

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER THREE

THE STOLEN BLESSING

Genesis 27

“No action, whether foul or fair,
Is ever done, but it leaves somewhere
A record, written by fingers ghostly
As a blessing, or a curse; and mostly

“In the greater weakness or greater strength
Of the acts which follow it: till at length
The wrongs of ages are redressed,
And the justice of God made manifest.”

- Anonymous

IN many a picturesque English village there lies a pond of stagnant water, which has been there as long as the oldest inhabitant can remember. It looks innocent enough when the winds of March sweep it, or the leaves of October bestrew it; but when it is exposed to the scorching rays of a summer sun, it pours forth volumes of poisonous gases, which had lurked unnoticed in its depths, and typhoid fever is sown in the homes that cluster round. Such is the heart of man. We do not think, we do not care to know, how much evil lies within. We read with listless interest the terrible photograph given by One who could not exaggerate (Mark 7:21); and attach a vague meaning to other words which characterize the human heart as “**desperately wicked.**”

And yet we do not feel so bad; nor shall we truly verify those words; nor realize how evil our nature is; or what a dying need we have for God until we have been exposed to some searching test, which shall reveal us to ourselves. Temptation is such a test. There is no sin in being tempted. Our great High Priest was “**tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin.**” And temptation need not necessarily lead to sin; so long as the steadfast will, inspired by the Holy Spirit, keeps the door of the nature shut and locked. Nay, temptation is even a blessing: “**Blessed is the man that endureth temptation,**” when it leads a man to discover tendencies, movements, appetites within him unknown before, but against which he must henceforth be on his guard.

God our Father permits us to be tempted, to lead us to see the hidden evils of our heart to hold up a looking-glass before us, in which we may behold what manner of people we are; and to make us so sensible of our own worthlessness and deformity as to drive us to hand ourselves over to Him, to do anything He may please, if only we may be delivered out of this body of death.

To know oneself, and to despair of oneself, is to come within the sweep of that gracious power, which can fashion a temple-column out of a bruised reed; and a noble vessel out of a lump of clay; and an Israel out of a Jacob.

We need not be at all astonished, then, to learn that temptation was allowed to come to Jacob from an unexpected source, taking him unawares. And if you are truly desirous of ascending the higher reaches of Christian thought and life, you must not be astonished if, in answer to your prayer for more grace and life, your heavenly Lover should take some unexpected means of showing you what you are. So Newton found -

“I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And see the glory of His face.

“Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.”

I. THE TEMPTATION ORIGINATED IN A SENSUOUS REQUEST OF ISAAC

We sometimes find it hard to think that the Isaac of this chapter is the same person as the submissive boy who carried the altar-wood on his stalwart young shoulders, and wondered about the lamb, and meekly submitted to be bound as a sacrifice. That was a radiant dawn for a human life, which for some reason became quickly overcast.

What was that reason? Was it the prosperity of which we read in the previous chapter? **“The man waxed great, and went forward, and grew until he became very great.”**

It would not be the last time that prosperity has choked off spiritual growth. Was it a too-easy disposition, of which we catch a glimpse in his readiness to abandon well after well, if only he might be left in peace? It would not be the only time that a molluscous lack of backbone has barred the path of a noble career. Was it an inordinate love for the pleasures of the table? There seems to have been too much of this in his constitution. He said to Esau, **“Make me savoury meat, such as I love.”** Rebekah was keenly aware of her husband’s weakness in this respect: **“I will make for thy father savoury meat such as he loveth.”** There is a sad suggestiveness in all this, and enough to account for all. The man who, on the supposed point of death, thinks most of all of a good dish of delicious venison, is not likely to shine as a specially brilliant star in the heavenly firmament.

We need to take warning against the twin sins of gluttony and drunkenness. Intemperance in eating may not result in the same outward degradation as in drinking; but it is as harmful to the spirit. The question is, whether average Christian people do not eat much more than is good for the health of either body or spirit.

Certainly the world and the Church are filled with numberless cases of men, the brilliance of whose minds has been obscured, and the edge of their spiritual life blunted, by their habitual and greedy indulgence in superfluous and luxurious food. With every grace we say at our meals, we need to ask that we may eat and drink, not merely at our own caprice, but to the glory of God. **“Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares.”**

Many years had passed since that memorable day on Mount Moriah; and many signs told Isaac that his sun was setting. Chief among these was dimming sight. God has mercifully arranged that such reminders, like warning bells, should ring out to show us how far we have travelled, and how near we are to the terminus of life. Many a man, who otherwise had dropped carelessly into the grave, has been awakened by such things to say to himself, “Behold, now I am old; I know not the day of my death. I must begin to prepare for the final act.”

There are glimpses of the better things in Isaac’s character in the threefold preparation he made for his end.

He made his last testamentary disposition. If you have not done this, do it at once no time so good as this. Leave nothing uncertain; nothing to chance; no loophole for heartburning or heartbreak amongst your heirs. He laid aside his earthly cares. He lived for several years after this; but he was a man set apart. It was the gloaming of his life; not quite dark, yet not light enough to work the fittest time for meditation and prayer.

It was ever the ambition of Dr. Chalmers to have such a time of Sabbath calm after the busy rush of his life of working days, and before the final act. He handed on the blessing. Even though he proposed to counterwork the purposes of God, yet there is a significant beauty in the desire of the old man to bless before he died. Aged people, we younger ones have surely a right to expect some blessing, ere you leave us, of ripe counsel; of matured wisdom; of prophetic experience.

II. THIS TEMPTATION WAS PRESENTED TO JACOB THROUGH THE UNSCRUPULOUS LOVE OF REBEKAH

Jacob was her favorite son. There was a closer relationship between them, than there could be between her and the more random Esau. As soon as she overheard Isaac’s request to Esau, she resolved at once to win his blessing for her younger boy. And if a momentary qualm suggested itself, she, doubtless, quieted it by the reflection that she was simply trying to ratify the bargain which he had made for himself.

We cannot but admire her love. She threw herself away on this lad, whom she was never to see again. She was reckless of personal consequences. She cared not what might come to herself, so that he might win. **“Upon me be thy curse, my son.”** For him she sacrificed husband, elder son, principle all. It is with such prodigality of affection that women constantly give themselves for their beloved. Their love is often worthy of a better object; and yet it is beautiful. Oh that all such knew of Him on whom the saint of the home at Bethany, and the sinner in the house of Simon, broke their alabaster boxes in a very prodigality of love, and yet there was no waste!

But Rebekah's love was not based on principle. And such love is as terrible as the fire which has burst from the restraints of iron bars, and leaves behind it a scorched and blackened trail. Love is either the bliss or bane of life: its bliss, if rooted and grounded in an all-mastering and all-penetrating devotion to purity, truth, principle or in a word, to God; but its curse, if, like some pirate crew, it steers the ship of life according to its own wild whim.

Let us keep our hearts above all that we guard, since out of them are the issues of life. And if we are ever prompted to act according to the strong solicitation of mere natural affection, let us remember the havoc which such a course produced in that far-off Eastern home, under the black tents of the patriarch Isaac: how it deceived the husband; wronged the elder son; drove the younger to an enforced exile; and blasted the reputation of this woman, who otherwise had been honoured and beloved.

But Rebekah is not the only mother who has acted thus. As we review her life, we find its counterpart in many: who will scheme, maneuver, palter with truth and righteousness, and cast even conjugal love into the scale, if only, at all hazards, they can advance the interests of their child. How little do they realize the harvest of which these are the seeds! a harvest of misery for the home; of heart-burning and hatred; of sorrow for those whom they would benefit; and of heart-breaking anguish for themselves.

In another sense than our Saviour meant, a man's foes may be they of his own household. We exert a vast influence not only by what we say, but by the spirit of our lives on those who dwell under the same roof, and address us by the tenderest names. And, alas! this influence is often sadly averse to their nobler life, withering it, as gas does flowers. They see us in our most careless moments, when we have ungirded ourselves, and lie at ease on the grass.

They catch up our least guarded words. They take us at a disadvantage, when, biased by love, we try to solve their problems and answer their questions so as to make life's pathway as easy as possible for their feet. And one drop of poison instilled into the heart by a loved and trusted friend is enough to spoil a life.

- We drink more unquestioningly of the poisoned chalice, when put to our lips by one we love.
- We enter more unsuspectingly the pathway to ruin, when the hand of parent or friend points the way.

The course of deceit is less forbidding, when urged on us by those who, like Rebekah, can gain nothing if we succeed; who are willing to assume all responsibility if we fail; and who profess that they are inspired by no other motive than the most unselfish devotion to our interests.

How careful should we be, then, of all suggestions and advice we give to those accustomed to look up to us; lest, wittingly or not, we should place a stumbling-block and occasion to fall in another's way. In such matters affection is no true guide, unless regulated, as God's is, by the dictates of righteousness and truth; if these be absent, there is terrible danger lest we should make again the mistake of Rebekah, and follow again in the footsteps of her sin, against her sons, herself, and her God.

III. THIS TEMPTATION WAS GREEDILY RESPONDED TO BY THE WEAK AND CRAFTY NATURE OF JACOB

Jacob was not a thoroughly vicious man; but he was deplorably weak: and weakness is close akin to the sin to which it inevitably leads. He would not have concocted this plot or laid the train himself. He would have preferred not to act the liar. He was really afraid of the result. But he had not the courage to say “ No “ to the strong will and wish of his mother, especially when she was ready to take all risks. He tried to quiet his conscience by the consideration that he was only trying to get his own; and that Esau had no right to think of getting back from their father the birthright which he had certainly sold. And so, when his mother put strong pressure on him, summoning him by the obedience he owed her as her son (ver. 8), he weakly did not refuse on the ground that it was unlawful; but suggested it was inexpedient, lest they should be found out.

“Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man; my father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a deceiver, and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing.”

When a man retreats from the position of what is right, to the urging of what is likely to be expedient and to pay that man is near a fall, swift as the archangel’s from Heaven to hell. Such a fall was Jacob’s. It is impossible to emphasize this point too earnestly, especially for the young.

So long as we take our stand on what is lawful as John the Baptist did, when he strode into the royal presence and told Herod that he had no right to take his brother’s wife we are impregnable. But when once we retreat from this, and argue with the tempter on the lower grounds of possible discovery and failure, we shall find ourselves outmatched by his arithmetic, and led as garlanded oxen to the slaughter-house.

Into this fault, to which all weak men are so liable, Jacob fell; and so, when, a second time, his mother commanded him to obey her voice (ver. 13), and go to the flock for two good kids of the goats, **“he went, and fetched, and brought them to his mother.”**

When once the first step had been taken, it was quickly followed by others which it seemed to render needful. Sin never comes alone. The first act of sin is like the boy put through a narrow window into a burglar-beset house, who creeps round to open the door for the entire gang; or it is like the first link of the rusty chain, which draws all the rest into the hold of the ship. If the graces come with linked hands, so do the vices. They are sporadic. That first sin of Jacob led to many others.

He simulated his brother’s dress and skin.

While the meat was cooking, Rebekah was engaged in turning over Esau’s wardrobe, to find some suitable garments, highly perfumed, as is the custom with the Easterns to this day. This done, she prepared the delicate skins of the kids for his hands and neck. All was done with haste; lest Esau might come in. And when all was ready, Jacob arrayed himself to play his part.

He deceived his father with a direct falsehood.

“I am Esau, thy firstborn; I have done according as thou badest me; eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me.”

He made an impious use of the name of God. In answer to Isaac’s question as to how he had found it so quickly, he dared to say, **“The Lord thy God brought it to me.”**

Yet what horror must have thrilled him as he found himself forced to take step after step, aware that he was being carried out by a rushing stream towards an ocean of ink; yet not daring to stop nay, compelled to press still further out to sea.

How his heart must have stood still when the old man became suspicious, and doubted his voice, and insisted on feeling, smelling, and having him near! What if God should strike him dead! What a relief when he came out again into the fresh air! though the words of the coveted blessing hardly repaid him for the agony he had passed through.

How he must have loathed himself, and longed to change places with the lizards that crept about the tents, or the little naked slave children that laughed so merrily at play! The sun itself seemed shorn of half its light.

Yet this is the man who became the Prince of God. And if he became so, is there not hope for us, who can trace in him many resemblances to ourselves? **“Though we have lien among the pots, yet may we be as the wings of a dove, covered with yellow gold.”**

If the Almighty Workman could fashion such clay into so fair a vessel, what may He not do for us? Our only hope is to hand ourselves over to Him, in an act of entire self-surrender; conscious that we are useless and worthless, deserving rather to be trampled under foot than fashioned by his hand; conscious, too, that if He do not work for us, we are undone; willing to be and do anything He may direct; careful to work out all that He may work in. If only we will to do this, and yield ourselves to God, and be willing to be made willing to have his will done in us, by us, and about us, then God will be able to work in us also some fair design of beauty and use. Oh, do not mar His work; or lead Him to make of thee some inferior vessel to that which thou mayest become! (Jeremiah 18:4).

But, remember, God must implant the nature which He educates into Israel the Prince. When we speak of God’s education, we must be very careful what we mean, and how we express it; lest we should countenance error. Amidst all his sin, there must have been in Jacob a better self, which was capable of receiving the education of God, and of being developed into Israel. You may call this faith, or what you will; but it was there. And it was the possession of this better nature that made Jacob stand in a different relation towards God than Esau did; and made him capable of rising to a spiritual level, for which Esau had neither the aptitude nor the taste. No doubt the God of love had thoughts of love towards Esau; but there was not, in his worldly nature, the faith, or the elements of nobility, which, through faith, had been implanted in his brother’s heart.

Put a stone into a flower pot; cover it with mould; give it water and sunshine, and light and air it will always be a stone: so if Esau had passed through the discipline of Jacob, he would always have been an Esau he never could have been an Israel; unless there had been also in him the better nature which is associated with faith. You may develop intelligence, by education and mind-culture; but the faculty must be already present, otherwise your best methods will be abortive. You can develop the rudimentary germ; but when it is absent, you cannot create it. So the discipline of God's grace in a human life can do nothing, unless there be the germ of that new and divine nature of which our Lord spoke to Nicodemus: **"That which is born of the flesh is flesh; that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Ye must be born again."**

If, then, you are conscious of a depraved nature, capable of the faults which disfigure the character of Jacob, be anxious to enquire if, besides this, there is the new nature, born of God, and capable of being educated into His image. If it be there, be thankful; and ask the Holy Spirit to lust against and repress the Jacob-nature, so that you may not do the things that you would (Galatians 5:17), and to hasten your Israel-beauty. If it be not there, your duty is to look at once to the Lamb of God, who was delivered for your sins, and was raised again for your justification; and the imparting, by the Holy Ghost, of the germ of the new and better nature will be simultaneous with the first real, longing, transforming look of faith to the Lord Jesus.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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