**VOLUME 10; CHAPTER 13 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**PREPARING THE HIGHWAY by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*The voice of one that crieth, Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a high way for our God.*

*Isaiah 40:3*

THESE WORDS ARE TAKEN FROM THE PROLOGUE TO THE SECOND part of the prophecy of Isaiah. That prologue consists of the first eleven verses of chapter 40, and this chapter contains the keynote of the twenty-seven chapters here beginning and closing with the end of the book. The burden of this second part of the prophecy is comfort, and the comfort which was to be brought to the people of God in those olden days was to know that Jehovah was acting on behalf of His people. Nevertheless, there was a responsibility which they were called on to fulfil. That responsibility is revealed in the words of my text.

By bringing together the first verse of chapter 35, with which the earlier prophecy closes, and the charge of the text, light will be thrown on its meaning.

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.

Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a high way for our God.

The abiding principles revealed in the text and in all its con- text are these: first, that God never abandons man to the result of his own folly; second, that He interferes, arresting, changing, restoring; and, finally, that in His interference He always calls on man for co-operation.

In order that we may gain the present value of this Old Testament call let us examine carefully the scriptural applications of it, and apply this scriptural examination to our own circumstances and conditions.

The prophet heard a call, the voice of one that crieth, and this was the cry: "Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a high way for our God." When we turn to the New Testament we find that each of the evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John connected this prophetic utterance of Isaiah with the ministry of John the Baptist as the herald and forerunner of Our Lord Himself. Consequently, we have a double illustration of the real meaning of the text, and so are helped to apply it to ourselves.

In the twenty-seven chapters which constitute the second part of the prophecy there are three great movements. In chapters 40 to 48 the prophet was contrasting Jehovah with idols. We may summarize the contrast thus: that the difference between Jehovah and all other gods is just this: other gods men make and carry; Jehovah makes men and carries them. Having thus contrasted Jehovah and idols, beginning with chapter 49 and ending with chapter 57, there comes into view, first indistinctly, then gradually with a wonderful distinctness, a Person Who is the Servant of Jehovah. We see Him suffering and triumphing, the Person through Whom Jehovah is to reveal Himself in His superiority to all idols. In chapters 58 to 66 the prophet again leads us along the line of contrast, contrasting faithful souls and hypocrites. The whole movement has to do with peace, the purpose of peace, God's Prince of peace, and the program of peace. Peace is seen ultimately established, not by the abandonment of any principle of truth or honor, but through battle and smoke and turmoil under the leadership of the great Prince of peace. The twofold preparation which the prophet pointed out as necessary for this activity of God through His Servant was, first, that people should turn from idols to Himself, and, second, that they should turn from hypocrisy to perfect confidence in Himself.

Then, as we come to the New Testament to consider the message of that wonderful man, the last of the long line of Hebrew prophets, again we discover three movements in his ministry which may thus be summarized. First, he came denouncing sin; second, he came announcing the near advent of the Messiah; finally, he came to present the Messiah to men in that statement: "Behold the Lamb of God, Which taketh away the sin of the world." When they asked him who he was himself, he answered that he was a voice, and uttered the words of the text.

The twofold preparation on which John the Baptist insisted may thus be described: repentance, a change of mind expressing itself in reformation, a change of conduct; and faith in the coming of One, expressing itself in following Him. He fulfilled his ministry when he indicated Jesus to his own disciples and sent them after Him, and when, at last, he said, "He must increase, I must decrease."

Now, the value of this glance at the old-time illustration and the illustration in the New Testament is that each reveals the fact that those who hear it can obey the call, and prepare a way in the wilderness for God, a high way in the desert along which God can travel. The accomplishment of the divine purpose is wrought out by God Himself, but He always asks for co-operation from men. In the ancient time the little remnant gathered round the prophet of the Theocracy is seen helping God's progress, making a high way, casting up a way in the wilderness and in the desert along which it was possible for God to move in order to accomplish His final purpose. In the case of the herald, the little group of disciples that gathered about him, loyal to his preaching in the midst of the corruption of the age in which he preached, constituted God's vantage ground. Out of their number the Messiah Himself at last selected His own disciples at the first, and so moved forward.

And if we follow through we find the principle obtaining in all subsequent history. The apostles of Jesus, hearing the call, obeyed and prepared a high way for God, and through their loyalty God moved forward to all the victories of the centuries. In the dark ages in the history of the Church the cry went up again, and the Reformers heard it, and made a high way for God. Later on in the history of our own country, amid lasciviousness and frivolity and corruption, the Puritans in the Established Church, and the Independents outside it, constituted that little group of souls who felt the agony of the wilderness, and made therein a high way for God. A little more than a hundred years ago, when once again darkness had settled on the Church in this country of ours, the Holy Club at Oxford, so-called in uttermost contempt, in which were found the Wesleys, Whitefield, and other kindred spirits, constituted a remnant who in the dark wilderness made God's opportunity, who in the desolate desert cast up a high way for the triumphant march of Jehovah.

Now I come to that which of course is principally on my heart, the immediate application of the call of the text. We lift our eyes in the midst of worship and look out on the world. As we do so we see the world today in the throes of the most terrific and appalling upheaval that it has ever known. The measure in which our eyes have seen the vision of the glory of the divine ideals for humanity is the measure in which we are conscious of the tragedy of the hour in which we live. I go back again to this passage in Isaiah, and in the 35th chapter a most glorious picture of restoration: "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose." If we reverse the picture contained in that whole chapter we find a picture of desolation, an exact picture of the circumstances in the midst of which we are living today.

But that is not all the outlook, that is not all the truth. That is not the highest truth or the deepest. So let us look again. What does the man of faith really see today when for a moment he resolutely climbs the mountain, and looks from the standpoint of his living fellowship with God?

First of all, he sees God. Ah! but that is the difficulty today. That is where we halt. Well, if you and I, living in the comparative quiet of this England today do not see God, the men in the trenches see Him, and the men who keep their long and lonely vigil on the high seas see Him. There is nothing more wonderful than the fact that letters are coming pouring in everywhere today from these men, who, in different ways, in different language, are telling the same great truth, that they are seeing big things and know it, that they are finding God as they never found Him before, and are being tremendously impressed with the reality of God.

But all the faithful see Him, and they see Him still in Himself as Love. God is Love. That fact has been forever made sure in human history by the Cross of Christ. That God is love never can be denied by all such souls as have really seen that Cross and have really come into fellowship with it in their own lives, and know its matchless power in the lives of other men. Therefore we know today that we must interpret circumstances by God, and not God by circumstances. The peril of the hour is that men and women of faith may be trying to account for God by the circumstances of affliction. It cannot be done. That is not the true outlook. The true method is that of interpreting the circumstances by the fact of God. Under the shadow of the Cross of the world's Redeemer, in the presence of all that Cross has wrought in personal life and in history, we are compelled to look again at this dark hour from the standpoint of the abiding, unchanging certainty concerning God, that He is the God of love. When we begin to do that we find that we see God not only in Himself, but in His activity.

In Isaiah 63 the prophecy is of conflict. "Who is this that cometh from Edom with dyed garments from Bozrah?" The answer was given, and another question was asked. Why are thy garments red in their apparel; why is there blood on thy garments as thou swayest forward in the majesty of thy strength? Then came the great answer, "I have trodden the winepress alone." The figure is daring, illuminating, inclusive, final. Look at the treader of the winepress in those Eastern countries and see what he does. He presses the grapes so that their own lifeblood may be poured out, so that their own very nature shall be manifested. That is what God is doing today, pressing out the inwardness of things to manifestation in the sight of angels, in the sight of men, in the midst of human history. Nothing has happened yet in all this strife but that potentially, its inspirations lay within the human heart and the human mind ere the strife began. All the brutishness and godlessness lay like a smoldering fire under the veneered rottenness of a false culture, and all the strength and heroism of the faith that is prepared gladly to die in defense of honor and truth lay unrecognized as the inspiration of life before the war broke out. In this hour God is compelling humanity to express itself, and in all the terrific scenes in the midst of which we live God is treading out the winepress, compelling the inward things of human life to express themselves. He has not inspired the slaughter, He is not responsible for the iniquity of war. All the potentialities that have grown into experience have been generated within the heart of man. God always compels man to be outwardly what he is inwardly. He gave Judas the bag, knowing that he was a thief, which is a graphic, terrific illustration of an abiding principle, that God compels a man, a nation, a race, into circumstances in which they will manifest outwardly the true inwardness of their character. He is treading the winepress.

But the true man of vision climbs higher yet, and sees the issues resulting. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; that is the ending of all inequality - valleys exalted, mountains made low. All the unevenness shall be made level and the rough places plain; that is the restoration of the highway that has been lost, over which ravenous beasts have been passing. Finally, is seen the divine Hegemony, the revelation of the divine glory, which all flesh shall see! God Himself is winning His victory, which ultimately is the victory of humanity as it marches out into the larger, grander, nobler life, a life to which it cannot come until the poison is pressed out in the winepress, until the forces of life have been poured out in the winepress. So God is seen, even today, not exiled, not indifferent, but active with the master impulse of infinite love to humanity; the hour of His vengeance is come, and that is the year of His redeemed. Now we come back to the call of the text: "Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a high way for our God." Observe that way is to be prepared in the wilderness, in the desert. It is in an hour of desolation that this work is to be done; it is through darkness that this toil must be endured. The results will be seen when presently the desert is blossoming with beauty, and the wilderness has become a cultivated way; but we are to do our work while it is still a wilderness, while it is yet a desert.

That brings us to the very practical question: How are we to prepare a way for God? What can we do? I say the question is practical. It is a large question. Yet sometimes the most practical and the largest questions may best be answered by the simplest forms of statement. Therefore, in two declarations, I want to give the way of preparation as I see it today. First, we have to prepare His way by standing for God with men; and, second, by acting with God for men. This is an hour in which the men of faith must stand for God with men, must stand for the sovereignty of God, for the absolute rights of God. Does that really need saying? Is it not so patent that there should be no need of saying it, certainly no need of argument? Yet, on the other hand, have we not been in grave danger of wandering from it? That old fundamental bedrock of Calvinist theology is the bedrock to which the Church must come back, the sovereignty of God. In this flippant and decadent age of ours, someone has positively written something about "If I were God"! The almost blasphemy of the suggestion! We have to take our stand anew today, for the final sovereignty of God, for the fact that there is no appeal from His decision, for the fact that whether it be a man or a society or a nation or a race, if either or all of these seek in any way to act apart from His law there is nothing for man or society or nation or race but irrevocable and irremediable ruin. That is a bedrock assumption to which we must get back from all those anemic interpretations of Deity which seem to think Him as merely some sentimental Being with Whom men can trifle and then escape. We must get back to the rock conception of God, and know that, whereas on that granite Rock a man or humanity may build eternal dwelling places, if man or humanity trifles with it, it will grind man and humanity to pieces.

I go further. The Church of God today will prepare a high way for God as she insists not merely on this fundamental fact of His Sovereignty, but on the revealed character of God. The Church is to insist on it that God is, as He has revealed Himself to be in the Word. The Church must lift her perpetual protest against any false conception of God. God is not Moloch, God is not Baal, God is not Mammon. God is God as He unveiled His grace and glory in the Person of Christ, terrific in His wrath, overwhelming in His compassion. The God of truth, the God of justice, the God of righteousness, the God of long-suffering and patience, the God Who will make compromise with evil under no circumstances, but the God Who will divest Himself of His dignities to die for a lost and ruined humanity.

Included in this is the fact that today the Church must stand everywhere for the law of God as that law is laid down, for individual rectitude of life, a rectitude of life the Pattern of which has been given to the world in the humanity of Jesus, in all the interrelationships of humanity for the value of truth, the necessity for justice, the maintenance of honor, and loyalty to obligations.

Forevermore the Church must stand for the infinite mystery of the love of God, so that as she helps men to make their policies, as she sustains men in the hour of their strife, as she prepares men to live or die for righteousness, she must forever more instruct and inspire them with love as the central, final meaning of all life.

The Church is also called on to act for men with God. That means, first of all, that she is to lift holy hands in perpetual prayer. I wonder if we are ceasing to pray as the days go on, or are we praying more? When this war broke out meetings for public intercession were held here and there much more so than today. I have had correspondence recently on whether we are right, or whether something should not be done to bring the Christian people together for public intercession. I am not anxious for this, but I am anxious that the individual soul in holy fellowship with God shall never cease to pray. I am not anxious to assemble a crowd. I am anxious for the mystic fellowship of all the saints in all congregations in unwearied intercession on behalf of humanity. We are to act for men with God. Men will understand our activity presently when we go out and act for them in actual deeds. I am coming to that. But the Church's first business is prayer. So far as I have influence, so far as my message may reach, I would urge, not that men will waste time trying to get up a meeting, but that they get to business in private, that whenever their minds go to the fields of slaugher, to the suffering homes, to the rulers of the nations and their counselors, they give their thoughts wings and lift them Godward. So shall we prepare in the wilderness a high way for God.

Then, of course, there must be much more than that. We must act for men in the actuality of the strife, in all ministry on behalf of those who are sorrowing, in guiding all diplomacy in the compass of the divine wisdom and the divine thought. This is an hour when prayer must have its expression in actual service. In proportion as all men and women of faith are realizing these things, and doing them, we shall prepare a high way for God.

In conclusion, let me say some things that are on my heart. Recently an interview with Benedict XV, the Pope of the Roman Church, appeared in our newspapers. He is reported to have declared that he stood for spiritual neutrality at this particular hour. I hasten to say that we have no right to judge any utterance of the Pope by newspaper reports. At the same time, when a man occupies that august and terrible position, any opinion to which he gives utterance demands attention. I notice that the Organ of the Vatican has said that in that report there are "various inexactitudes." I observe that Cardinal Bourne has said that in the report he discovered "much embroidery." I note also that Father Bernard Vaughan said, in his own more vigorous method, that the whole thing is "a wicked fake." Let us hope that it is so. I do not suppose that anything I say will influence the Pope any more than anything he says will influence me. Yet, because people are reading this report, and the mind of men has been moved by it, as the correspondence in the newspapers has revealed, I should like to say that the Pope has the means of definitely correcting the inexactitudes, removing the embroidery, exposing the fake. However, that is beyond the consideration of the present moment. The idea which shocks my soul is the idea of spiritual neutrality. I declare to you today that this is impossible. Because the Church of God is supernatural, she cannot be spiritually neutral. She must distinguish between right and wrong, she must distinguish between truth and a lie; and she must speak. The necessity for her distinguishing, and for her public speech today, is the greater because the rationalization of theology has issued in the destruction of the elementary moral sense in certain theological quarters. Perhaps it is so - I suppose it is so - that organized Christian testimony is impossible. Then let all individual Christians and those prophets who are responsible to God alone utter no uncertain sound today. Let it be declared, and insisted upon, that we stand, not first for our own nation, but first for the Kingship of God and for the Kingdom of God, and for all those things which are involved in the divine government of right and truth. Only as by our praying and by our toiling, and, if necessary, by our sacrifices, our tears, our suffering, we stand for the spiritual ideal are we helping. But as we stand for that ideal, in the wilderness the way of God will be prepared, and in the desert the high way will be flung up.