

The Message of Ephesians

by G. Campbell Morgan

The letter to the Ephesians teaches that the Church of God is eternal in character, with its conception in the past eternity, construction in time, and consummation in the coming eternity, and that its power to help the world is measured by its other-worldliness.

Scripture: Ephesians 1:4

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "The Church's Eternal Purpose"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the profound message of Ephesians, focusing on the eternal character and temporal conduct of the Church. He explains that the Church is part of God's eternal plan, constructed by His power, and destined for His purpose. Morgan urges believers to walk worthily of their calling, appropriating God's power and engaging in spiritual conflict. He highlights that the Church's influence in the world is directly tied to its other-worldliness, and that true engagement with the world stems from a deep connection to God. Ultimately, the message calls for unity, sanctification, and the use of God's armor in the face of spiritual challenges.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching. "The Saints ... in Christ Jesus"

i. The eternal Character of the Church.

a. The Conception. The Plan of God from Eternity.

b. The Construction. The Power of God in Time.

c. The Consummation. The Purpose of God to Eternity.

ii. The temporal Conduct of the Church.

a. The Construction. Conformity to the Unity.

b. The Confession. Sanctification of all Life.

c. The Conflict. To stand, To withstand, To stand.

II. The Abiding Appeal. "Walk worthily. . . ."

i. According to the eternal Plan.

"Grow up into Him . . . the Increase of the Body."

ii. Appropriating the eternal Power.

"Understand the Will of the Lord . . . filled with the Spirit."

iii. Approaching the eternal Purpose.

"Against" . . . "The whole Armour of God."

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. To the Church

i. The Measure of the Church's Power to help this World is the Measure of her Other-worldliness.

ii. The Test of the Other-worldliness of the Church is the Measure of her Influence in this World.

II. To the World

i. The Church of God is the Instrument of God for the Establishment of His Kingdom.

ii. The Way into the Church is through the One Lord. One Faith, Out Baptism.

This letter leads us to the high places of vision, and to awe-inspiring sublimities; it leads us there, and then leaves us in amazed and wondering adoration in the presence of the truths revealed. There is a sense in which an attempt to declare its message is easy. There is a sense in which it is difficult. It is easy because the whole letter is a message. It is difficult because the letter is a message, and therefore, having studied the content we have already heard the message. Yet with the consciousness of that content in our minds, we may reverently inquire what is its essential message, and what its persistent application.

Let us then consider, first, in broad outline the essential message, as to its central teaching, and its abiding appeal; and secondly, give attention to its application.

We are immediately arrested by the fact that there are no salutations in this letter, in the ordinary sense of the word; and as we proceed through the argument we are impressed by the fact that there is very little local colouring. It stands alone, a great message of truth. It is quite evident that more than one particular church was in the mind of the apostle. Even if he wrote it to one, it is a message preeminently to the whole Church, the Catholic Church of Jesus Christ.

The teaching of this letter has to do entirely with the Church. It is the final word of the New Testament concerning the Church. It is the last exposition of the words of Jesus Christ at Caesarea Philippi, "Upon this rock I will build My Church ; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom." In that declaration we have the full and final truth concerning the Church. For its exposition we need the whole of the Petrine and Pauline teachings; but especially the Pauline, because Paul was the steward of the mystery of the Church. In this letter, then, we have the last exposition of the meaning of Christ. To study it in the light of that statement at Casarea Philippi is at once to discover the

connections. The Lord said, "I will build My Church," and the figure of building is here employed by the apostle. The Lord said, "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it," and the apostle deals with the conflict very fully. Finally the Lord said, "I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom" ; that is, the standards of moral and ethical interpretation; and in the heart of this letter we find the application of the ethic of Jesus, to all the details of every-day life.

The central teaching of this whole letter is suggested by words taken from its opening address, "The saints in Christ Jesus," as they describe the composition of the Church of God.

The phrase "in Christ Jesus" following the words "the saints" indicates the unification of the units into the unity of the Church. The word "saints" suggests diversities, differences; the phrase, "in Christ Jesus," reveals the fact that all are one; and thus there breaks upon the mind the vision of the whole Church, that Church being Christ and all those who are united to Him.

The central teaching deals with the Church, and falls into two parts; that first, of the eternal character of the Church; and that secondly, of the temporal conduct of the Church.

And first as to the eternal character of the Church, the letter teaches us three things as it deals with the conception, construction, and consummation thereof ; showing that it was in the plan of God from eternity, is being realized by the power of God in time, and will fulfill the purpose of God in eternity.

The conception of the Church comes up out of the past eternity. It is almost impossible to use such words with absolute accuracy. I have spoken of eternity past; there is a sense in which that is a contradiction in terms. Eternity is eternity; it is an ever-present now. With God there is neither past nor future. His is age-abiding life; a great and infinite mystery which our finite minds cannot fully grasp. Consequently we are bound to think of these things by the dimensions with which we are familiar, and we speak, therefore, of the past, present, and future. A fine attempt to give expression to these truths is found in Hebrew literature in the declaration, "From everlasting to everlasting Thou art God." If we translate the Hebrew word rendered "everlasting" in our versions, according to its first significance, the statement will read, "From the vanishing-point to the vanishing-point Thou art God." That is to say, the writer was conscious that there is a limit to human understanding, and a limit to the stretch and sweep of the human mind, both backward and forward. There is a vanishing-point. Some men have seen further than others because they have climbed higher than others ; but there always has been, and still is, a vanishing-point We find it in Genesis, as we step out of the unseen into the seen; " In the beginning," that is the vanishing-point. John climbed far higher up the mount than Moses, and he also said, "In the beginning," but his "beginning" was further back than that of Moses, for Moses referred to the period immediately preceding creation ; but John referred to the essential fact of eternity, that timeless, limitless fact ere time or creation in any form existed.

To-day we are looking on. How far can we see? As far as the second Advent? Yes, and beyond it. To the millennial reign? Much further! To the Kingdom of the Son? Yes, and beyond. To the generation, that is to the new birth, of the age of the ages. There again we come to the vanishing-point. "From the vanishing-point to the vanishing-point, Thou art God."

Turning our thoughts back again to what we thus speak of as eternity past, this letter teaches us that the plan of the Church was formulated there; it is eternal. It comes up out of these vast distances, out of the eternities, the ages that we cannot comprehend, and of which the utmost we can say is that they are beyond the vanishing point.

May God deliver us from taking so great, so stupendous and sublime and far-reaching a vision of the wisdom which transcends our finite theory, in order to formulate a doctrine that God has chosen a few people to be saved and left the rest to be damned. That is an unwarranted deduction.

The plan of the Church existed in the mind of God from eternity. He predestined the Church that it should be conformed to the image of His Son. Paul peered into the deep things, the infinite mysteries, until somewhere back in those past eternities he saw in the mind of God, the Son of His love, the archetypal pattern of all perfection, and he declared that He predestined men and women that they should be conformed to that likeness. The Church then is not an experiment in human history. It is part of the plan of God. Let no member of the Church be anxious as to whether it is going to be destroyed or not. Let us not be filled with panic because the Church of God is being criticized by men who know neither the Church nor God. It is eternal because it is the conception, the plan of God, from eternity.

It is eternal in another sense. If the conception is the plan of God from eternity, the construction is by the power of God operating in time; that is eternal power; it is power coming from eternity past, and continuing to eternity future. The power which, operating in Christ, raised Him from the dead, is the power by which He builds His Church. In Christ, men and women are quickened, raised, and seated in the heavenlies. That is the operation of the power of God in time, and that is the whole story of the construction of the Church.

And finally the Church is eternal in yet another sense. The consummation is eternal, for the Church is to serve the purpose of God in the coming eternity. Through the Church in its union with Jesus Christ there will be revealed to the ages to come "the exceeding riches of His grace" ; and there will be unveiled before the angels "the manifold wisdom of God."

That is the first note of the central teaching of this letter. The Church of God is eternal. Its conception in the past eternity was the plan of God. Its construction in time is by the power of God. Its consummation in the coming eternity will be for the fulfillment of the purposes of God. Are we of this Church? Then we were in the heart and mind and plan of God in the ages gone ; we are to fulfill the purposes of God in the ages to come ; and the plan of the past, and the purpose of the future, are linked by the power of the present ; for plan, and power, purpose are alike eternal.

From these stupendous declarations the apostle turned to the subject of the temporal conduct of the Church. When that great vision has broken upon the life, and its virtue has empowered it, what will be the result in conduct? With the winds of the past eternity blowing across her, and the light of the coming eternity streaming upon her path, what manner of people will the members of this Church be?

The apostle describes that conduct as having relation to the construction of the Church; as constituting a confession before the world; and as being a conflict against all opposing forces.

Concerning the construction of the Church, he appeals to the members thereof; "I therefore . . . beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called." This he shows they will do by "giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is followed by a picture of the Church, being hilt up, growing up, "in all things into Him." The first responsibility of churchmanship then is the maintenance of the Spirit of unity. Can such a word be uttered without shame, without a sense of disappointment and .of failure?

In the next place the apostle shows that the Church is to make a great confession in time concerning God; the mind of God, the purpose of God, the will of God. This she will do by the sanctification of life. Not by creeds written or recited ; but by life, true to the heavenly standard and the eternal measurement in the details of everyday experience ; husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants. The sanctification of all life in the power of the heavenly conception is the confession which the Church makes to the world.

The result of such a confession must inevitably be that of conflict with the forces which are opposed to the purpose of God. The Church must be armed, and at war with these forces. In that conflict she is to stand, to withstand, and having done all, to stand.

Once again, if that be the picture of the temporal conduct of the Church, we cannot fail to notice how it coincides with the word of Christ at Caesarea Philippi. He declared, "I will build My Church." The first responsibility of the Church is that she obtain and maintain the view of the unity of that Church and "grow up in all things into Him, which is the Head, even Christ . . . unto the building up of itself in love." Building according to the pattern is our first responsibility.

His final word was, "I will give unto thee the keys," that is, the insignia of the office of ethical teaching. The Church is to fulfill that responsibility by the sanctification of life.

Between that first proclamation and that final commission He said "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." In order to fulfill the responsibility suggested by that declaration the Church must obey the apostolic injunction: "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil . . . take up the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and, having done all, to stand."

The Church of God is eternal in character; the plan of God in the past; the power of God today; the purpose of God in the future. Therefore in temporal conduct she must cooperate with God in His building by growing up into the Head; deliver the message of God's purity and holiness to the world by her sanctified life; fight the foes of God by putting on the whole armour of God.

If the central teaching of this letter is unified in that opening phrase, "The saints in Christ Jesus," its abiding appeal is focussed in the injunction, "Walk worthily of the vocation."

First, the members of the Church are to walk according to the eternal plan, to behave in time according to God's purpose from eternity. He predestined us that we should be conformed to the image of His Son. We are therefore to "grow up in all things into Him, which is the Head, even Christ." That is the standard! The measure in which we are living in holiness and in love, is the measure in which we are conforming to the eternal plan. We are not to be holy because decency demands it; we are not to be righteous because the policeman may arrest us if we are not; these are not our motives. We are to walk according to the eternal plan, remembering that our individual life was in the thought of God, and of it He has revealed the pattern in His Son, and He calls us to be true to the plan that has come up out of the past eternity by conforming to that pattern.

If we are to walk according to the eternal plan we must do it by appropriating the eternal power. When we read this letter we are amazed at its height, and the glory of its suggestion, and we are inclined to say, Who is sufficient for these things? Then we come to the great word in which the apostle says, "Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that

worketh in us." Am I a Christian man? Then I am such because I share the life of Christ, and if I share the life of Christ, I have resident within me power enough to make me all that God meant me to be from eternity. The eternal power is within the Christly soul, and we walk worthily as we appropriate it, and make use of it, understanding what the will of the Lord is, being filled with the Spirit, that so we may walk in harmony with the will of God.

The appeal of the letter is finally that we walk not only according to the eternal plan, not only appropriating the eternal power, but approaching the eternal purpose.

That walk will mean a fight against the forces that are attempting to hinder us, spiritual antagonisms, intelligences from the upper spaces who occupy lower places, who inhabit the heavenlies where the saints walk, that they may attack them. The devil's masterstroke to-day is that he has so largely succeeded in hiding himself, while still hard at work. It is quite time the saints awoke to recognition of these principalities and powers. They are manifested in many ways. We read of spiritualistic seances and bureaus; and the tragic thing is that the Church of God is laughing at these things, and saying there is no reality in these doings. It is certain that messages from the spirit-world are being actually received by men to-day; but they are messages of demons. If we are living the age-abiding life, if the plan of our life comes out of eternity, and its purpose runs into eternity, then false spirits will impede our progress, and attempt to seduce us from loyalty to the one Spirit of God; "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the worldrulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." We are to keep our eye upon the consummation, and "put on the panoply of God," and fight.

So may we walk worthily of the vocation, according to the eternal plan, appropriating the eternal power, and approaching the eternal purpose. Such is the abiding appeal of the letter.

Finally let us briefly make an application of the message of this letter to our own age.

Its message to the Church is, first, that the measure of her power to help this world is the measure of her otherworldliness. I use that phrase because it is being used as a term of reproach. There are men who tell us that the Church has been other-worldly, and therefore has failed. The measure in which she has failed is the measure in which she has ceased to be other-worldly. The darkest day in the history of the Church was the day when Constantine patronized her. Then she ceased to be other-worldly, and instead of leaning wholly and solely upon God, and upon the presence of the Spirit of God, she leaned on the arm of flesh, and by doing so lost her power. That is going far back, but we may make a present application. The measure of the Church's power to help the world is still the measure of her other-worldliness. Only as the Church remembers her heavenly, her Divine calling, can she set up the standards of life, and supply the sufficient dynamic thereof.

This letter further teaches that the test of the Church's other-worldliness is the measure of her influence in this world. If she is so otherworldly that she has no care for the condition of this world; if she is so other-worldly that she is unconscious of its sigh and sob and sorrow; if she does not care anything about the slums, then she is other-worldly, but the world she is of is the other world of the devil, which is selfish and un-Christlike. That is the tragic mistake we have too often made. We have sung songs of heaven, and have forgotten this poor sinning, suffering earth; and so have demonstrated our ignorance of heaven, for it is in heaven that earth's sorrows are most keenly felt, and it is upon the heart of God that earth's wrongs lie most heavily. The measure in which the Church of God is other-worldly in the true sense is the

measure in which she is putting her life against the sins and sorrows of the world, to sympathize, to shepherd, and to save. It is not possible to do that unless we are other-worldly. Unless we can bring into the slums of London the light and life of the city of God, we had better leave it alone; it will only degrade us, and we shall not help it. Socialism that begins by telling men that man is in process of evolution, and that sin is an incident, is a cruel lie; such socialism was born in the pit. But the socialism that sees the city of God, the Kingdom of God established in the world, and then lives in the midst of human sorrow and sin to bring to it redemption by blood, and regeneration by life, is the socialism of Christianity.

I take up this epistle to the Ephesians and climb the heights and scale the mountains and gaze upon the far-flung splendours of the eternal vision; and then I climb down and live at home, and in my relation to wife and child, to servant and master, my confession is to be made. The Church of God can never help God when she ceases to be other-worldly. When she is otherworldly she helps the world; and cannot avoid doing so.

This letter declares to the world that the Church of God is the instrument of God for the establishment of His Kingdom; and it teaches that if any man would help to the establishment of His Kingdom, there is one way, into the Church; he may enter through the one Lord, by one faith, and one baptism.

While this plan comes out of eternity, while this purpose lies in the distant eternity, and while this power is operating in time, there is no man or woman who may not come into the plan and into the purpose by coming into contact with the power. One Lord, the Lord Christ; Child of the eternities; Master of the ages; the Glory of the coming eternity. One faith; the simple abandonment of the needy soul who says:

"Just as I am, without one plea,

But that Thy blood was shed for me,

And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,

O Lamb of God. I come."

One baptism; the baptism of the Holy Ghost, whereby that trusting soul is made a member of Christ, a member

of the Church ; and enters the plan of the eternities, and travels towards the purpose of the eternities, by appropriating the power of the eternities.

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