

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE ANGEL-LADDER

Genesis 28

“Though like the wanderer,
Daylight all gone,
Darkness be over me,
My rest a stone:

Yet, in my dreams, I'd be
Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee.”

- S. F. Adams

WHEN Esau found that Jacob had stolen his blessing, he hated him, and vowed to kill him. This was nothing less than might have been expected from his headstrong and impetuous nature. These threats came to Rebekah's ears, and filled her with fear, lest she should be deprived of them both in one day Jacob, the jewel of her eye, by the hand of his brother; and Esau, by being compelled, like a second Cain, to become an outlaw for his brother's murder.

But there was one source of relief which presented itself to her mother's love and woman's wit. She understood Esau's temperament perfectly. She knew that a passionate, hasty man is less to be feared than a man who gives no sign of the tumult raging within. Rage like Esau's would soon expend itself in words and threats; and burn itself out, like a quick and furious fire, for want of fuel. If only Jacob absented himself for a short time, all would be forgotten.

So Rebekah made up her mind that he should go across the desert to Haran; to abide for a time with her brother Laban, from whom she had been parted since that memorable day, when, with many a girlish dream floating before her dark eyes, she had started with Abraham's servant for her new home. She did not tell her husband all her reasons it would have done more harm than good; but she adduced very good and obvious ones, in the necessity of preserving from defilement the holy seed, and of procuring for Jacob a suitable wife.

Isaac fell in with the proposal; and **“called Jacob, and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padan-aram; and take thee a wife of the daughters of Laban, thy mother's brother. And God Almighty bless thee!”**

And Jacob, not without many a tear, went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And it was on his way that this revelation of the Angel-Ladder was made to him.

I. THE CIRCUMSTANCES IN WHICH THIS REVELATION WAS MADE TO HIM

Jacob was lonely. He was not what we should call a young man; he had reached mature years: but it is almost certain that this was the first time of his leaving the shelter of his home. Led afar from home in pursuit of the fleet deer, his hunter brother may often have passed the night amid the wilds, comfortable and content. But Jacob had no taste for such experiences. For him solitude had no charms; he loved to hear the sounds of human voices, and the stir of the camp. In the early morning light, as he started forth there may have been an exhilarating sense of independence, freshness, and novelty; but as night drew its curtains over the world, and the stars glimmered out of the depths, and the solemn boulders lay so still on the moorland around him with no tent for shelter, no fire for warmth, no pillow for rest, there stole over his mind a sense of loneliness and melancholy. This was God's chosen time, when He drew near to his spirit, and said, "**Behold, I am with thee; and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest; and will bring thee again into this land: for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.**"

And so it has often been with men. We must be withdrawn from the rush and hum of the busy market-place, if in the old minster we would see the calm angel-faces carved in stone, or hear the thrilling notes of the chorister boys. Recall, for a moment, your first night away from home as a schoolboy; or apprentice; or servant; or student: and answer, if that were not a sacred epoch in your history, when God took up the trailing tendrils of your love, and twined them around Himself, and you realized His presence, and clung to Him as never before.

Jacob was also standing on the threshold of independence. It is a solemn moment when a man enters on independence fairly afloat like a swimmer without corks; adrift like a boat's crew who have seen the waves close over their ship. Childhood sleeps peacefully, because it has no responsibilities; the flower is sheathed in its green case; the nestling is fed and shielded by the untiring care of the parent bird. But this does not last long; and none need wish prematurely to exchange such dependence for the independence that must needs care for itself.

The child must go forth at last to earn his own living; to win his spurs; to stand alone; to choose and act for himself. It is a solemn crisis.

But it is at such a moment that the Almighty, as a wayfaring man, offers His company for the untrodden path. Happy is he who accepts the proffered help; and transfers the feeling of dependence from the earthly to the heavenly Friend. It is almost worthwhile being cast off by father and mother, if one may be taken up by the Lord. And when one is willing to be taken up by Him, there need be no further anxiety or care; for directly a human spirit yields itself to its Almighty Lover, that moment He takes it, and assumes all responsibility, and makes Himself answerable for all its needs. There is but one condition: "**Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.**"

As Queen Elizabeth said once to one of her Court: “Sir, if you will look after my business, I will make yours my care.”

Would that all the children of God might know what it is to hand over, moment by moment, as they occur, all worries, anxieties, and cares, to the compassionate Lord, sure that He takes them straight from their hands! We need never feel, then, as if all depended on our tired brain or failing strength; because the Lord Himself would supply all our need, according to his riches in glory. There is, indeed, no real independence for the believer. To be independent of Christ is to be cast forth as a branch to wither. The secret of rest, and fruit, and power, is an abiding union with Him which time cannot impair, and death cannot dissolve.

Jacob was also in fear. What should hinder Esau, when he heard of his flight, from pursuing him? He was well acquainted with those parts; was fleet of foot; or might use dogs, so as to track him and run him down. Besides, the country was full of robbers and wild beasts. And it was then that God calmed his fears, by showing him that that lone spot was teeming with angel-hosts, willing and eager to encamp about him, with celestial watch and ward.

The most lonely spot is as safe for us as the most crowded, since God is there. It is His presence that keeps us safe amid the crowded city; and it is not in the smallest degree withdrawn when, benighted on some desolate moorland, we lay ourselves down to sleep.

- Into the low dungeon, where the true-hearted prophet lies (Lamentations 3:55);
- Into the prison cell, where the heroic apostle awaits his doom (Acts 23:11);
- Into the cabin of the creaking, labouring vessel, threatened each moment with destruction (Acts 27:24)

there comes this assurance of One who cannot lie: “**Fear not!**” so that we may boldly say, “**The Lord is my helper: and I will not fear what man shall do unto me**” (Hebrews 13:6).

II. THE ELEMENTS OF WHICH THIS REVELATION CONSISTED

The Spirit of God always conveyed His teachings to His servants in language borrowed from their surroundings.

- John’s records of Heaven are full of reminiscences of the Aegean; which sometimes murmured around the cliffs of his prison-isle as a sea of glass bathed in fire, and at other times broke on them in yeasty foam.
- David’s Psalms make constant reference to the wild hill-country of Judaea, in which so many of them were composed;
- Daniel’s visions commemorate the giant forms familiar to him in Babylon; and
- Amos casts his prophecies in moulds borrowed from a herdsman’s life.

So was it here, Bethel was a bleak moorland that lay in the heart of Palestine. There was nothing remarkable about it; it was “**a certain place.**” The hill-sides and upland slopes were strewn with large sheets of bare rock: most of which lay flat upon their faces, like huge fallen gravestones; whilst some few were standing erect, like the cromlechs of our Druid circles.

Fleeing northwards, the wanderer suddenly found himself overtaken by the swift Eastern night, whilst on this desolate and unpeopled waste. There was no help for it but to lie down on the hard ground, taking the stones thereof as a pillow for his head. And thus he slept; and as he slept he dreamed: and in his dream his mind wove together many of his waking thoughts in fantastic medley.

The striking appearance of those huge boulders; the memory that Abraham had built one of his earliest altars there, remnants of which may have been still standing; his last look upwards at that wondrous Heaven, studded with the brilliant constellations of an Eastern night all these wove themselves into his dreams. It seemed as if the huge slabs of limestone came near together, and built themselves up into a gigantic staircase, reaching from the spot where he lay to the starry depths above him; and on that staircase angels came and went, peopling by their multitudes that most desolate region, and evidently deeply concerned with the sleeper that lay beneath. Nor was this all; for, from the summit, the voice of God fell like music. There are here three points of interest.

(1) *The Ladder.*

Jacob may have been oppressed by a sense of his insignificance, and sin, and distance from home. And it was very pleasant to know that there was a link between him and God. Earth is not a wandering star: it is bound to Heaven, not by the golden chains of which our Laureate sings; not by the iron fetters of necessity, as a slave-ship to its captor; not by the silken ties of gravitation which thread the worlds but by a ladder, denoting communion, fellowship, passage to and fro.

That ladder is Jesus Christ Himself (John 1:51).

He took upon Himself our nature, built up from the dust; and in that nature passed upwards from the brow of Olivet, beyond principalities and powers, thrones and dominions, to the very throne of God: and in doing so, He has left a trail of light behind; and become “**the way**” by which we may approach the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy. There is no other way; “**no man cometh unto the Father but by Him.**” To neglect Him is to drift past the only medium by which a sinner may come into the Light and Love and Life of God. And yet the weakest and most sinful may climb through Jesus from the verge of the pit of hell to the foot of the eternal throne.

“The sons of Ignorance and Night
May dwell in the Eternal Light,
Through the Eternal Love.”

Milton, in his sublime poem, tells how sin and death followed the track of Satan, and paved after him a broad and beaten way over the dark abyss, whose boiling gulf tamely endured a bridge of wondrous length from hell, continued to the utmost orb of this frail world; so that the wicked spirits of his court might easily pass to and fro to tempt us mortals. That is imagination: this is fact, that there is a “**Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus**” (I Timothy 2:5).

Sometimes, when the sky is beclouded, we do not see that across the garden path there sways a ladder of gossamer, linking tree with tree; but when the sun shines, it is revealed by its silver sheen. So, as the infidel looks upward, he can see no bond of union between this atom of stardust and the metropolis of the universe, until his eyes are opened, and he sees the ladder left by the trail of the departing Saviour. Thank God, we are not cut adrift to the mercy of every current; this dark coal-ship is moored alongside the bright ship of heavenly grace; yes, and there is a plank from the one to the other.

(2) *The Angels.*

The angels ascended: *there is the ascent of our prayers.* The angels descended: *there is the descent of God's answers.*

We are reminded of the afferent and efferent nerves of the body up which flash the sharp stings of pain from the extremities to the head; and down which come the directions how to act.

It would be well to ponder more frequently the ministering care of the angels.

- They keep pace with every railway train, at whatever speed it travels, which bears some child of God to his appointed destination.
- They convoy every ship ploughing its way through the troubled sea, which carries an heir of salvation to the haven where he would be.
- They encamp with horses and chariots of fire about every city, however beleaguered, in which God's servants are found.
- They minister to our needs.
- They prepare for us strengthening meals when we sink exhausted on the desert sands and wish to die.
- They whisper comfort into our troubled hearts.
- They carry our departing spirits upwards in the hour of death. "And all for love, and nothing for reward."

God gives His angels charge concerning us, to keep us in all our ways; they bear us up in their hands. "**The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.**" They are "**sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation.**"

What comfort Jacob must have realized! He found, to his great surprise, that that lone spot was as thickly populated as the gate of some Eastern town, which is the place of concourse and barter. But it was the gate of Heaven; for it seemed as if the populations of Heaven were teeming around him, thronging to and fro; and all engaged in the beneficent work of bringing in the needs of men, and carrying out the blessings of God heaped up, after the overflowing measure with which He is wont to give. We need never yield to feelings of loneliness again, if we remember that, in our most retired hours, we are living in the very heart of a vast throng of angels; and we should hear their songs, and see their forms, if only our senses were not clogged with sin.

(3) *The Voice of God.*

God answered his thoughts. He felt lonesome; but God said, "**I will be with thee.**" He feared Esau; but God said, "**I will keep thee.**"

He knew not what hardships he might meet with; and God promised to bring him safely back again. He seemed forsaken of friends; but God gave him the assurance, "**I will not leave thee.**" Appearances seemed to contradict the Divine promise; but God said, "**I will do that which I have spoken to thee of.**" These are precious words; but they only belong to those who lie at the foot of that wondrous Cross which unites earth with Heaven. If your place is there, you may freely claim all the comfort that they contain.

Is it not remarkable that Jacob did not see these glorious realities until he slept?

God was as much brooding in the wilderness before he slept as afterwards; only he knew it not. It was only when he slept that he came to know it.

"Gradually slumber stole upon him, and folded him in her arms; gradually the fever cooled, the excitement subsided, the anxiety ceased. He grew tranquil and still; he lost himself the flurried, heated, uneasy self that he had brought with him from Beersheba: and, while he slept, the hitherto unperceived Eternal Presence came out softly, largely, above and around him. He saw His glory, and heard His voice; the solitary waste trembled, flushed, and overflowed with God" (S. A. Tipple).

There is a lesson for us in this old story of how the Lord waited until His servant slept ere He revealed to him the secret of His presence. Is it not true that we sometimes need to sleep in order to see? May we not be rather too wide-awake too wakeful to the passing things of earth? And would it not be well if we were more oblivious to these things, that our spiritual vision might behold the things which are unseen and eternal?

When the groups of children are playing in the forest glades, and their voices ring out in laughter, all the life of animals and the song of birds is hushed: but when they have gone their way, the squirrel springs up the bark; the birds call to each other; and many a beautiful thing glides into the open from behind the trees. "**Enter into thy closet, and shut thy door.**" "**My soul, be thou silent unto God.**"

It is impossible to walk with God, unless we have these seasons of quiet vision.

Some are ever dwarfed, and driven to and fro by every wind, because they do not make times of respite from the whirl of occupation, and the fret of daily work and care. We need to escape from ourselves, our cares and gains, our personal individualities, in order that we may be at leisure to receive the revelations of God. And if we are to have this blessed sleep, it must be the gift of God in answer to our childlike trust.

In our next paper, we shall detail the effect which this marvellous vision produced on the awe-struck fugitive; but ere we close, we ask you to think of that mystic ladder, which descends from the throne of God to the spot, however lowly, where you may be, as you read these lines.

It may be a moorland waste; a humble cottage; a ship's cabin; a settler's hut; a bed of pain: but Jesus Christ finds you out, and comes just where you are. The one pole of this ladder is the gold of His Deity; the other is the silver of His Manhood; the rungs are the series of events from the cradle of Bethlehem to the right hand of power, where He sits. That ladder sways beneath a weight of blessing for you. Oh that you would send away your burdens of sin and care and fear, by the hands of the ascending angels of prayer and faith! so as to be able to receive into your heart the trooping angels of peace, and joy, and love, and glory.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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