**VOLUME 9; CHAPTER 23 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**SONGS IN PRISON by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*... about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns unto God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison-house were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened; and every one's bands were loosed toward God.*

*Acts 16:25,26*

THIS IS AN ARRESTING AND WONDERFUL STORY, AND THE MORE carefully it is considered the more the wonder grows. At first we wonder at the singing. Then we wonder so much at that which inspired the singing, that we should wonder more if these men had not sung. At first we are amazed with the cheerfulness and heroism of these men, and then we find out that their singing was not abnormal but normal. It was not the result of a transient emotion. It was the expression of a constant experience of the soul.

Let us, then, first look at the picture presented by these two verses; second, recognize the one central value of the story in order that third and finally, we may consider some of its particular teaching.

These are the things that arrest attention. First the men, Paul and Silas, then the circumstances in the midst of which we see them, then their occupation in the midst of the circumstances and finally, the issue of the story as it is contained in all that remains of the chapter.

Paul and Silas were Jews and were held in contempt in Philippi because they were Jews, as is most evident from this story. Yet, as emerges in the course of the story, they were Roman citizens. But pre-eminently they were Christians, the one an apostle and the other a prophet.

Their ministry and their message necessarily challenged effete Judaism and paganism wherever they came. They were calling men to a new way of life both as to ideal and power. Consequently, wherever they went they created disturbances. "… These that have turned the world upside down have come hither also!" That is always the note of true Christianity. It always challenges effete religions and paganism. Organized Christianity which fails to make a disturbance is dead. It is equally true that they created love for themselves wherever they came. What tender heart affections fastened around this man Paul!

Now observe their circumstances at this time. "But about midnight …" That disjunctive sends us back as it suggests all that had gone before. They had been charged with sedition. They had been beaten with many stripes. Beating with rods was a terrible experience. When Paul was writing to the Corinthians, he referred to such beatings as amongst the things he had endured. "Thrice was I beaten with rods …" It was physical brutality of the worst kind. Their backs were bruised and bleeding and unwashed. They were cast into the inner prison, some inner chamber or dungeon from which light was excluded and probably almost all air was shut out. The final barbarity was that their feet were made fast in the stocks. All that before the "But." Immediately following it are the words, "At midnight!" That accentuates everything. It accentuates the loneliness, the weariness, the suffering.

We now come to that which is central; the occupation of these men. They were praying and singing hymns. This is not a description of two exercises. It does not mean that they were offering petitions and also singing hymns of praise. The word translated praying covers the whole ground of worship; asking for gifts, rendering of adoration, continued supplication, offering of thanksgiving. In this story the word "worship" is qualified by the word that follows. They were hymning the praises of God. The Greek word here employed is one that had long been reserved to represent the praises offered to heroes or gods or to the one God. The worship of these men was that of adoration. It was the expression of the gladness of their hearts. Two were gathered together in the Name and in the midst was the Lord; all unseen by the eyes of sense, unapprehended by any who were round about, undiscovered even after the jailer himself had come back to look at the prisoners. That Presence was the supreme sense of these men. They did not ask for anything, they gave. They were exercising their Christian priesthood on its highest level, which is not intercessory but eucharistic, the priesthood of thanksgiving. In the dungeon, in the darkness of the night, their feet fast in the stocks, their backs all bloody, they offered praises. They gave and their giving was the outcome of their gladness.

Immediately we ask, "What was there to make them glad?" I am inclined to answer the inquiry by saying that if we had asked them they probably would have said, "Nay, what is there to make us sad?"

Finally, we must glance at the issues. The prisoners were listening! Here again a word arrests us. It indicates attentive listening. It is a word that is almost invariably employed for that listening which gives pleasure, the word used when men listened to perfect music and were charmed by its sounds, or when men listened to some oration that swept them away.

In all this story there is revealed that which is peculiarly Christian, the victory of the soul over all adverse circumstances and the transmutation of all opposing forces into allies of the soul. Think of some of the sayings of this man Paul who sang that night. He (in paraphrase) says: "Tribulation worketh patience, therefore rejoice in tribulation." He says: "Afflictions work a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, therefore we will rejoice in our afflictions." Yet again he says: "Godly sorrow worketh repentance." These are all the things from which the soul of man shrinks; tribulation, affliction, sorrow! These things are made the allies of the soul, they work on behalf of the soul. Out of tribulation comes patience which leads on to confidence and hope of ultimate victory. Afflictions which can be dismissed in the light of eternity as light afflictions, which are but for a moment, are seen working out the weight of glory. Sorrows of the soul are working toward the change of mind which means its transformation into perfect harmony with the mind of Christ Himself. This is the central value of the story. This is the central truth concerning Christian experience.

What then was the secret of this experience in the case of these men? It was the outcome of their knowledge of God. He was known as compelling all things to work together for good to those who love Him. The experience is not stoicism. The Christian man does not say: "What cannot be cured must be endured." I am afraid I have often said it, but when I have done so, it has been because for the moment I have forgotten my Christianity. To say that what cannot be cured must be endured is paganism. It is wonderful that paganism ever climbed to that height. It is a great attitude, it is heroic up to a certain point, but it is not Christianity. Christianity does not say what cannot be cured must be endured; it says, rather, that these things must be endured because they are part of the cure. These things are to be cheerfully borne because they have the strange and mystic power to make whole and strong and so to lead on to victory and the final glory. Christianity is never the dour pessimism which submits. Christianity is the cheerful optimism which cooperates with the process, because it sees that through suffering and weakness, joy and triumph must come. That always and only results from a clear vision of God. Wherever this clear vision of God comes to the soul through Christ - through Whom alone it can come - there follows the ending of bondage to all secondary causes, and the sense of relationship to the primary and final cause is supreme. Two men were in Philippi, in prison, in the inner prison, in the stocks, in suffering, in sorrow! All true, but the final thing is not said. They were in God! Their supreme consciousness was not that of the prison, or the stocks, or the pain, but of God. They were not callous or indifferent; pain was pain to them; confinement was confinement; loneliness was loneliness; but they realized how all these things were yet held in the grasp of the King of the perfect order, Whom they knew as their Lord and Master and, consequently, they sang praises. They did not ask for anything, not even for an earthquake. They gave Him praises. That is Christianity. Because of this vision of God and because of this sense of the soul, the experiences which otherwise would have depressed and led to despair became wings of hope, the inspiration of song.

All this took place at midnight! That accentuates all the difficulty, the loneliness and weariness and pain. Yet the phrase is not really "At midnight." This very slight alteration in the Revised Version is not to be passed over lightly. "About midnight!" To these men midnight was not a definite moment at all. Midnight is never a stopping place. It is coming, and lo! it is gone before we know it. Time is transfigured. There is no long, deadly moment with all the agony of eternity pressed into it to these men. They are traveling, and they are traveling in the spirit of the hymn:

We are marching through Immanuel's ground

To fairer worlds on high.

Through Immanuel's land; not to Immanuel's land, but through it. John Bunyan puts the river his pilgrim had to cross in Immanuel's land. The pilgrim did not cross the river to reach Immanuel's land; the river was in it and ere he knew it, he had passed the river. So to these men all these things were in Immanuel's land. Midnight, that deadly hour, that most terrible hour, wherein some people seem forever to dwell; anticipation of it makes it a perpetual presence, and the memory of it an abounding agony. But for these men there was no such actual time. It was about midnight, and then they sang, and they sang praises to God.

What then are the things of value here for ourselves? In attempting to answer this inquiry let us keep our mind upon these men. First, we learn that men who sing while they suffer are men who have learned the profound secret that suffering is the method by which joy is perfected. That declaration is limited by human history as we know it. I am not prepared to say that we can make a statement like that, and apply it to the whole universe of God. It is conceivable that there may be abounding joys in God's great universe that have never been reached through suffering. I cannot tell. I do not know. I do not ask to know. I am dealing with humanity as the result of our own experience and in the light of the biblical unveiling. Suffering is always the method by which joy is perfected. In the midst of the Paschal discourses our Lord said: "… your sorrow shall be turned into joy." That is an entirely different thing from saying that your sorrow shall be exchanged for joy. Without desiring for a moment to be censorious in criticism, yet it is true that half our hymns suggest that we should look on to heaven where we shall find a joy which is a compensation for the sorrows of life. There is truth in that view, but it does not get to the heart of the Christian revelation. The truth is that all the ultimate joys of the heavenly state are joys that have come out of the agonies of the earthly tribulation. Is that a startling thing to say? Then listen to these most revealing words: "… Who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising shame. ..." With infinite reverence I say that He had never reached that joy save through His sorrows. That which was wrought out in the experience of our Lord on our behalf is a revelation of what all this pain means - this abounding, palpitating, poignant agony. Your sorrow shall be turned into joy. Again and again we have glimpses of it, outworking into the present of immediate experience. Look back over the years. There they are, travel-worn years; much of light is upon them, but much of darkness also; many days of triumph, marching with the band playing and the flags flying, and many days of disaster and defeat. Already you know that the greatest things of life have come, not out of the sunlit days, but out of the darkened hours. Your sorrow has already been turned into joy. When your sorrow that seemed unendurable at the hour, blossomed with beauty, your sorrow was turned into joy. Christianity as an experience is the ability to know that this will be so even while the agony is upon us, and so we are able to sing in the midst of it. Men who sing while they suffer are men who have learned the profound secret that suffering is the method by which joy is perfected in human life and human history.

But again, men who sing in prison are men who cannot be imprisoned. It was impossible to imprison Paul and Silas. But they were imprisoned. They could be shown in that prison, in that inner chamber, with their feet fast in the stocks. Ah, but they were not imprisoned. Fellowship with God is the franchise of eternity. You may put these men within your stone walls, you may make their feet fast in the wood of your brutal stocks, but they are not there. They are sitting with Christ in the heavenly places. They are ranging themselves with the living ones. They are swinging the censers of their heavenly priesthood in high and holy places. As to bodily presence, they are there in the prison, but as to spiritual essence they are with God. Men who sing in prison are men who cannot be imprisoned.

Therefore we may add: men who sing at midnight are citizens of that city of which it is said they need no light of sun or moon, for the Lord and the Lamb are the light of it. But they are in Philippi! Yes, as to bodily presence but not as to spiritual experience. Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees to find a city but never found it. He died without seeing it. Those who have followed in his steps have still been seeking it. It has never been found. It is not found yet. But it is clearly seen; it will be built; it will be established. Abraham lived in it though he never saw it; he walked its streets though it was never built; he held communion with its inhabitants though he never reached it. Paul and Silas, where are you living just now? In Philippi? No, in the City of God! In the City of God there is no night. These men were children of light, they were stars of the morning, and the morning stars sang together long ago, and they will sing together through all earth's midnight until the last shadow is melted. Men who sing at midnight are citizens of the city in which there is no night.

And finally, men who sing when their work is stopped are men whose work is never stopped.

They have put Paul in prison. His beloved work is stopped. He cannot preach in prison. But they sang praises, and the prisoners were listening. A man who can sing in prison is a man whose work is never done. When the missionary journey has to be abandoned and the preaching services are all canceled and there is nothing more to do, he will sing and the prisoners will hear his singing. The singing of a prisoner is a message to prisoners and they will listen. I cannot go any further. I do not know what happened to those prisoners afterwards. If you will allow the speculation, I believe that some of them were brought to Jesus Christ as the result of that singing. Cancel that if you do not agree. At least one man was won for Christ; the hard brutalized man who had been able to put these men in the stocks in the inner prison and leave them all bleeding from the rods and faint with loss of blood. He had left them and gone to sleep. He was asleep. If you want to know how brutalized he was, get that upon your heart. What is the next thing we see him doing? Washing their stripes, his whole nature revolutionized, his whole being completely changed with a suddenness equal to that of the earthquake that shook the prison to its foundations. He is washing their stripes; he is putting food before them. Men who sing in prison when their work is stopped are given to see that their work is never stopped; it runs on through bondage to liberty, and the gospel is preached anew.

All I have so far said has had to do with one verse of my text. There is another verse. "… suddenly there was a great earthquake; so that the foundations of the prison-house were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened; and every one's bands were loosed." That was very wonderful, but we will not dwell upon it. I made it part of the text in order to say that it does not matter. It does not at all affect our story. It does not rob from it; it does not add to it. The glory of our consideration is in the other verse. That earthquake does not always come. We shall miss a great deal if we imagine that when we are in prison and sing, there will be an earthquake. Prison doors may not be opened at all. Thousands have been left in prison and died there, but they sang, and they sang through until they joined the new song on the other side. That earthquake does not matter. Do not let us fix our minds upon the earthquake. Probably we shall never have a deliverance like that. That is not the point of the story at all. Two or three years passed away and Paul was in prison in Rome, and then he wrote to these very people, to this jailer, and these Philippians. Read his letter, the letter he wrote to these very people from another prison. It is a song from beginning to end. He was still singing, and there was no earthquake. But probably he was liberated. Yes, I agree. Possibly he expected to be liberated. Indeed, he surely did as that letter shows. But he was not singing because he was to be liberated. Read the letter through, and you will see that the inspiration of his song was not the expectation of deliverance. It was the realization while he was in prison of the fact that he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ. That is the secret of the singing in the Philippian letter. That sense of relationship to Jesus Christ transfigured everything else. The chain? He looked at it, but it flashed with light. He was the prisoner of Jesus Christ. Let us go on. Presently, he was in prison again, and he was never coming out, and he knew it. His last writing was the letter of a man in prison never to escape. He knew it perfectly well. Things had not gone well with him in the first part of his trial, and he was assured that the issue of the second part of it would be death. How then did he write? What is he doing? Listen to him for a moment:

For I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved His appearing.

He was singing still; still an anthem, still a paean of praise! They were very dark days. Listen!

Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: … Demas forsook me, having loved this present world, and went to Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee; for he is useful to me for ministering. But Tychicus I sent to Ephesus. (It is colder here.) The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, bring when thou comest, and the books, especially the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil. …

Do you see the conflicting circumstances? Was he singing now?

At my first defence no one took my part, but all forsook me; may it not be laid to their account. But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me; that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom: to Whom be glory for ever and ever. …

He was singing still. Ah yes! and the singing that we have listened to in Philippi was before the earthquake. He had no idea that the earthquake was coming, He did not sing because he was to be let out of prison. He sang because prison did not matter.

Your harps, ye trembling saints,

Down from the willows take;

Loud to the praise of Love divine,

Bid every string awake.

His Grace will to the end,

Stronger and brighter shine;

Nor present things, nor things to come,

Shall quench the spark divine.

When we in darkness walk,

Nor feel the heavenly flame,

Then is the time to trust our God,

And rest upon His Name.

Blest is the man, O God,

That stays himself on Thee!

Who wait for Thy salvation, Lord,

Shall Thy salvation see!