**VOLUME 9; CHAPTER 03 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**SOUR GRAPES by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But everyone shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.*

*Jeremiah 31:29,30*

*What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are Mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is Mine; the soul that sinneth, it shall die.*

*Ezekiel 18:2-4*

DIVINE RELIGION HAS NO MORE INSIDIOUS AND DEADLY FOE THAN misrepresentation, whether in the lives of those who profess it or in the interpretation of its sacred writings.

Nothing can be more disastrous in its effect upon men than a false doctrine; that is, a misinterpretation of what God has said to men, resulting as it must in a false conception of God and of man's relation to Him. And I am growingly convinced that amongst the most pernicious misrepresentations are those which are popular, general, superficial, based upon some isolated passage, and resulting from a conception due to superficial observation. General, popular, superficial, are words I have used of set purpose. These general impressions, resulting from a glance at things upon the surface and expressing themselves in some passage of Scripture, which seems to square with the opinion formed as the result of such superficial observation; these, after all, are far more deadly and perilous heresies than those more familiar ones of the Christian church against which we so often protest.

It is to one such misinterpretation that I desire now to direct attention, because it is so common, and because it is in many respects doing harm. I refer to the popular quotation and interpretation of that proverb which occurs in both of my texts, "… The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Let me say immediately that the statement is not true. It is constantly quoted today, glibly quoted, in the course of conversation in order to clinch an argument. It is constantly quoted in order to prove the helplessness of a man because of his relationship to his father. A man has yielded to certain courses of vice, certain habits of meanness, and either he himself or someone else will say in excuse for him, "… The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and, the children's teeth are set on edge." That is to say, this man cannot help these things because he has inherited the tendency from his father.

It is constantly quoted also in regard to that most pernicious and evil doctrine that God punishes children for the sins of their fathers. Neither of these statements is true.

Let us consider, then, first the history of this proverb; "… The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"; in the second place, God's answer to the proverb as we have it here in Holy Writ. From that twofold consideration, let us finally attempt to state the resulting truths which are of importance to ourselves.

Let us first take the proverb itself. What is its place in Scripture? There is a reverent yet mischievous worship of the Bible which leads people away from its spiritual value and corrective force. Let me give you a characteristic illustration of what I mean. It is said that the Abyssinian church, having canonized all the names in the Bible that were the names of good men, proceeded to canonize Pontius Pilate because his name is in the Bible, and he became Saint Pilate. That is a very grotesque illustration of what I mean. Sermons have sometimes been preached upon this proverb as if it were true, because it is in the Bible. Let us see how it comes to be in the Bible. It is found twice and only twice - once in Jeremiah and once in Ezekiel. The prophecy of Jeremiah having been uttered somewhere about the time of Ezekiel's, perhaps a little earlier, I refer first to it. This particular proverb is found among those which Jeremiah uttered in the last days before the fall of Jerusalem. It was a wondrous ministry that ministry of Jeremiah, because it was a ministry foredoomed to failure. Others of the prophets spoke the great Word of God, always in hope that the Word might be listened to and obeyed, and that there might be some improvement in the circumstances of the people as they turned to God; but Jeremiah had to face the certainty that men would listen to him, and then laugh at him, and sin again. Nevertheless he had to go on proclaiming the great message. It was a ministry of failure. If we study his prophecies carefully, we discover this most interesting and wonderful fact, that in the darkest days, when Jeremiah was in the dungeon, his prophecies broke out into their most optimistic notes. The prophecies of hope were uttered from the dungeon. It is in the midst of these prophecies of hope that this particular proverb is to be found. At the close of chapter thirty-one, the great message of hope is singing itself out; through all the darkness the prophet was looking toward the light, from the midst of adversity he was gazing upon a restoration. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will sow the house of Israel. …Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. … Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will build the city. ..." These are the opening words of three strophes. He was looking on to wonderful days that are yet to be. But, remember, he was in the dungeon, he was in the prison, he was in the midst of the most dark and evil hours of the history of Judah. "Behold, the days come. … Behold, the days come. … Behold, the days come. … In those days ye shall no more say, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But everyone shall die for his own iniquity: every soul that eateth the sour grapes, … it shall die." He was looking to the days of restoration when men shall return to true conceptions of God, and he declared that in those days false proverbs shall cease.

I turn to Ezekiel, and there I find the text again. Ezekiel received his great call to prophetic ministry six years before the fall of Jerusalem, but never exercised his ministry in Jerusalem. Away yonder in Babylonia on the banks of the River Chebar, in the midst of the influence of Babylonish things where he saw those mystic representations of God, the revolving wheels, the burning electron, there this wonderful prophet of hope exercised his ministry. While he was doing so, there visited him certain elders from Jerusalem who came to talk with him about the situation. The prophet received the elders of Israel, and among other things, he said to them, "Why do you use this proverb in Jerusalem? The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. What do you mean by it?" All chapter eighteen is in refutation of that proverb.

When the proverb was born I cannot say, but here it came into use. This is its first appearance in biblical history, and its last; but it has persisted in the speech of men until now. The days in which we first find the proverb were days of national ruin, days of national disaster, of spiritual deadness and moral turpitude. There is an acidity about it that bites. It is striking and suggestive. I can hardly recite it without feeling my teeth are on edge; "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." I go back to the day of Isaiah, the great prophet of the theocracy, and I hear him singing a song of a vineyard, and the owner of the vineyard says he has planted a very pleasant vineyard with a very fruitful vine. "… he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and behold it brought forth wild grapes." I wonder if someone took hold of that thought of the vineyard, and said, "Yes, and the fathers have eaten the wild grapes that are green and acrid. The fathers in the days of Isaiah not only produced wild grapes; they ate them; and as a result, the children are suffering, their teeth are set on edge." The men of Israel, whoever formed the proverb, were using it in that sense of excuse for their sin of reflection upon God. It was the utterance of a word of despair, "We cannot help it. Jerusalem is going to pieces. Zedekiah is playing the fool; punishment is falling upon us. We cannot help it. … The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

The proverb is used today in exactly the same way. That use of the proverb persists in the most remarkable way through the millenniums, and we hear it still. Sometimes it is used with more flippancy than in the case of these men; sometimes with the same despair. Many a man will look into the face of the Christian worker and say, "Look at me. See what I am. I cannot help it. My father has eaten sour grapes, and my teeth are set on edge." Another man will say, "What does God mean by this? I am suffering for my father's sins."

It is important that we should consider God's answer to the proverb. First, its presence in Holy Scripture is due to the fact that it had to be denied. It is only to be found in the Bible in order to be contradicted, in order that, like a base coin, it might be nailed to the counter forever as counterfeit and untrue. Yet it is current still. Let us listen to the answer. Jeremiah answered the proverb in two ways. First by foretelling a day in which it would be abandoned altogether; and second, by giving it the lie direct. Now notice carefully the two verses. First we have the prophecy of abandonment. "In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." He was looking on, as I have already said, to the days of restoration, to the days of the new covenant, and though the most part of Jeremiah's prophecy may be unfamiliar to many Christian people, that part of it is quite familiar by reason of the fact that it is quoted in the New Testament. "I will put My law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people; and they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them." In those days, the days of the New Covenant, men will not use a proverb like this, said Jeremiah. In those days of repentance, repentance on the part of men and consequent repentance on the part of God; those days when men, repentant, shall turn to God, and God, repentant, shall turn from judgment back again to mercy; those days in which there shall pass away forever more false conceptions of God; this proverb will have no place in current speech.

Thus, by predicting a period of abandonment, Jeremiah denied the truth of the proverb; and then proceeded to emphatic denial, by statement of the opposite truth, that everyone shall die for his own iniquity. Then, in order that there may be no mistake, he borrowed the figure of the proverb itself; "… every man that eateth the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge."

Then when we turn to the prophecy of Ezekiel, perhaps uttered a little later than this of Jeremiah or it may be almost at the same time, we have a remarkable illustration of biblical exposition. In Jeremiah 31:30 are the words: "... every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge." Ezekiel 18 is a sermon on that text, an exposition of it. Let us consider that eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel in order to see what are the things the prophet said in answer to this proverb.

First of all he laid down one fundamental fact; " ... all souls are Mine. …" At the close of the chapter he stated a final fact; "For I have no pleasure in the death of the sinner." Between that fundamental fact and that final fact he elaborated his argument, taking illustrations from life.

What is this fundamental fact? God says, "… all souls are Mine; ... the soul of the father ... the soul of the son …"; equally, separately, individually. God declares in that word by Ezekiel that He is not distanced from any man by the distance of that man's father. All souls are Mine; that of the father, and that of the son. God is as near to the son as to the father, to the father as to the son. The father may have as close relationship with God as the son; the son may have as intimate dealings with God as the father. That is indeed fundamental, for if that be grasped, the whole difficulty is dealt with, and that is why it is placed at the forefront of the argument. "… all souls are Mine. …" Every soul can have direct, first-hand, immediate dealing with God. It sometimes seems almost too wonderful a statement to find in the Old Testament. It is the culminating doctrine of the New. In other words, full of mystic beauty and tender poetry, is the thing that Jesus told a woman of Samaria who was a sinner, making His application of the fundamental truth that in every life there is individual possibility for worship; neither in, Jerusalem, nor in this mountain set apart, not here nor there by appointment, but where, anywhere, the spirit of a man goes out to God, there God is.

Therefore, no man is shut off from God by the distance of his father, and no man is brought near to God by the coupling link of his father. "… all souls are Mine ..."; the soul of the father, the soul of the son equally.

Then he proceeded to that remarkable argument by illustration, in which he does not merely take individual men, but takes them in the line of their descent. Remember, he was dealing with a Hebrew people, an Eastern people, who understood a great deal more about the solidarity of the race than we do; who believed in the peculiar continuity that runs from father to son down through the generations; who realized that a son is linked to that which is gone and responsible for that which is to come - a great truth, but a great truth which may be abused, as it was here. With that in mind, notice how the prophet traced the descent. He said in effect, here is a man, a good man, and a true man, and a righteous man. He lives. That man has a son. He is evil; he turns from his father's ways of goodness. He dies because he is evil. Watch still the line of descent. That evil man has a son who is good. He is true, he is righteous. He lives. Now we talk about the principle of heredity skipping one generation and going to another. That may be quite true. But God says, however true that is, there is another truth, and that truth is that every single man stands in immediate relationship with God and can have dealings with God. He will be judged ultimately not by the things inherited but by the things he did, in view of the immediate force at his disposal, which is the force of his right of access to God. A good man lives because he is good. A son turns to evil courses; he is not spared for his father's goodness but is judged for his own acts of evil. He has a son who turns back to goodness; he does not die for his father's evil; he lives because of his own goodness. All of which means that to turn from evil is to live; to turn from right is to die.

The prophet then went a good deal beyond the question of descent; he dealt with purely personal things. Here is a man who says, "I am handicapped by what I did; I am not blaming my father, but I am blaming those years that the canker-worm has eaten. There is my past. There is my sin. I cannot get away from it. It masters me still." To that man God says, "I put Myself between your past and you; and if you will turn from that past to do right, you will live."

Another man says, "Yes, I know I am going wrong today; but I used to be right; therefore I am still all right." God says, "No, you will be condemned, whatever you did yesterday, because of the sin of today." If my past was one of wrong and I want to turn to right, God comes between me and my past. If my past was right and I turn to wrong, God cuts off that past of right and does not reckon it, but deals with me for what I am.

If that be the answer to the proverb according to Jeremiah's statement and Ezekiel's argument, what is the answer according to Christ? The answer according to Christ is the fulfilment of what these men foretold. It is stated in Jeremiah's prophecy that He will introduce a new covenant whereby the law shall be written upon the heart. That new covenant is fulfilled in Christ. Infinitely the most beautiful poetry in Ezekiel's prophecy is the story of the river that flows from the temple of God. Is there anything more beautiful in the story than this: "Everything shall live whithersoever the river cometh"? In Christ that mystic prophecy has been fulfilled, for through Him the river of the water of life is flowing freely. Everything liveth wherever the river comes. In Him men are brought to a recognition of God and of their right of access to God. In Him men are brought into actual dealing with God. So that for a man to sit down and excuse his sin, or utter his blasphemies against heaven, or wail in an agony of despair in the words of this proverb, "… The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge," is to deny the teaching of the Bible, and to deny the message and the mission of the Christ.

Let us attempt in a closing word to gather from this meditation one or two essential truths. I put the first into this very definite form. God never punishes children for the sins of their fathers. Nowhere in the Old or New Testaments is it stated that God punishes children for their father's sins, except the children continue in the sins of their fathers. I know the passage that has been quoted, and I go back deliberately to it in the Book of Exodus. In connection with the giving of the law to the people, in the fifth verse of the twentieth chapter I read, "… I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" - but we must not stop there - "upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate Me." Continuity in the sin of the father will bring continuity in the judgment and punishment of the child. And then, as if in very deed, as one of the prophets said, "judgment is ever one of God's strange acts," mark how the rest of the world runs - "and showing lovingkindness unto thousands of them that love Me …" and that does not mean thousands of individuals, but of generations. But there must be continuity in love. Where there is continuity in sin, there is continuity in judgment. Where there is continuity in love, there is continuity in mercy.

I pray you remember in passing in this connection, for the subject has many side issues, that a distinction must be made between punishment and chastisement. It may be in that larger operation of God with the race, that I do suffer pain as the result of sin in some of my forefathers, but that is not punishment. I am permitted by that very suffering to share in the healing process of the race. Punishment is the pain of disease; chastisement is the pain of excision. The difference must always be borne in mind. Because we are members of a race, a sinning race, most humbly and reverently, and yet with all confidence may I say it, those of us who name the Name of Christ and who enter into fellowship with Him who came to bear the sins of others, are permitted to have fellowship with His sufferings, to make up that which is behind in the sufferings of Christ. There are men today who understand that in their suffering, resulting from the wrong-doing of their fathers, they are not being punished, but they have come into co-operation with the great passion of God through which He is cleansing not a man alone, but a race, and is moving toward the establishment of His ultimate Kingdom. God never punishes a child for his father's sin except a child continue in that sin.

That leads me to another word. Someone says, "All that is true, I grant you. But there are some children who continue in their father's sins because they cannot help it." That is quite true. I admit that. That is the operation of the law of heredity. It is a perfectly true thing. We cannot escape it. That is to say, it is true if we shut God out of account; if we put God merely at the back of a process of law, and know nothing of Him in personal, actual experience. If God is merely One through whose propulsion all things proceed, and I am merely one "within the grasp of law," it is no use talking to me. I cannot help it. There is fire in my blood. There is poison in my mind. The devil in solution was transmitted to me, and I cannot fight against it. If there is no Christ and no Bible and no Christian religion, then heredity is the last word, except, perhaps, as we may balance it by environment. But in the name of God we have our Bible, we have our Christ, we have our God; and the Bible declares that God is the deepest fact in human life for every man. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews said, "… we had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto a Father of spirits, and live?" A most wonderful word revealing the relationship of every man to his own father and to God. My father was the father of my flesh; he was not the creator of my spirit. I am related to my father in the flesh. He transmitted to me the forces of the flesh but had nothing to do with the creation of my spirit. My spirit in its first creation was of God. God has bound Himself to humanity in a strange and marvelous mystery, whereby He is the creator of the spirit in the case of the procreation of every human being, an appalling and a wonderful mystery; He creates the spirit. If you inherit your tendencies in that delicate and marvelous thing, your flesh, your body, from your father; underneath it is yourself, your spirit life, which your father did not generate but which God did create. Am I to be bound by the accident of flesh and blood, or am I to hear a voice that bids me turn back again to the Father of spirits, that through Him I may receive the power that shall be superior to everything else, and live? Blessed be God, it is ever strangely marvelous and majestic and inexplicable; but it is the operation of the spiritual law. The good man lives; the bad man dies; the good man lives.

Before the prophet had done, he who looked upon the face of God upon the banks of the Chebar must sing of mercy as well as of judgment. Before the prophet had concluded he sang, "The Lord loveth not the death of a sinner." Therefore, to turn to Him is to find power for life against all the evil that inheritance gives to me. And more, against my own past, for if I have done wickedness and will turn to Him, I shall live.

Let me gather up all the things that are in my heart in final words, and let me apply them. If your teeth are on edge, do not blame your father. Whosoever eateth sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge. If your teeth are on edge, you have eaten the sour grapes.

"Yes, but my father did eat them, and I had a tendency to sour grapes before I was born." Is that so? Then God is greater than your father, and the forces that He places at your disposal are greater than all your tendency toward sour grapes.

"Yes, but I have eaten them myself. I plead guilty. God help me, I am guilty. I have eaten them. My teeth are on edge, and I have contracted a liking for sour grapes! Though I hate them, I must have them."

God is greater than one's liking. Get back to Him. He will put Himself between you and your father, and between you and your past, for the river of God is flowing, and there is life wherever the river comes.