

The Message of 2 Chronicles

by G. Campbell Morgan

The second book of Chronicles teaches that formal religion is infinitely worse than none, and that the Church must establish the nation.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 5:13

Topics: "The Danger of Formalism", "The Importance of Genuine Worship"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the critical distinction between rationalism and ritualism in the life of a nation, as illustrated in 2 Chronicles. He highlights Solomon's initial greatness and subsequent failure, demonstrating how formal religion can become impotent when disconnected from genuine faith and action. The history of Judah's kings serves as a cautionary tale of how neglecting the true essence of worship leads to national decline. Morgan warns that mere formalism in the Church today can result in societal decay, urging believers to strengthen their faith and live out their convictions authentically. The sermon calls for a revival of genuine worship and action to impact the nation positively.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

The Condemnation of Rationalism

The Revelation of the absolute Importance of the Recognition of God which was merely formal in the Life of the chosen People.

I. The Demonstration by Contrast. Solomon

i. Solomon's Inheritance.

a. The Conditions.

b. The supreme Inheritance.

ii. Solomon's Greatness.

a. In Relation to God.

b. In Relation to the People.

iii. Solomon's Service.

a. The Temple built.

b. Administration from that Center.

iv. Solomon's Failure.

a. Its Cause.

b. Its Course.

II. The Illustration in History

The Kings of Judah. Rehoboam to Zedekiah.

i. The Rending of the Kingdom.

a. Jeroboam. Substitution of false Form.

b. Rehoboam. Retention of the true Form.

ii. The Degeneracies.

a. Observance of the Form, and Neglect of the Facts.

b. Growing Neglect of the Forms.

iii. The Reformations.

a. Always beginning at the House of God.

b. The appalling Revelations of each Beginning.

iv. The ultimate Disaster.

a. The House burned with Fire.

b. The People carried away.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

The Importance of formal Religion in the Life of a Nation

I. The Discovery of the Point of Application

Cf. II Chronicles 5:13-14 and Acts 2:1-4.

II. The Manifestations of Formalism

III. The Disaster of Formalism

Therefore, "Strengthen the things that remain."

The general atmosphere of the second book of Chronicles is the same as that of the first. The temple of Solomon had long been in ruins. At the time of writing, the temple of Zerubbabel was about to be erected. The books give one continuous story; yet in the two we have two phases of one great truth. In the first we have the revelation of the importance of the temple to the national life. In the second we have the revelation of how absolutely useless the temple was. That is a paradox, a contradiction; and to recognize it is to be able to understand the permanent value of this book.

The first book of Chronicles is the condemnation of rationalism in national life. The second book is the condemnation of ritualism in national life. In the first book I see the necessity for a nation's remembrance of God, and recognition of His government in all its affairs. In the second book I have a revelation of the absolute folly and failure of the nation which recognizes God formally, but does not answer the symbolism of its recognition by the actuality of its conduct and character. That is the difference between rationalism and ritualism. Rationalism says, We can manage without God. Ritualism says, We must adopt the terminology which suggests God, and having done that, it is careless of that actual dealing with Him, which is vital to national life.

In the first division of the book we have the story of Solomon, and it constitutes a demonstration by contrast of the impotence and uselessness of formal religion. In the second division, which gives us the history of the Kings of Judah, we have illustration in history. Take first this demonstration by contrast. In looking at the details we notice four things: Solomon's inheritance, his greatness, his service, his failure.

As to Solomon's inheritance. A superficial statement is that he came to the throne and the kingdom. That is perfectly correct so far as it goes. The throne and the kingdom created his opportunity for fulfilling the supreme purpose of his life. Solomon's supreme inheritance was that of the work of building the temple, for the recognition of God on the part of the nation. He came to be king over a people recognizing the supremacy of the throne of Jehovah.

His father David had prepared for the building of the temple, the master passion of his life having been that of the recognition of the relation of national strength to submission to the throne of God. The government of the people from the beginning of their national existence was closely associated with the formulae of worship. Moses was the lawgiver. His first work was the building of the tabernacle, and the setting in the centre of the nation of all the symbols of its relation to God. When Solomon commenced to reign he did not offer his first sacrifice at the place where the ark was, the temporary tent which David had erected, but at the old tabernacle, long neglected. That action of Solomon was significant. The tabernacle had symbolized the people's relationship to God, and by going to it he expressed his conviction that their national greatness and strength depended upon their relation to the throne of God. His temple was to be the successor of Moses' tabernacle. Solomon's inheritance, then, was the opportunity, right, and privilege, of building that temple which was to remind the people of their relation to God.

Then as to Solomon's greatness. The beginning was a wonderful one. The greatness of the man is revealed in the simplicity of his heart as he made his plea for wisdom. It is seen, moreover, in the fact that, as a king, he bore his people on his heart in intercession before God.

His service consisted of the building of the temple; and then in the administration of his kingdom from that centre. That we need not stay to describe. All the details are simply set forth by the chronicler.

His failure was disastrous, and was caused by the violation, in his own self-centred life, of the truth the temple expressed. Even in the days of prosperity there are evidences of weakness, as a man of sensual

passion is seen playing upon the edge of the awful things that ultimately ruined him. The whole failure of Solomon was due to the fact that he answered the cry of his own self-life, and in doing so violated the principle of Divine government, to which the temple he had erected bore witness before himself and his people.

The temple became, in the case of Solomon, a form and nothing more. Consequently, it became not merely of no use, but a paralysis in the life of the king, and a poison in the life of the nation.

Turn to the second division of the book. It tells the story of Judah from Rehoboam to Zedekiah. The sin of Jeroboam in Israel consisted of the substitution of a false form of worship for the true. Rehoboam retained the true form in Judah. Throughout the history there is the observance of the form, and the neglect of the fact. This issued in growing neglect of the form. We never find nations or men long observe a form when it becomes devoid of power. Mere formalism must die sooner or later. The issue is irreligion, infidelity. It was so here. All the reformations began at the house of God. Asa renewed the altar, and restored the dedicated vessels to their place. Jehoshaphat instituted a series of special missions all through the country, sending men to read and explain the book of the law through the towns and villages. Joash restored the house after Athaliah's destruction of it. Hezekiah opened the doors, and assembled the people for worship. Josiah repaired the house of the Lord.

In each case the revelations of the beginnings of the reformations are appalling. Asa renewed the altar, and restored the dedicated vessels. That implies a broken altar and desecrated vessels. Jehoshaphat felt it necessary to send special prophetic messengers through the country to interpret the book of the law, which reveals the prevailing ignorance of the law. Joash restored the house of the Lord after Athaliah's destruction. That means that the house had been destroyed. Hezekiah opened the doors, which means that while the house still stood, the people had become so utterly weary of formalism, that the doors had been closed. Mark the marvel of the story of Josiah. In the midst of a reformation that must have been very partial, they found the book of the law; and finding it, and reading in it, the king was so startled at the awful condition of his people that he halted the whole reformation, in order to find out from the prophetess Huldah the meaning of this law, and the effect likely to be produced by his reformation. Thus all through the story we see the people getting lower, in spite of the fact that at the commencement of this period of history the temple was built and established, and became the central symbol of their religious life.

Finally there came the ultimate disaster. The house was burned with fire, and the people were carried away into captivity. In the first book the story is told of the passionate desire of the man after God's own heart to build the temple, knowing as he did the importance of the recognition by the nation of the fact of God. In the second book the aspiration of David becomes the achievement of Solomon. The passionate desire of the old man becomes the actual deed of the young man. I stand in the earlier chapters almost amazed at the splendour and beauty of the temple, and I listen to the songs of the singers, and watch the worship of the worshippers, and I thank God with David that the house is built. Yet immediately I see the nation beginning to fall, and gradually, stage after stage, sinking lower, until the house is burned and the chosen nation is cast away. If the first book teaches that it was necessary that these people should recognize God, the second teaches us that when the recognition was that of form and ceremony, it was worse than useless. That to me is the permanent value of this book, which thrills and throbs through all its history, and upon all its pages.

The living message of the book is that of the impotence of formal religion in the life of a nation. Let us first discover the point of application. In the thirteenth verse of the fifth chapter I read, "It came even to pass,

when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord, saying, For He is good: for His mercy endureth forever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord." It was a great moment. The temple finished, its worship of song perfected, all the notes of the instruments and voices merged into one great ascription of praise. Then the glory filled the house. In the Acts I read, "When the day of Pentecost was now come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them." The connection between these two passages is evident. Doubtless there is disparity, but there is also similarity. The two temples; the first was natural, the last spiritual. The temple in the olden days, made according to the pattern of God, in the unity of worship crowned with the glory of God, and filled with His presence; the symbol in the centre of the nation of the presence and government of God. That is the Old Testament picture. Observe the New Testament picture. Again the temple, no longer of material things, but of living stones, merged into the habitation of God by the baptism of the Spirit, a perfect unity.

As the temple in Chronicles was the centre and criterion of national life, so the Church of God is the centre and criterion of national life, if she do but understand her vocation, and fill her position. The application of the first book of Chronicles is to the nation. The message delivered to the nation was this, If you think by policy and diplomacy to maintain your strength without recognizing God, you are doomed to disaster. Now the message is to the Church. It is a warning to the spiritual Church lest she should become formal, and so fail to establish the nation. I have no desire to use any phrase in a controversial sense here, but I am bound, in the interpretation of truth as I see it in the Bible, to say this, the Bible knows nothing of the establishment of the Church by the State, but it teaches forevermore that the Church must establish the nation. In order to do this, formal religion is infinitely worse than none. By formal religion I mean high Church doctrine without full Church life. I mean Puritan philosophy without Puritan experience. I mean a Nonconformist conscience without conduct conformed to Christ. These things are the essence of ritualism.

What is high Church doctrine without full Church life? The doctrine of the Church that is forevermore arguing for the correctness of its views, and cursing the man who does not share them! That is a formalism which curses a nation.

What is Puritan philosophy without Puritan experience? There are some who think the Puritan philosophy consisted in a passion for destroying buildings. Nothing of the kind. The Puritan philosophy is that man is spiritual, and has the right of access to God who is Spirit, without the intervention of man or ceremony. Oh, the dignity of it! But if that is our philosophy, and we do not go to God, our philosophy becomes paralysis instead of power. Sometimes I am a little tired of hearing about the Puritanism of the Free Churches. I want to see it in the life of those who know what it is to have commerce with God. What do I care about the accidentals in the Puritan movements of long ago the speech, the dress, the iconoclasm? If a man looks at these things only, he has never seen the Puritan movement. The Puritan movement was that of strenuous saints, who refused to let any one come between themselves and God. Hold that philosophy to be a fine one, and live six days a week as though there were no God, and that is a ritualism which is a peril to a nation.

What is a Nonconformist conscience without Christian conduct? The presence of the crowd at the platform meeting when we show our superiority to other people, and its absence from the service of worship, and its neglect of the worship of work. We need the conscience sensitive to the call of Christ; the conscience

that worships, and then strips itself to serve. If I am forevermore talking about my conscience, and boasting in my freedom, and fighting merely for the shibboleths of freedom; that is ritualism, and I have no room to criticize the man who is a ritualist in some other section of the Church.

The disaster of formalism. What is it? It is not merely that the Church is a failure. That, of course, is a disaster. I am not, however, prepared to shed tears over the failure of a system. I am prepared to shed them over the fact that when the system fails, the work is not done. That is the supreme and final agony. If the Church of God is not what it ought to be, we have a nation without salt and without light, a nation rushing headlong to Godlessness, characterized by base ideals and ignoble conduct; by cowardice in the presence of a wrong, and carelessness about the importance of right. If that be the national condition, the blame is with the Church of God. I do not say the churches, but the Church, the Catholic Church, which is the Temple of God. If she were instinct with the life of Christ, and allowed that life to fill and flood and flow through her, the nation could no longer be careless.

I go back to the creation of the temple, and what followed in Jerusalem. The multitudes were amazed, perplexed, critical. The tragedy of the hour is that the Church does not amaze London, does not perplex London, does not make London critical. Why not? Because of her formalism. The world has done with formalism. Whether it be her theatres, her public houses, or anything else, she means business; and a world that means business is never going to be influenced by a Church that is playing. What we need is the Church, the Temple, filled with the Presence, flaming in its glory, flashing in its light, communicating its fire. Then we shall be able to say to the evil statesman, You dare not! We shall be able to say to vested interests, Disgorge! We shall cast out devils in the name of Christ. But formalism can do none of these things. What then is the message of the second book of Chronicles? What is the living word? "Strengthen the things that remain."

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