

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE SCHOOL OF SORROW

Genesis 35-42

“The ills we see
The mysteries of sorrow deep and long,
The dark enigmas of permitted wrong, -
Have all one key:
“This strange, sad world is but our Father’s school;
All chance and change His love shall grandly overrule.”

- F. R. Havergal

IN manufactories of china-ware there are processes which illustrate our lives with startling force and beauty. Amongst others which read us deep and helpful lessons, is the burning-in of the colors, which had been previously painted on the ware. It is only the skilled hand that can delineate those designs which delight our fancy; but no skill of the painter could make them other than evanescent, unless there were some other method of rendering them permanent. This is accomplished by placing the newly-painted ware in a kiln or furnace, where it is exposed to very intense heat; and the colors are burnt in and fixed.

It is very often thus that God makes permanent some great blessing which we have received. He burns it in by placing us amid the fires of keen suffering and sorrow. So often have I noticed this, that I am never surprised to hear men date an unusual amount of trial from the moment in which Heaven seemed nearer, and Christ dearer, than ever before. It must be so: or the blessing which they had obtained would fade from their soul as the tints of sunset fade off earth and sky; or as the photograph fades from the plate, unless it has been “fixed” in the dark chamber.

In this respect, there is a precise analogy between the experience of Jacob and ourselves: teaching us again that spiritual life is one, though severed by the centuries; and that the Bible is evidently the Word of God, because it is so certainly the book of man. When, having left his idols behind, Jacob had got back to Bethel, and had built again the altar of renewed consecration, we are told significantly that **“God appeared unto him again, and blessed him.”**

Are all the readers of these lines conscious that the blessing of the Almighty is resting upon them? as the light of the transfigured body of our Lord fell upon the virgin snows of Hermon, and made the darkness light? Has God revealed Himself to you again, after the long, sad lapse of fellowship and communion?

Is the backslider back again in the house of God, and at the gate of Heaven? If not, would it not be wise to do as Jacob did? Ask God to show you what your idols are. Tell Him that you want to be only, always, all for Him. Put away not only your sins, but your weights, i.e., aught that hinders you in the Christian race. If you cannot do this yourself, tell Him that you are willing for Him to take them from you. If you cannot say that you are willing, tell Him that you are willing to be made willing. And when you have thus surrendered your will, give yourself again to Him; entreat Him to take full possession of your entire being; lay yourself as an Isaac upon the altar of self-dedication; and remember that He takes all we give, and at the moment of our giving it. It may be that He will appear to us at once, flooding our spirits with the old unspeakable joy; or He may keep us waiting for a little. But it matters comparatively little, if only we can say, with the assurance of an unwavering faith, **“We are His . . . nothing shall henceforth separate us from the love of God.”**

It was a great blessing, indeed, that God vouchsafed to Jacob. **“God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob; but Israel shall be thy name.”**

The angel had said as much as this at Peniel; and, for a brief moment, he had shone in the transfiguring gleam of royalty. But the gleam was transient enough; like that which sometimes breaks for a moment far out upon a stormy sea, and is instantly veiled again. But there had been wrought on him a deep spiritual change since then; and his experience had been brought into more constant conformity with the level of Israel, the Prince which was now re-affirmed as his perpetual designation. And forthwith he was plunged into a fiery furnace of trial, which made both name and character permanent. But this was not all: God constituted him father of nations and kings; and promised to give to him the land in which he was a wanderer, as his fathers before him.

Now these two items of fruitfulness and possession are only possible to those who have passed through the school of suffering. It is in soul-travail that our children are born; and it is through much tribulation that we enter into the Kingdom. Let no man think that he can win the highest spiritual attainments without paying the price for them. Our Lord could only be perfected as our Captain and High Priest by the things that He suffered; through His sufferings He became the Author of eternal salvation to all who believe.

We need not dwell further, then, on the probable reasons why, from this moment, Jacob's path was draped in the gathering shadows of outward sorrow. But we may notice what those shadows were. And we may interest ourselves in remarking how, as the sorrows gathered, there was a fuller life, and fruitfulness, and royalty.

Jacob is increasingly replaced by Israel, the Prince. Does it not remind us forcibly of another, who said, **“Though our outward man perish, the inward man is renewed day by day?”** (II Corinthians 4:1 6). Our affliction is light, and for a moment, compared with the weight of glory which it is working out.

There are four burials in one chapter (Genesis 35), including that of the idols in Shechem. These were the beginning of sorrows.

First, Deborah died; the old favorite nurse, who had accompanied her young mistress, when, long years before, she had left her home across the Euphrates to become Isaac's bride.

What a link she must have been with that sacred past! What stories she could tell of the glory of that camp presided over by Abraham, the friend of God! And often she would live again in the past, and tell how bitterly Rebekah rued the fatal advice she gave to her favorite son whom she was never to see again; and for lack of whom she pined, until she drooped in death, whilst he still tarried across the distant Euphrates' flood.

Rebekah's death may have made the camp of Isaac distasteful to the faithful old servant; and she took the first opportunity of coming to spend her remaining days with him whom, in memory of the long past, she too loved with the tenacious affection of her race. It must have been a sad wrench to Jacob to lay the remains of his mother's closest friend beneath that oak in Bethel. The grief occasioned by her death was evidently quite unusual; since even the oak became known, in after years, as "**the oak of tears.**"

But a worse sorrow was in store. They journeyed from Bethel, and there was but a little way to come to Ephrath. The foremost ranks of the march were already in sight of the hostelry, and were eagerly pressing on for the camping ground. But suddenly a summons from the rear bade them halt. The beloved Rachel cannot go another step. The tidings of her extreme agony and peril silence the motley groups of drovers and slaves, and servants and sons. Gathered in confusion upon the road, they await the issue with the dread suspense which breathlessly marks each flicker of life's taper. That scene would never be forgotten by any of them, least of all by Jacob.

When he, too, lay upon his dying bed, in that hieroglyphed Egyptian chamber, it came back to him, with touching force and pathos, such as told the freshness of the wound, and the anguish of the grief, which thirty years could not dull. Ah, sorrow! nature may cast its mantle of greenery over her scars, and golden grain may stand in serried ranks upon the field of Waterloo; but thou canst inflict wounds which never seam together, but gape, and gape.

But all the agony of those devoted hearts could not stay that departing spirit: the mother only lived long enough to see her second babe, and to enshrine her sorrow in its name; and then she died, and was buried there in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. It was a matter of evident regret to Jacob, in after years, that she did not lie, with the rest of her kin, in Machpelah's ancient cave; but he could never forget that lone spot on the way to Ephrath (48:7).

And when the wheel of time had brought many changes, and that spot had become famous as the birthplace of the great Son of Jesse, still it seemed to the anointed ear of the prophet as if Rachel's spirit haunted the spot, wailing for her children. And even to this day travelers turn aside to visit Rachel's tomb.

Yet another heart-pang was measured out to that much-tried man. We suffer keenly through the sins of those we love; and when the father saw his Reuben and his Judah stained with the soil of nameless impurity, he drank perhaps the bitterest cup of his life.

Nor was this all. He lived to see dissension and hatred rend his home. The elder brethren envied and hated their younger brother, Joseph; the son of the beloved Rachel, and the child of his old age. His partiality most certainly added fuel to the flame. It was a great mistake to confer the costly coat that indicated the heir and prince of an Eastern clan. But we can easily understand how naturally the old man would turn to the promising lad, whose dreams bespoke his regal future, and reminded him of his own. **“His brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.”**

But there was worse to follow. One day the sons brought home the coat he knew so well; but it was bedaubed with blood, and stained. **“This have we found; know now whether it be thy son’s coat or no.”**

It may be that a suspicion even then crossed his mind that there had been foul play. But if it did, he kept it to himself, and only let it slip afterwards in the bitterness of his grief (42:36). He at least professed to believe that an evil beast had devoured the beloved body, and that Joseph had been rent in pieces.

How he mourned only those know who have passed through similar anguish. The father’s grief touched unwonted chords in the hearts of his children. They rose up to comfort him. **“But he refused to be comforted; and said, I will go down to the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.”**

But another sorrow was in store. Jacob was next called upon to see his aged father breathe his last; and perhaps once more to hear those trembling lips pronounce the blessing which had cost so much. **“Isaac gave up the ghost and died, and was gathered unto his people.”**

He joined the great gathering of his clan, in the ranks of which are numbered all meek and true-hearted souls. Who are our people, to whom we shall be one day gathered? And the two sons buried him. Esau came from Edom - the successful man of the world, who had anticipated this moment years before, as likely to suit his purpose for slaying Jacob; but who was sweetened and softened by the mellowing influence of time. And Jacob limping in his step; broken by hard toils; stricken by his recent losses came to help him. There they stood for a moment: the twins whose lives had been such a struggle and such a contrast, reconciled in the presence of the great silence of the grave; and soon to take their several ways, never again to meet, but to tread ever diverging paths, both they and their children, and their children’s children. We link hands with the playmates and companions of early life across the tiny stream, and for some distance we can keep them linked, albeit that the streamlet widens between us; then loosing hands, we walk side by side, keeping each other well in view, and talking merrily: but, at last, the mighty river spreads its volume between us; and we can neither see nor hear anything, save the break of the sea upon the shore. It is all important that those who love should be on the same right side of the stream, if they would escape an eternal separation.

On the heels of bereavement came one of those terrific famines to which Eastern countries are subject, and which sweep them bare of people. The family of Jacob was not exempt. The sons seem to have sat down in the stolid indifference born of long privation; and were only aroused by their father’s appeal, **“Why do ye look one upon another?”**

They went down into Egypt in all ages the granary of the world; and after an agonizing interval of suspense returned. But Simeon was not with them; and to get him, and more corn, Jacob must risk the son of his right hand the lad who had cost him so much in Rachel's death. Who does not sympathize with the cry of agony wrung from that quivering heart, a cry that revealed that depth of love of which it was capable? **“Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not; and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me. Ye shall bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.”**

In addition to all this, there was growing upon him a sense that his life was closing; that his strength was failing; and that he must prepare to follow his father into the unseen. His years had been few in comparison with those of his forefathers; and he had the weary sense of failure, in that he had **“not attained”** (47:9). It is a pitiful thing, when an old man finds life ebbing fast away from him; whilst all his regrets cannot recall one single mistake, or give him the consciousness of having done all he could. Such sorrows fell to Jacob's lot: they fall to our lot still; and when they do, let us learn how to behave ourselves.

I. DO NOT JUDGE BY APPEARANCES

Jacob said, **“All these things are against me.”** It was a great mistake. Joseph was alive - the governor of Egypt; sent there to preserve their lives, and to be the stay of his closing years. Simeon was also alive the blessed link which was drawing and compelling his brothers to return into the presence of the strange Egyptian governor. Benjamin would come safely back again. All things, so far from being against him, were working together for good to him; and if only he would trust God, he would live to see it so.

All things are yours, if you are Christ's. All things serve you. Even those that seem most awry and trying are really promoting your best interests. If you knew as much about them as God does, you would go down on your bended knees and thank Him, with streaming eyes, for the most untoward of your circumstances.

The seed buried in the ground may rejoice in the frost as much as in the genial sunshine. And even though some events cut us to the quick, if we believe that the infinite love of God is working in and through them, we may sing as Paul and Silas did, albeit that our feet are fast in the stocks. Let us cultivate the habit of looking at the bright side of things. If there are only a few clouds floating in your sky, do not say that the whole is overcast; and if all the Heaven is covered, save one small chink of blue, make much of that; and by all means do not exaggerate the darkness.

II. BE SURE THAT GOD HAS A PURPOSE IN ALL YOUR SORROW

The apparent aimlessness of some kinds of pain is sometimes their sorest ingredient. We can suffer more cheerfully if we can clearly see the end which is being slowly reached. But if we cannot, it is hard to lie still and be at rest. But the believer knows that nothing can come to him, save by the permission of God's love. Every trial must reach him through the mystic barriers that engird him; and must show a permit signed by the hand of God Himself.

Nothing comes by chance, or by the will of friend or foe; but all is under law. And each several calamity has a specific purpose.

“For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod” (Isaiah 28:27)

And as the farmer carefully adjusts his method to various kinds of grain, and to accomplish the object he has at heart, so the Almighty varies his method of dealing with us: He ever selects the precise trial that will soonest and best accomplish His purposes; and He only continues it long enough to do all that needs to be done.

“Bread corn is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break it with the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen” (Isaiah 28:28).

I commend that precious promise to those who think their sorrows past endurance. They will not last forever; they will be suited to our peculiar needs and strength. They will accomplish that on which the great Husbandman has set His heart.

III. REMEMBER THAT NOTHING CAN SEPARATE YOU FROM THE LOVE OF God

When Jacob reviewed these dark passages of his life from the serene heights of his dying bed, he saw as he had never seen it before that God had shepherded him all his life long; and His Angel had redeemed him from all evil (48:15, 16). We do not realize this at the time: but there is never an experience in life without the watch of that unsleeping Shepherd-eye; never a peril without the interposition of that untiring Shepherd-hand. The hand of the Good Physician is ever on the pulse, as we pass through the operation. **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay.”**

These things may, sever God from our eyes, and shut away the realization of His love: but they cannot make Him cease to love us; or hide us from Him; or separate us from Him. Take heart, you who are descending into the dark valley of shadow; the Good Shepherd is going at your side, though you see Him not. His rod and staff shall comfort you: yea, His own voice shall speak comfortably to you. Fear not!

IV. ANTICIPATE THE “AFTERWARD.”

Look not at the things which are seen; but at those which are not seen. Cast into the one scale your sorrows, if you will; but put into the other the glory which shall presently be the outcome of the pain. Consider how splendid it will be, when the discipline is over; and the lovely shape is acquired; and the lesson learnt; and the pattern fixed for ever. Anticipate the time when every vestige of Jacob shall have been laid aside, and Israel is become the befitting title for your soul. Will not that repay you because you will have been brought into a oneness with Christ which shall be Heaven in miniature?

Take heart, thou bit of Heaven's porcelain: thou must be shaped and fashioned on the rapid wheel; thy fairest hues must be burnt in amid the most fiery trials but thou shalt yet grace the table of thy King; and shalt be used of Him for His choicest purposes.

“Wherefore, let them that suffer according to the will of God, commit the keeping of their souls to Him, as unto a faithful Creator” (I Peter 4:19).

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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