**VOLUME 9; CHAPTER 21 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE ASCENSION by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Now this, He ascended, what is it but that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth. He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.*

*Ephesians 4:9,10*

THESE WORDS ARE PLACED WITHIN BRACKETS BOTH IN THE Authorized and Revised Versions, and rightly so, for they constitute a distinct parenthesis in the apostolic argument. We can omit them, and the main teaching is not interfered with in the slightest way, but it is made more radiant by reason of the light within them. The passage helps us to come to a clear apprehension of the supreme importance of the Ascension, which was at once the culmination of our Lord's earthly ministry and the initiation of His heavenly service. It consists of a question and of a statement: "Now this, He ascended, what is it but that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth?" and "He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things."

The question emphasizes a fact and is a question that does not require an answer. The fact, which is not in dispute, is that the Ascension of our Lord involved descension. Now that assumption arrests attention. One is inclined to challenge it. Does ascension necessarily involve descension? It certainly is not so in the case of any other human being of whom we have any knowledge, either personally, or in these Sacred Writings. We think of the blessed dead as ascended and properly so. Of course, the words "ascension" and "descension" are figurative terms enabling us to think intelligently of facts in a realm where dimensions are more than we are familiar with. I say then that we may properly speak of men of the past as having ascended, but their ascension does not involve their descension. If the first man had never fallen, all we know of humanity would lead us to believe that he would have ascended. After the period of earthly, probationary life, the school time of the soul, man would have passed to the higher and the larger life for which this life is forever a preparation. But this ascension would not involve descension. If the first man after having fallen, by reason of his confidence in God, ascended, it does not at all involve the idea of his descent. We think of Moses passing to the Mount and dying, as one has said, of the kisses of the lips of God, he himself ascended; but that ascent does not involve descent. The fiery prophet of Israel was caught away in a chariot of fire, a fitting vehicle for the conveyance of his spirit to the realms of light, and thus he ascended, but that does not involve descent. Enoch, the quiet man who walked with God, and was not, for God took him, ascended; but descent was not involved. These men began their being here in the world. Human life begins here, serves it probation here, and if it fulfils the ideal, it ascends, but that does not involve descent. Why then does the apostle say, in interrogative form, what he conceives will be at once admitted: "This, he ascended, what is it but that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth"?

If ascension involves descension, it involves much more. If the Ascension of our Lord must include the fact that before His Ascension there was a descent, something far more is included. If ascension involves descension, it is patent that ascension is a return to a place originally occupied. Therefore, involved in this declaration is the central truth concerning the Person of our Lord. Whereas the Ascension lays emphasis upon the Resurrection and the passing into heaven of a man of our humanity, this statement warns us against thinking of Him merely in the terms of our own humanity. "He that descended is the same also that ascended …" is another way of saying that in the Ascension He passed back to the place from which He came. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Then came His descent: "… the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." The Ascension was the passing back of this One into the presence of God. In this declaration of the apostle is involved the truth which he declared in another letter in which the descent is described in the most wonderful language. He said of Him, that being in the form of God, He did not count this high dignity a prize to be snatched at and held for His own enrichment but emptied Himself. That is the descent. Continuing, the apostle said that being found in fashion as a man He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the Cross, wherefore God hath highly exalted Him. That is the Ascension, but it is the Ascension of One Who descended, and the One Who descended is the One Who in all the mystery of the past ever existed in fellowship and cooperation with God.

The whole emphasis of the question is on the descension. All the values of the Ascension - the human values which are ours, the things in which we make our boast and our trust which are of the very anchorage of our hope and faith - resulted from the descent.

"He … descended into the lower parts of the earth. He … ascended far above all the heavens, …" These two statements take us to the uttermost reaches of our thinking with regard to humanity. The first takes us to the uttermost depth. I am aware that there have been differences of opinion as to the real meaning of this phrase: "…the lower parts of the earth." There have been those who have suggested, and not without reason, that it is merely a reference to the earth simply placing it in contrast with the higher places of creation, "… all the heavens, …" which are subsequently referred to. But I do not so read the passage. Here I believe the apostle was referring to the ultimate depths of human experience resulting from sin; the lower parts of the earth, Hades, Sheol, the prison house of spirits. Involved within the phrase, of course, is the Incarnation itself. He descended; He took upon Him the form of a servant; He was made in the likeness of man; He came into all the circumstances and experiences of humanity; He lived His life among sinning men amid all the degradation of humanity which resulted from sin, He passed to the uttermost bound of that degradation in the mystic marvel of His dying. When His body lay in the grave, His Spirit descended into Hades and so He passed into the lower parts of the earth.

It is that to which the apostle draws attention. He declares in effect that the Ascension - while it involves descent and while, therefore, it further involves the prior existence of this Person, the Son of God - gains its values from that descent into the lower parts of the earth.

Now let us pass from this examination of the question, to consider the statement which immediately follows it and which is so closely related to it; "He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things." As in the question our attention is focused upon the descension, here it is kept focused there, but we are asked to interpret the Ascension by that descension. The statement first reveals the relation of that descent of our Lord to His Ascension. Apart from that descent and the accomplishment therein of a Divine purpose, there would have been no ascension in spite of the fact that the One Who descended had occupied a place in eternal fellowship with God. Ascent was the return of the One Who had accomplished His mission, and the last glory of the Ascension is that it sets an eternal seal upon the victory won in the mystery and the darkness of the descent. The One Who was from the beginning, the One Who became flesh, the One Who took our humanity and entered into it, entered into it for the purpose of ransom and redemption. That One could have found no way back into the place of power and fellowship with God had He failed to fulfil the Divine purpose. Let us at once admit that we are imagining the impossible. Nevertheless, here is the tremendous fact - which, trying to grasp with our human minds, we have to state it in this way - that God's adventure upon saving men was an adventure upon which He risked everything. The self-emptying of the Son of God was no easy thing even to Him. It was indeed self-emptying, the risking of everything upon the venture of dealing with sin, abolishing death, rescuing and ransoming a race, and bringing it back to the place of Divine intention and desire. This statement reveals to us the issue of that descension. Notice the superlative nature of the terms of which the apostle made use. "… far above all the heavens, …" Above the heavens. That is unthinkable, and because it is unthinkable it is written. In order that our estimation of the place which He now occupies should be superlative, Paul employed the phrase, "… above all the heavens, ..." I repeat, we cannot think beyond the heavens. This is a poetic figure and a most daring one. Paul speaks elsewhere about being caught up into the third heaven. In Scripture we are familiar with three heavens. The heaven of the atmosphere; the stellar spaces and the heavens beyond, the dwelling place of angels and of the spirits of the just made perfect. To that third heaven Paul said he was caught up upon one occasion. Now he said that this One ascended above all the heavens. It was a poetic figure intended to emphasize the high place, the final place of authority and dignity and power and glory to which this One passed. It means that He is elevated to a position which is above every form of creation. His Ascension was to the place of supreme and final and eternal authority.

Moreover He ascended above all heavens that He may fill all things. There are two possible meanings of that phrase. It may mean that He might fill all things by His presence, His sovereignty, His activity. Or it may mean that He might fulfill all things, realize the original purpose of God in all His creation. I believe that both ideas are included.

Yet, if we speak of Him as filling all things with His presence, His sovereignty, His activity, we seem to be contradicting the whole doctrine of the Ascension. The doctrine of the Ascension is that a Man of our humanity has passed to this central place of power and glory. But if He be a Man of our humanity, how can He fill all things? The mystery is admitted, but the admission of a mystery does not deny the actuality of the fact which is mysterious. Have we no glimpses of light on the subject in the stories of the days of Jesus between His Resurrection and Ascension? Was He not then preparing our hearts for an understanding of this fact? He appeared again and again to some group of disciples, and He did not come by the usual ways of human coming! The doors were shut for fear of the Jews, and they were not opened, but He was there. He talked with them in human speech and held out human hands and invited them to touch His human hands. Then again, without the shooting of a bolt, or the opening of a door, He was not! Not what? Did you think I was going to say not there? I was not. He was there, but He was not visible.

Two men were walking to Emmaus, and a third joined them. Their hearts burned within them while the Stranger talked with them. At last they invited Him in and offered Him the hospitality of their home for the night. He went in to abide and sat at the table with them. He was a Man of their own humanity, the very Man they had seen and beheld and handled, to use John's words. Suddenly, as He broke bread, they discovered Who He was, and then, with equal suddenness, He was not visible, but He was there! Let there be no Sadduceeism in our thinking. He can most certainly, suddenly, gloriously appear upon the field of battle to a dying soul. I believe with all my heart and all my soul that some of our boys have seen Jesus actually.

And yet, He filleth all things. This is not new in the history of Jesus. It was true of Him when He was here in the world. He spoke of Himself once in language that is very suggestive, as being in the bosom of the Father even while He was still here. For the three and thirty years that the Son of God walked the ways of earth, heaven lost its manifestation of Deity. It did not lose the presence of God, but it lacked His manifestation. While He was here, walking our ways, the roads of Judaea and Galilee, He was still in high heaven. When upon the green hill outside the city wall, He hung upon the brutal Roman gibbet, dying to save men, the chief pain and agony was felt in heaven in the heart of God.

That which is new is the assurance that comes to us as we remember that in that descent He won His victory, accomplished His purpose, carried out the great Divine campaign to finality and so went back again to heaven to be forever the medium through which God is to be known. Not yet do we see the glory of the victory, not yet do we see all things put under Him, but we see Jesus, the Man of our humanity, exalted thus to the right hand of God.

Now let us turn from textual examination to the theme itself. Let us think of the glory of the Ascension. The simple fact is that above all heavens is the One Who was forever there, but now He is there as Man, as well as God. That is new in heaven. When Jesus of Nazareth passed to the supernal heights, heaven entered upon a new phase and a new experience. Heaven then regained the One through Whom alone God manifests Himself to creation, but He was changed. The manifestation of light and love and life and of the glory and the beauty of Deity was the same, but there were new unveilings. At the center of the universe is a Man and withal a Man bearing in His body wound prints. The seer of Patmos, amid all the flaming and the flashing of the glorious revelations that came to him then, saw the throne, the light-girdled throne of the Ancient of days, and was ever more wonderful thing said concerning that throne: "I beheld in the midst of the throne … a Lamb as it had been slain, ..." There at the heart of the universe is a Man of our humanity Who is a Redeemer.

By that Ascension, humanity is explained, and by that Ascension the place of man is secured in spite of his failure. By that Ascension, I say, humanity is explained. It is when we see Him ascended, that we know what was in the heart of Deity when God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." What dreams we dreamed as we read the Genesis story. How we have tried to think out the meaning and the purpose of God in the creation of a being so wonderful. When God created humanity, He created it capable of close and intimate fellowship with Himself. Now all this is made plain by the fact that at the center of the universe God Himself remains incarnate, manifesting Himself to all creation through humanity.

But the Man there bears wound prints. Therefore, by the Ascension we know that the place of man is secured in spite of his failure. Our human need is joined forevermore with the grace of Deity. These then are the things that are verified to us by the Ascension of the Man of Nazareth.

But let this be interpreted by the context. This parenthesis, this excursus was called forth by the fact that Paul had just quoted from a Psalm. The quotation is not exact. It is marked by a verbal alteration which gives a new turn to the thought. The Psalm reads:

"Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive. …" So far Paul's quotation does not vary. The picture suggested by the Hebrew poetry is that of a king returning, bringing with him a band of captives. "… Thou hast led captivity …" Thy captives, Thou hast led them hast led captive.

Then the Psalm says: "Thou hast received gifts among men, Yea among the rebellious also, …" We get nearer to the heart of the statement if we read it thus: He received gifts consisting of men, yea, consisting of the rebellious also. The King as he returns carries with him a band of captives. These are his gifts, not gifts he bestows, but gifts bestowed upon him. This idea Paul changes. With a fine daring, by a verbal change, he gives a new view of the situation. He says: "He led a band of captives captive; He gave gifts unto men." This verbal departure of the apostle is not a contradiction, but a fuller interpretation. The captives He led captive were His possession, according to the Messianic Psalm. "He led them captive, who were His possession, in order that He might bestow gifts upon them," is in effect the apostolic statement. They were given to Him by the right of His conquest, and He took them, not to put them into the galleys, not to oppress them, but to give them gifts, to crown them. Paul is not denying the teaching of the prophetic Psalm. That is all included in his sentence: He led His captivity captive. Paul says yes, but He did this in order to bestow gifts upon them.

This then is the contextual exposition. When He ascended, He ascended leading with Him a band of captives that were now His rightful possession. In His own words in that great intercessory prayer He called them: "… the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world: …" He received gifts from among men. They were of the rebellious, they were of the stubborn; those who by their own sin had violated the order of His universe, had introduced deformity and ugliness, and were against God. But this One had by His descent won them, captured them, made them His captives, and when He ascended, He ascended representing them, carrying them with Him to the same supernal height, leading His band of captives captive, and that in order that He might bestow gifts upon them.

The first gift He bestowed upon His band of captives was the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. Then He gave helps and healings and all the varied gifts that His captives need to lift them out of the degradation of their captivity and prepare them to reign with Him in life and glory and beauty forever and forever. In that Ascension of our Lord we also ascended. If indeed we are among the number of His captives, we are already in the purpose and plan of God, seated with Him in the heavens. Our life is hid with Christ in God even now. The life we live here in the flesh is the life risen, ascended, exalted of the sovereign Lord of life and glory. If for a little while we remain where the storms are sweeping and the long and dark and difficult journeys have to be undertaken, where the furnace is heated seven times, we are not alone; for while we are seated with Him in the heavens He is walking in us and with us, the way of sorrows.

From the heights, the mysterious heights of eternal oneness with God and fellowship with Him, He descended to the lower parts of the earth to be numbered with transgressors. He passed down into death in fellowship with humanity. He descended into the prison house of souls. Thence He ascended, and the glory that comes to Him is that of those men whom He receives as His gifts. Who are they? The rebellious!

See how the plated gates unfold,

How swing the creaking doors of brass!

With drums and gleaming arms, behold

Christ's kingly cohorts pass.

Shall Christ not have His chosen men,

Nor lead His crested knights so tall,

Superb upon their horses, when

The world's last cities fall?

Ah, no! these few, the maimed, the dumb.

The saints of every lazar's den,

The earth's off-scourings - they come

From desert and from fen.

To break the terror of .the night,

Black dreams and dreadful mysteries,

And proud, lost empires in their might,

And chains and tyrannies.

There ride no gold encinctured knights

Against the potentates of earth;

God chooses all the weakest things

And gives Himself in birth.

With beaten slaves to draw His breath,

And sleeps with foxes on the moor,

With malefactors shares His death,

Tattered and worn and poor.

See how the palace gates unfold,

How swing the creaking doors of brass!

Victorious in defeat - behold,

Christ and His cohorts pass.