**VOLUME 9; CHAPTER 06 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE PROBLEM OF HOW TO BEGIN by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom ...*

*Proverbs 9:10*

THERE ARE HOURS WHICH SUGGEST NEW BEGINNINGS. AT THE dawn of the year, on our birthdays, when we leave school or college and enter upon life's business, we find ourselves almost invariably and inevitably beginning again. To use the very old and familiar figure of speech, we turn over a new leaf. The figure is poetical and it is warranted. In our life story we turn the page and begin a new chapter; and it is impossible to do it, if we have any moral sense and any spiritual sense, without wanting to begin all over again. We are conscious at such times that in very many regards our lives have been characterized by folly, and we desire that they should be governed by wisdom. We look back along the pathway and see the mistakes we have made, sometimes ignorantly but often wilfully, and at the parting of the ways, we earnestly desire that in the days that lie before us there should be fewer mistakes made either ignorantly or in waywardness. We have turned over a new leaf, and we desire that the writing upon the new page shall be more legible, more worthy of the great Master, having fewer erasures necessary, fewer spoilings of the meaning by indistinctness, more of truth, more of beauty, more of glory.

How are we to begin? That is the supreme question of such hours. It is not a simple question. The measure of our honesty is the measure of our perplexity. The measure of our sincerity is the measure of our fear. May I venture to add to these statements another; the number of our years is the measure of our fearfulness. We are more afraid than we used to be of new resolutions and new beginnings by reason of the many failures of the past. Still we desire to begin again. How are we to begin?

In my text is the answer. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom …" In the last of the set discourses on wisdom in this Book of Proverbs, the preacher made that declaration. It is not to be confused with an earlier statement. I open the Book of Proverbs and I read, "The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel." The introductory words run on to verse six, constituting a preface. Then the preacher summarized the whole intention of his discourses on wisdom and of the proverbs which he had collected, and the summary is found in these words, "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of knowledge; …" In the last of the discourses we have the words of our text, "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom ..."

The difference to which I want to draw attention is not the difference between the words "knowledge" and "wisdom," but a difference between two words which are the same in our translation but which are not the same in the Hebrew; "The beginning of knowledge" and "the beginning of wisdom." The word translated "beginning" in the first declaration is a word which means first, but not in time alone; it means first in order of time, of place, of rank, of value; first in importance, You will observe that the revisers have suggested an alteration in the margin so that the first of these verses should read, "The fear of the Lord is the chief part of knowledge." The thought of the first declaration is that the fear of the Lord is the supreme value in wisdom. Of course in that larger declaration, the thought of the text is included. We are now dealing with beginnings, and that is the exact meaning of the word of my text, the beginning as the starting point, the commencement. The fear of the Lord is the starting point in wisdom, is the commencement of wisdom. The commencement of the way of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, for the fear of the Lord is the abiding secret of the way of wisdom.

Let us first consider generally this subject of beginning. In doing so I would remind you first that a beginning is not a beginning. There is always a past. There is always something that has preceded what we call a beginning. I might summarily dismiss this by saying that a new beginning is impossible. A beginning is never a beginning. We may illustrate the truth in any sphere of life. What is the beginning of a tree? There is no beginning that is not related to a past history. The young tree that we plant in our garden; that is the beginning of the tree there, but it is not the beginning of the tree. If we plant an acorn, that is not the beginning of the oak tree; the beginning of the tree which will come from the acorn is the tree from which the acorn came. We travel back until we discover that every tree is related to mysteries as infinite and far-extending as is the mystery of our own life. Take the beginning of a bird. Some of the older men and women will remember the great days when Hastings lectured on Christian evidences and that curious and interesting question which he perpetually propounded to those who held contest with him; which was first, the hen or the egg? We begin our backward journey, and there is no beginning. A beginning is not a beginning. Enough of illustration on the lower level. There is no moral beginning either of sinning or of doing righteousness. You did not begin to sin when you sinned. Behind that beginning to sin was the thought, the conception, and behind the thinking and the conception, tendencies assaulting the soul; that mystic stuff of which thoughts and dreams are made lay behind. There is no beginning. There is no beginning for the doing of right. Behind the deed is the thought, and behind the thought is the will, that infinite majesty of personality. I am less and less surprised as the years run on, and I know better, to find that I cannot know myself. I am less surprised that the psalmist said of God, "Thou understandest my thought afar off." And then added: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain unto it." There is no beginning. Being has no beginning. The only beginning is that of form; the form of being may have a beginning; but that which takes the new form existed before in some other form. The new form is but a resultant of things that lay behind it. It always has to do with a past. I will turn over a new leaf, and I will begin again. I cannot. All the past is there. The new leaf is in the one volume and must constitute a part of the one story. The way of wisdom must take into account that past. It was this tremendous sense of the past that made Nicodemus look into the eyes of Jesus in the night and ask the question that was neither rude, flippant, nor irrelevant, "… How can a man be born when he is old? …" It was not a foolish question. It was a question coming up out of the deepest sense of personality, the essential, the elemental. It was a question of the soul. "… How can a man be born when he is old? …" What of those years that have run? How can I begin? If we are to discover the secret of wisdom, we must take the past into account, for a beginning is not a beginning.

In the second place, I remark that a beginning is not lonely, independent, self-contained. Whatever may seem to begin, begins in the midst of environment, in the midst of surrounding forces that touch it and will claim its attention. There is nothing which begins and which, in its beginning, is separated from all the forces that are outside itself. Every beginning is made in the midst of forces which are destructive and constructive. The tree begins its growth and its development; and there are evil things waiting to fasten upon it and destroy it, and there are great and generous forces waiting to give it new strength and enable it to come to perfection of being. To those forces, that which is begun will respond, rejecting sometimes, receiving sometimes; rejecting the evil things and receiving the good sometimes; sometimes rejecting the beneficent things and receiving the evil things. These are the mysteries of life. If we leave that lower realm of illustration and climb to the higher, we shall immediately see how true all this is. We make our new beginnings in the midst of forces destructive and constructive. They are in waiting for us tomorrow; no, they are right here in the sanctuary! Some of the most disastrous moral and spiritual catastrophes have happened in the sanctuary of God in the hour of vision and light and glory. When we turn over the new leaf and decide we will begin again, we must begin remembering that we cannot begin alone or independently; a beginning is not self-contained. Beating through the air, advancing upon us, are forces destructive and constructive, and the whole activity of a new beginning is concentrated at that point. A new beginning in the moral and spiritual realm is the readjustment of life to forces that surround, both constructive and destructive; the opening of the soul to the constructive, and the shutting of the doors of the soul to the destructive. The way of wisdom must take into account the forces which surround the life. There is another question, one which Nicodemus did not ask but which is quite as pertinent; how can a man live his own life in the midst of these forces? When I have turned over this new leaf and begun again, how am I going to realize my own personality in the presence of these forces? Any answer to the question of how to begin must take in this great fact of environment.

I have one other thing to say about the beginning. A beginning is a beginning. We do start new things when we begin. Being has no beginning, but its form and its expression have, and in the creation of a new form, a new expression, new forces are sent out, the issue of which no man can see. Whenever a man makes a new start, a new beginning, he is starting something that will run on from the propulsion of that beginning, whether good or bad. This fact creates the supreme responsibility of life. In that hour when we turn aside to the thing that is base, and low, and mean; beginning that from which we had previously turned away, we are starting things, the ultimate issue of which we cannot see. Equally is it true that when we form resolutions on the side of good, in that hour we start forces for good, the ultimate of which will be known in the future and never perfectly here. Every new beginning is in that sense a beginning, and the things that follow will take direction and shape from that beginning.

In the new beginning of which we are now thinking, the new moral and spiritual beginning, that new direction is supremely in mind. What do we mean by turning over a new leaf? That the order of our life is to take a new shape, a new form, a new color, a new tone. We are looking ahead. When a man desires to walk the way of wisdom, he must take tomorrow into account, for the way of wisdom is supremely a passion for tomorrow. Here then we have another question that we ask; how can a man give the right direction, the true form and fashion and shape to the future? Every beginning must take into account three things, the past, the present, and the future. How then shall we begin?

That brings us to the declaration of the text, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom .." The supreme thing in every hour of new beginning in moral and spiritual life is that of some principle of action which will set us in right relationship with the past, with the forces that lie about us in the present and with the future. That principle must be more than intellectual orthodoxy. It must be vitally actual. It must be a principle which, being observed, brings us into the place of moral and spiritual power. We must find some principle which deals with all these facts not merely ideally, but dynamically, not merely from the standpoint of revealing to us a philosophy, but from the standpoint of communicating to us potentiality, which shall be sufficient for this terrible mystery and fact of the past, for these tremendous powers of the present, and for that weird and yet alluring mystery of the future.

When I pondered this text and had come to this part of my message and my burden, I said to my soul, "It is so old a statement, how can you deal with it?" I then asked two questions, and I will now ask them aloud. They are the questions of a man who presumably had never heard the statement before; the questions of a little child. First, "Who is the Lord?" And second, "What is it to fear the Lord?"

Who is the Lord? I have no answer to this inquiry other than that of biblical and Christian revelation. That answer is a threefold one as I understand it. He is the Creator and therefore the One Who knows perfectly that which He has created. He is the Preserver of all such as He has created and therefore the One Who cares for that which He has created. Finally, He is the Redeemer and therefore the One Who must love that which He has created and which He has preserved. There is nothing new in all that, but if some of us can put our lives into right relationship with it all, that will be something new; that will be a true beginning.

He is the Creator, therefore knowing. Already in my sermon I have made a quotation which I want to use again, from that wonderful, classic psalm than which there is nothing finer in the Bible in this regard and nothing approaching it outside the Bible:

O Jehovah, thou hast searched me, and known me,

Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising.

Thou understandest my thought afar off.

Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,

And art acquainted with all my ways.

"… Thou understandest my thought afar off." Thought is the most wonderful thing in my personality, mystic, strange, the thing that supremely puzzles me; it is the vehicle through which temptation assaults me, and I cannot help its assault; it is the vehicle through which high aspirations come to me, and I cannot help their coming. "… Thou understandest my thought afar off." The Lord is the Creator, and I am the created, a realized thought of God. He thought me, planned me, and fashioned me. He distanced Himself from that which is physical in me by the distance of my parenthood. He kept Himself near to me in the essential mystery of my being which is spiritual. For in me, as in all other men, He breathed the breath of life. Therefore He knows me perfectly.

O the comfort of it? Did you expect me to say the terror of it? By no means; the comfort of it! "Thou God seest me." In the olden days they printed those words, framed them, hung them up in the nursery, and too often interpreted them so as to suggest that God is a sort of moral policeman. Print it again, frame it, bedeck it with flowers, and then sing it to the children: "Thou God seest me." He watches over us as the master Workman, Who, according to the ancient history, when He had completed man saw that His work was very good. The Lord is my Creator, understanding the mystic mechanism of my being. As to physical powers, I am fearfully and wonderfully made. More marvelous still are my mental capacities. The supreme, august, majestic dignity is that spiritual life which is akin to Deity, offspring of the Most High. I do not know myself; Thou Lord, knowest me perfectly. Then indeed, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom …"

He is Preserver also, caring for all that His hands have made. Here we approach a statement where there are difficulties, but let us think carefully, let us think broadly, let us come to no hasty conclusion. There are men and women in London tonight for whom it seems as though God did not care. There are little children in London tonight for whom it is very hard to understand that God cares. But we must remember that the plane of human suffering which is unrelieved by Deity is a plane from which God is excluded by man's rebellion. The blame of such suffering is not upon God's provision but upon man's dealing with God's provision. There is in this world of ours such plenty that there need be no crying out in the streets and no poverty; but when man forgets God and breaks His law, then suffering follows. In the provision of God there is perfect supply for the preservation of humanity. Remember further, that disease and suffering are not in the economy of God; they are overruled within that economy, mastered within it, held in the grip of the Divine government, but they are not the will of God. Let us talk no blasphemy about disease being the will of God. Disease is never the will of God. The Lord is the One that preserveth the life which He has created. He created the morning for us, He created the darkness for us, giving His beloved sleep and in sleep giving to His beloved; making season follow upon season for man's well-being. We often measure Him by our own incompetence, and we imagine that several wet weeks in succession demonstrate the fact that the throne of God is vacant and that humanity is to be ruined. It is not so, and those who know God never blaspheme Him by criticizing His weather. He preserveth the life of man and beast! He is the Preserver of such as He has made.

Finally, He is the Redeemer. I am not going to discuss the problem. There is a problem, the problem of evil, of sin. The fact that man has lost his vision of this God, and the consciousness of this God, and relationship to this God, and that rivers of evil surge through the centuries destroying human life; the fierce fires of wrong persist in human history and permeate humanity, blasting, scorching, destroying. We have to face the fact that man, most mystic and mysterious in his being, is a rebel, and that thus revelling against God, he is banished from consciousness of God and fellowship with God. What then? God has not left humanity; God has not abandoned humanity! God has found a way by which His banished ones may return, because His is love which alters not when it alteration finds. God's is the love that follows and associates itself with sinning souls in comradeship in order that such may be healed and restored, and that at infinite cost; cost so marvelous that we cannot attempt to speak of it in any terms that are current in the common speech of humanity. The Lord is the Redeemer.

What then is His fear? Subjectively, it is recognition of His might and of His holiness. It is admission of the righteousness of the claim He makes upon the human soul. It is reverence for Him and a desire for conformity to His will. "In all thy ways acknowledge Him …" The fear of the Lord subjectively is that acknowledgment of God, that recognizing of Himself and of His claims, and that desire for such adjustment to that central infinite truth of all the universe and of all life which shall be for the glory of Him Who is at once Creator, Preserver and Redeemer. It follows that objectively the fear of the Lord is submission, adjustment, obedience. I do not mean that fear of the Lord is acceptance of truths about Him, or subscription to creeds which men have written. I am not undervaluing either the one or the other, but there may be both without the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord, I repeat, is first of all recognition of Himself and admission of His claim, reverence for Him; and then the answer to it that comes out of the volitional center of the life, the answer to that of which the soul is convinced.

Here someone will say in his or her heart, "This is all in the realm of mystery; let us get back to the realm of simplicity." Then I inquire, "Do you believe in God in any form, do you believe in Him in any manner?" Then the fear of the Lord is the answer of your life to that which you believe; it is the taking of your life and putting it into true adjustment to that of which you are convinced. Is He Creator? Then I venture to say in the name of common sense, if on no higher ground, your business is to find His thought for you and to obey it. Is He Preserver? Then I affirm that the supreme business of your life is that of worship and of faithfulness in recognition and in response. Is He Redeemer? Then the supreme business of your life is that of yielding yourself to that redemption, the handing over of the soul to the Redeemer. "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom …"

I claim, in conclusion, that this declaration of the ancient preacher is justified, philosophically, historically and experimentally. It is justified philosophically. Note the relation of Jehovah to the things which we said at the commencement must be taken into account in the way of wisdom; the past, the present, and the future. As to the past. What relation has the Lord to the past? Let the whole business be stated briefly once again by declaring whatever your past, or mine, He antedates it. Let me speak now to those who may not agree with all my attitudes towards the Bible. I want to ask you before you take my Bible and tear out its first page, to make up your minds what you propose to substitute for that page. We were among the trees a little while ago, tracing them back, and we lost our way. We were among the birds following them back, and there also we lost our way. Follow the pathways again; then take the Bible up and read; "In the beginning God created …" If some other cosmogony satisfies you, I have no right to dictate to you; but so help me God, nothing else can satisfy me, but that does satisfy me. "In the beginning God …" I do not mind which way you travel; it may be you will say that the birds came after the trees and that something preceded the trees, and you travel back until you come to primordial protoplasmic germs. I will go with you, but now what is at the back of that? "In the beginning God created …" He antedates all your pasts and can control your past.

What of the present? What of the forces that assault the soul, luring it both to good and evil? He encompasses the whole of them and can control them. Nothing is out of His grasp. Not heaven alone but hell also is within His government. The Book of Job, that wonderful Book, teaches us how the Adversary of man is compelled to tell the sum of his devilry before God before he is permitted to exercise his power against man. That is always so. Milton when he made Lucifer, son of the morning, say, "It is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven," made Lucifer express not his badness only, but his madness also, for Lucifer cannot reign in hell. God reigns in hell. "Though hell be nigh, yet God is nigher, Circling us with hosts of fire." All the forces in the midst of which we make our new beginnings are atmosphere in Deity and are controlled by God on behalf of all such as fear Him.

What of the future? He possesses it and can order it. He sees the end from the beginning. The final consummation, in one gleam of gold the New Testament has revealed and in one only, when Paul having climbed to the greatest height of all his apostolic thinking, said, "Then cometh the end, when He shall deliver up the Kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power." That is the great and wonderful consummation about which the Bible has said so little that we dare say but little. That is made sure by the government of God. The future is His.

Where then shall I begin? "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom …" There is my past, "… How can a man be born when he is old? …" God stands between me and my past. Around me are the forces of today; How can I deal with them? God will deal with them, so I can deal with them in fellowship with Him. There is the future, what am I to do with tomorrow? There is hope in God for that also is His. Faith in God about the past; fellowship with God about the present; hope in God about the future. "Being … justified by faith …" that is the backward look. We have peace with God …"; that is the present. "Rejoice in the hope of the glory of God"; that is the future.

In proportion as our lives are put into right relationship with Him, we mount His chariot and ride triumphantly toward the goal of the ages and if the wheels be sometimes splashed with blood and the conflict leave scars upon the man who fights, what does it matter! Life is not feeble, frail; it is mighty, mysterious. The way of wisdom is the way of infinite, glorious victory, and the beginning is the fear of the Lord.

The declaration is justified historically in the experience of all the souls who have known the fear of the Lord. Hear me again - it is a sentence I would like to elaborate, but I will not - in the history of all the nations that have feared the Lord, the declaration of the text is vindicated.

Finally, it is vindicated experimentally. At this moment, the answer of the soul intelligently to the declaration vindicates its accuracy, and the experience of the soul in obedience vindicates its accuracy. By which I mean that we know full well that to fear the Lord is to walk in the way of wisdom. We know full well that if we will act in the fear of the Lord, we shall have found the highway at the end of which is the perfected life and the city and the home of God.