in Himself the Divine purpose and intention, One through Whom, therefore, is revealed in the universe of God, to the heavens above and to the earth beneath, the thought that was in the mind of God when He said, "Let us make man in our own image, and in our likeness." All who preceded Jesus in time, even at their highest and best, had been but hints and prophecies as to the meaning and purpose of God in humanity.

We must remember that this word was written by Luke concerning the birth of Jesus after the completion of His life, after the crucifixion, beyond the resurrection, after there had come to the disciples the illuminating glory of the Pentecostal baptism. Luke was writing of the whole fact of Christ as he knew it as the result of that Pentecostal illumination, and with the sense of the whole life of the Man Jesus on his mind. When his pen wrote the story of that birth, he wrote it thus: "She brought forth her first-born Son." She brought forth the Son of Man, Who takes precedence and pre-eminence above and beyond all other of the sons of men in that He was in Himself the crown and glory of humanity. On that day, in the manger in Bethlehem, was born the archetypal Man, God's Man, Man according to the Divine counsel, the Divine purpose, the Divine possibility, the Divine power. Perhaps I may illustrate what I am attempting to insist on concerning the hour in which this was written in the most simple way by saying that I do not think Mary would have used these words at that moment. I do not think the worshiping shepherds would have understood Who was born at that moment. Even if Mary pondered in her heart this strange and wonderful thing that had happened by the grace and favor of heaven, as most certainly she did, I think she had no true apprehension of Who her Son really was in this great movement of the Divine activity. Presently, beyond the life of purity, patience, beauty, and power; beyond the awful tragedy of the death in which that life so resplendent in glory seemed to go out and be eclipsed; beyond that strange, transforming resurrection hour setting its seal on the truth of His own teaching, and transfiguring the mystery of the Cross; and beyond that hour of illumination which appeared when the Holy Spirit came for the interpretation of the Christ - looking back, those who had thus come to know Him said, He is the "first-born Son," the crown and the glory of our own humanity. In Him humanity came to its own, to use the phrase we so often employ in other applications; in Him humanity realized itself. He was, and is, the first-born of the race.

That consideration must be supplemented by another. If in Him the ultimate glory of creation in the purpose of God, which is man, was realized, the whole story of the birth of Jesus reminds us of the fact that this did not happen as the result of a process of creation. There was some arrest, some change, some new and interfering activity on the part of God in order that there might appear this crowning glory of humanity in a Man. This One born was begotten by neither the will nor the act of humanity, but by the will and activity of God in a strange mystic brooding and mystery of the Holy Spirit, by which operation motherhood was sanctified and purified for its sacred office, so that the angel announcing the coming of the Babe did say to her, "That which is to be born shall be called holy, the Son of God."

When Paul came to write his Colossian letter - the purpose of the letter being that of showing the infinite resources of the believer on Christ - it was necessary in the course of it to speak of this selfsame One, of His peculiar glories, and His relationship to the whole cosmos; and Paul described Him as the first-born of creation. Let us again remind ourselves that that phrase is the exact description of the true place of man in the cosmos. Man is the ultimate in creation. For the purpose of a meditation such as this, it does not at all matter what view we may hold of the process of creation, that is, if we admit that this order is a created order. It does not signify whether we think that the creative process was that of long eons through which creation moved ever higher and higher until it came to its ultimate, or whether we believe that these things came originally into being by some stupendous word of God, immediately producing results. Either view equally demonstrates the glory and majesty of God. To my own understanding the more wonderful and splendid idea is that which - and it is not out of harmony with Genesis, but is consonant with scientific investigation - that which by long, and to our thinking, slow, processes creation climbed higher and ever higher, until it reached its goal in man. Even if men deny the Creator, they are compelled to admit that the last and final glory of the cosmic order is man. That is exactly what the Apostle meant when he wrote of Jesus as the first-born of creation. He saw Him as the One to Whom the whole creation moved, its ultimate goal, the destiny of everything. It was probably a slow-moving process, but it went ever and ever on, until at last Man appeared. That is the Divine order. Here, of course, we must be very careful to allow the Biblical revelation to flash on our thinking, and to correct it; for the Biblical revelation is not that of man finally evolved into separate being, but that of man ultimately created by an act in which the spiritual and material were united in order that the possibilities of the material might be fully realized; and in order that the glory of the spiritual through the material might be fully manifested. In other words, all creation is an expression of God. No flower decks the sod but that is a revelation of the Divine. No single tint of the rainbow or fleck of color on the petal of a flower but speaks of God. In His temple all things say, Glory! That was a great word of the Psalmist. When Isaiah saw the vision of the uplifted throne he heard also this majestic song, not the song of holiness alone, but this also: "The whole earth is full of His glory." All creation is an expression of God. But its foremost born, its ultimate expression, its last and final word concerning God is expressed in man. The first-born of the virgin is the final Man, the goal and glory of humanity. In that sense He is the first- born of creation, the foremost One, the last and final voicing of the glory of God in and through creation.

Yet here again we halt. As we have already seen, this Man whose birth we celebrate at Chirstmastide was not born as the result of what we describe as natural processes. Here was a strange new intrusion on the part of God into affairs and facts which He Himself had originally created and ordered, and which have ever been under His government. The writer of the Colossian letter is careful to tell us in this very connection that Christ is before all things: that is the language of time. He also declares that in Christ all things hold together, or consist. That is the language of continuity.

Let us face the mystery: He Who came, the first-born of creation, the goal to which the whole creation moved until He came, came not by the movement of creation toward Him, but by a new order of God, a new act of God, a new overruling of God. By the power of God He came, the Creator, Who is before all things; He came, the Sustainer, in Whom all things consist. Thus we stand in the presence of a Light that blinds and a glory that is as darkness to our finite minds; in the presence of that kenosis, that self-emptying of which I never can think without remembering that most awe-inspiring, and yet most illuminating, line of Charles Wesley: "God contracted to a span." The first-born came, not by processes of creation, which God originated and governed, but by a new touch and new intrusion, by a new activity of God. In that is evidence of the redeeming purpose of God in His coming. Man cannot redeem his own kind. Man is of the creation entirely, and, while causing, also shares its failure. God only can redeem; He is beyond the creation. The creation is of Him, but in Him is no failure. He Who faileth never, bends to that which fails and touches it anew with power, and enters into it by His own mysterious self-emptying. That is the deeper truth concerning the birth of Jesus.

Thus we come to that of which the mystic light has been on all our earlier considerations. The Apostle directly writes that Christ is not only first-born of creation, but "first- born from among the dead." The arresting word here is the word "dead." It suggests a condition that ought not to be in human life. Into that condition - a condition expressed in the words, "In the midst of life, we are in death" - He came. He was crowned with glory and honor in order that He might die, not after He had died. Let us read the Hebrew letter very carefully at this point. It does not affirm that Christ was crowned with glory and honor as a result of His dying, but in order that He might die. That is one of the supreme words of revelation: "Crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He should taste death for every man." The ultimate crown on the brow of God is that which crowns the Living One Who stooped to die to redeem men. He came into the condition of humanity resulting from sin, lived in the midst of it, passed down into death itself. We can never now celebrate Christmas without realizing the Cross in the midst of it all. I was greatly impressed yesterday with a little poem in a daily newspaper. It may be imagination merely, but listen to it: -

On the night when Christ was born,

In the starlight's gleaming,

Sharp-speared thorn boughs in the shadow

Stirred with troubled dreaming

Of a cruel, piercing crown,

Of a King in death bowed down:

On the night when Christ was born,

And the glad song breaking,

Reeds about a marish pool,

As with long heart aching,

Wailed with pain of that far hour

When a reed should mock His power.

On the night when Christ was born,

To a bleak moon clinging,

Stood a grey, ungladdened wood

With the olives flinging

Writhen shadows - watchers dim

Of the tree which beareth Him.

Whoever wrote that had been very near to Christ. That is a poetic fancy, but it is nearer to truth than much prose and argument. "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth together in pain."

I want that same poet to write me three more verses about the Cross, telling how those thorns blossomed with the roses of eternity, of how the reed at last became the iron rod of government, of how after a little while the olive wood became the material of the throne of eternal Deity. The cradle and the Cross must always remain close together in our thinking.

We see Him passed to that condition of death, and then we see Him as "first-born from the dead," manifested beyond death as the Living One, passing out of its gloom to the glory of the everlasting day. First-born of dead ones, taking pre-eminence over all others - behold Him!

In the context will be found this suggestive phrase: "The Kingdom of the Son of His love." That is a picture of the issue of all the wonder. It means that He Who is the first-born from the dead is He Who will yet realize all creation and establish the great Kingdom of God. Through His Church, His Ecclesia, His called-out saints, He will make the desert blossom as the rose, heal the salt marshes, give the world its final bloom, and make the whole creation the anthem of the glory of God.

Let us pass to the last suggestive phrase, "The first-born among many brethren." Immediately there rises before the mind a picture of a new race upspringing as the result of His birth, His dying, and His resurrection. From the Roman epistle let me select some illuminative phrases and sentences, for the moment stringing them together like pearls without the complete statements of which they form a part: "Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? … Through Jesus Christ our Lord." "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and death." "Heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ." "All things work together for good." Through these sayings we gain a picture of the new race delivered from death, through the Spirit of life set free from the opposing forces of life, heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ, conscious that, in the midst of forces, the grind of which sometimes is terrible, but the direction of which is of God, all things work together for good. In the midst of creation the new race is broken, bruised, groaning, travailing in pain; and that new race is groaning and travailing in pain together with creation. The groaning and travailing have to do with birth; they constitute the birth pangs of a new creation out of which at last the Divine purpose is to be realized and fulfilled. Of that race Christ is first-born, "the first-born among many brethren."

We are not celebrating a small matter at this holy season. We are celebrating the coming into time and human history of the eternally first-born. The hour is mystic and marvelous, the hour in which He came in splendid lowliness, bowed to our level, even though it was the level of sin and of death, in order to lift us to His level, which is the level of holiness and age-abiding life.

Thus we take our four texts, and from them we hear the music of hope, of courage, of victory.

We shall gather in our homes, and the bairns will be about us. We shall not check their merriment, but rather laugh and play and romp with them. The glory of all the glad news will be that on the faces of our children we shall see the light that comes from the cradle of the Babe. The first-born Son is our ground of hope when we look into the faces of our children.

Then we shall pause a moment in the merriment, and think of that of which all our newspapers speak every day, of the whole creation groaning and travailing in pain. We cannot read a newspaper without seeing this, if the light of God illumine our reading. Look again. Shining between the lines of the paper is the mystic message of Christmas; Christ is the first-born of creation, and that is the prophecy of the hour in which the groaning shall cease, the travail be over, and God's great triumph be come.

We look at death. I would speak with all tenderness. Some of us will know more of the pain of death at Christmas than ever before. A place is empty! No, it is not empty. Look again, oh ye who are crushed and broken of heart. Look at the vacant chair. Behold, it is occupied by the First-born from among the dead. Now we know that those who sleep with Jesus will God bring with Him.

Lastly, we look at ourselves, and that is the most tragic look of all! Oh, the failings of another year, the deflections from the path of faith, the terrific sense of things that master me. Look again! Cease looking at yourself! "Behold the first-born among many brethren," and in that beholding find assurance in His face that at last He will perfect that which concerneth you. So while the bairns are laughing and angels are singing, let us sing our carols and keep our Christmas. It is a great festival! It is the Festival of the First-born!