**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**58. DEATH AS SLEEP**

*"He said these things, and after that, he said to them, "Our friend, Lazarus, has fallen asleep, but I am going so that I may awake him out of sleep." The disciples therefore said, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he spoke of taking rest in sleep. So Jesus said to them plainly then, "Lazarus is dead. I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe. Nevertheless, let's go to him."*

*"Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will still live, even if he dies. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die."*

*John 11:11-15; 23-26a*

OUR SUBJECT here is death as sleep; and the story is that of the final sign in the realm of works, wrought by our Lord in His earthly ministry, as recorded by John; that of the raising of Lazarus. In this story we see Him in the presence of death on the physical level, that is, the separation of the spirit and body. Death in the spiritual level is the separation of the soul from God. In that sense, in the day that man ate of the forbidden fruit, he died, for in that day he was separated from God. Man's physical death did not come at once, though that came ultimately.

Twice before in the record of our Lord's ministry we see Him standing in the presence of death. Once it was the child of Jairus, and again it was the son of the widow of Nain. Here death is seen in the case of the brother of Martha and Mary, and on that physical level this is superlative. In the first case the child was dead in the house, and not many hours had passed. In the second case the boy was on his way from the city to burial, but not yet buried. Here we are in the presence of death, of a man who had been dead four days, and buried four days. Therefore this is a superlative case.

So we proceed along the usual lines in these studies, considering first the subject illustrated, the figure of sleep in the presence of death; then simply and quickly take the figure itself, in order that we may deduce the teaching.

What was the fact that our Lord was facing? Jesus said when the news was brought to Him over Jordan, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God" (11:4). Again at verse thirteen, "Jesus had spoken of his death." In those verses there is the common word for death, *thanatos*, which means just what we mean by death. Again, at verse thirty-nine, "Martha, the sister of him that was dead." At verse forty-four, "He that was dead came forth." Once more, in the fourteenth verse, "Jesus therefore said unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead," or as it should be, "Lazarus died." The reference is to a fact, an accomplished fact.

In those verses two words, "death," and "dead" occur. In verses four and thirteen we have the word *thanatos*, the simple word for death. In verses thirty-nine and forty-four we have a word associated with the other, in a strengthened form of it, the word *thnesko*, dead. When our Lord used the phrase, "Lazarus is dead," He used yet another and intensive form of the same word, *apothnesho*. It might be rendered, though it is not beautiful, or euphemistic, He has died off; he is simply dead. So by this group of words we are in the presence of death, in the presence of the dead.

What was our Lord doing when He used this figure of speech? First of all, we see that He had a clear view of the fact of death. He knew the fact as they saw it. He knew the fact as it was recurring around Him in all the time of His public ministry. He knew the fact as these men saw it, as Martha and Mary saw it in the case of Lazarus; but in His first reference to it He did not use either of these words for death. When the disciples misunderstood Him and thought He really was referring to natural sleep, then John says He said plainly - mark that word - He said distinctly, positively, Oh no, that is not the case of taking rest; he is dead, he has died; he has shared the experience that is covered by the word that men had constantly used , he is dead, he is to be numbered among those who are dead. He saw death as they saw it, and consequently when they did not understand Him, He said the plain thing, He is dead, emphasizing it in the word He used, completely dead, actually dead. The body that has been put in the sepulchre is lifeless; he is dead.

But before we can approach or understand His figure of speech, we have to take the whole story. If He saw the fact of death as they saw it, He knew the fact of death as they did not know it. Here we are in the presence of that outlook of Jesus which is so manifest in all the story of His life; that whereas He saw the near, that which was right under their eyes, He always saw more. He never looked upon life as complete, as it could be viewed at the moment under the circumstances. He saw more. He saw through; and therefore He said, Lazarus is sleeping. They said, He will do well; he will recover. No, He said, he is dead, as you mean death; but I see more than you do. Those are the circumstances, and it was to illustrate that, that He used this figure of speech.

Now take the figure and look at it simply. What is sleep? It is not cessation of being even on the human level. When we go to sleep it does not mean our being has ceased in sleep. What is it therefore? Unconsciousness of all things around. I am not going into the subject of dreams, those strange experiences that we all have. I am dealing with normal and proper sleep, when we have eaten the sort of supper we ought to eat! We are unconscious of everything. We say sometimes of someone, he was sleeping like a baby. There it is, completely unconscious of surrounding things. That is the figure our Lord used, and therefore we have come rightly and very beautifully to associate the idea of sleep with repose. The words are recurring "Nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep." That is what those men with Jesus thought when they said, if Lazarus was asleep, he would recover. If a man has been ill, and has really gone to sleep, he will recover, he will be saved; literally that is what they said. The danger is past, for he is sleeping.

Let us notice another thing in passing. This figure that our Lord made use of was not a new one for death. Sleep as the image of death is common in literature from its dawn. Pagan writers used it as well as those of the Hebrew people. Westcott says the image of sleep for death is very common in all Rabbinic writings. That is the image our Lord took up. Yes, Lazarus was dead. He spoke plainly, One is always thankful He did, for the sake of men who were not grasping the significance of His reference to Lazarus being asleep. He said, he is dead. He died definitely, positively, died off; he is gone, he is lifeless. That is all true.

But Jesus was seeing more than they did. Martha and Mary saw a lifeless corpse, and Martha, dear heart, was blunt in her description of the condition of that corpse as she expected it was by this time. Those disciples who had travelled up, heroically going, as Thomas said, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him"; if they had been able to look into the tomb when the stone was rolled away, they would have seen wrapped in the cerements of the tomb the dead body. That is what they saw, and that is all they saw. But Jesus said, That is not all. As a matter of fact it is not the supreme fact. He is dead, he has lost the consciousness of all the things that are around him, his sisters and friends, and everything else. He is dead; but he is not dead in the full and deep sense of the word. He saw the dead body, but He saw the man; and the man was not in the sepulchre as He saw him. So that He said, So far as this side is concerned, so far as you are concerned, he is dead; but so far as he is concerned, and the things of this side, he is unconscious, he knows nothing about them.

We might indulge in many speculations, which are not profitable. I am often asked, Do the loved ones know what we are doing here? I do not think so. Bishop Bickersteth in that remarkable poem, "Yesterday, To-day, and For Ever," thought there might be circumstances under the government of God, when they are permitted to see and know, but as a rule, so far as we are concerned, they are asleep. They have no consciousness of what is going on here. And are we not really glad that is so, for their sakes? I often am.

What then is the teaching which we have here? First, the clear evidence that Christ's outlook on personality was that of its continuity beyond death. Even when as to this world they were asleep, unconscious, and we cannot communicate with them in any way, they were not actually dead, they had not ceased to be. Notice this simple thing. When presently He had told them to roll away the stone, and they had done it, what did He do? He spoke to the man. He spoke to him by the name they had known him, "Lazarus, come forth." He spoke to the same man, the same personality. That man could not have heard Martha, if she had said, Lazarus, come back. Oh no. That man could not have heard Peter or John, standing there, if they had called into the void, after him. But he heard Jesus, and Jesus addressed him. He did the same with the little girl. He laid His hand on her, and said, "Talitha cumi," little lamb, arise. He spoke to one who could hear Him. Not the father and mother. They could not reach her. She was asleep so far as they were concerned. She was not asleep so far as He was concerned. And when He approached the bier coming out of the city of Nain, we have exactly the same thing. "Young man, arise," as to one who could hear Him, and one who did hear Him. They all heard Him; and He brought them back from the sleep that was the unconsciousness of the things here and now into consciousness of them, and into the position in which they became conscious of them. Sleep!

But of course the whole thing hinges on that point. I say emphatically, no other voice could have reached that maid, that young man, Lazarus; but His voice could. The fact that His voice could, demonstrates the fact that those addressed were able somewhere, somehow to hear Him. Lazarus heard and struggled into an upright position in his grave-clothes, as would be quite possible if they, as they certainly did, adopted the Egyptian method of winding him. He could and did get up, and then Jesus said, "Loose him, and let him go." The little girl, not yet wrapped in her grave-clothes, but lying there, she heard His voice, and she sat up, and opened her eyes. The young man was able to struggle up on his bier, possibly helped from it, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

So that if we speak of death as sleep we must recognize that the only One Who can wake out of sleep is our Lord Himself, the only One Who can bring back into consciousness those fallen on sleep. No one else can. We remember that old trite quotation from Gray's Elegy,

"Can storied urn or animated bust

Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

Can honour's voice provoke the silent dust,

Or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of death?"

There is only one answer to Gray, when he thus sings. No, you cannot reach them, but Jesus could, and Jesus did.

Let us go back in this Gospel of John to some things He said on an earlier occasion in His ministry. "As the Father raiseth the dead and quickeneth them, even so the Son also quickeneth whom He will." Again, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live." And yet once more, "Marvel not at this; for the hour cometh, in which all that are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done ill, unto the resurrection of judgment." Those are the great and astounding facts that He declared in the earlier part of His ministry as recorded in John's fifth chapter. But it is His voice that can call them. It is His voice which they can hear; no other voice.

Seeing that this is so, we realize that they that sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. Therefore we sorrow not as those that have no hope. For if Christ died and rose again even them that sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. Some may sing that hymn with new meaning,

"Sleep on, beloved, sleep, and take thy rest;

Lay down thy head upon thy Saviour's breast;

We love thee well; but Jesus loves thee best -

Good-night! Good-night! Good-night!"

It is said that the early Christians were accustomed to bid their dying friends "Good-night," so sure were they of their awakening on the resurrection morning. That does not mean that they have ceased to exist. They are existing in a realm where He is in authority, and where His voice can be heard; and being heard they will obey.

Do not forget the solemn words. "The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; … all that are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done ill, unto the resurrection of judgment." When He spoke to Martha He said, "I am the resurrection, and the life; he that believeth on Me, though he die, yet shall he live." Lazarus is in the tomb, but "though he die, yet shall he live."

Here is another very familiar word of Scripture which we may often quote correctly but think inaccurately. Jesus did not say, "Yet shall he live again." No, not "again," but "yet shall he live." Jesus said plainly, Lazarus is dead, but he is not dead. He is where My voice can reach him. He is asleep, unconscious of all the things he has been conscious of; but I can find him, I can reach him; and there will come a day when My voice will reach all that are in the tombs.

So we say to our loved ones,

"Sleep on, beloved, sleep, and take thy rest."