

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER TEN

FAILURE

Genesis 33, 34

“Or sometimes strangely I forget;
And, learning o’er and o’er
A lesson all with tear-drops wet,
Which I had learnt before.

He chides me not, but waits awhile;
Then wipes my heavy eyes:
Oh, what a Teacher is our God,
So patient and so wise!”

- F. R. Havergal

THAT midnight wrestle, which last engaged our thoughts, made an epoch in Jacob’s life. It was the moment in which he stepped up to a new level in his experience - the level of Israel the prince. But, let us remember, it is one thing to step up to a level like that; it is quite another to keep it. Some, when they touch a new attainment, keep to it, and are blessed for evermore; others, when they have stood there for a moment, recede from it. Yet it is well for them to have stood for even a moment on the shining table-lands, where God Himself is sun: for, when once they have caught sight of a new ideal, they will never be satisfied to live as they have lived; and, even if they do not win it at once as an abiding experience, they will come to it afterwards. Jacob, alas! soon stepped down from that glorious level to which the Angel had lifted him.

This descent is indicated by the retention, in the sacred record, of the name Jacob.

We should have expected that it would have been replaced by the new title, Israel as Abram was by Abraham; but it is not so. How could he be called Israel, when he had so soon reverted to the life of Jacob; and had gone back from the life of clinging, to the cringing, crafty, scheming life which he had been leading all too long? The time will come when Israel shall become his habitual designation; but not yet - not yet.

Our Heavenly Father is very tender with us; and if we do not learn His lessons at once, He will present them to us again and again now in one form, then in another until at last His ideal is accomplished in our characters and lives.

We have to consider now the three evidences of failure, which are recounted in these chapters.

I. THE FIRST FAILURE WAS IN HIS MANNER OF MEETING ESAU

As the morning broke, “**Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked; and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men.**”

Such is life. It is filled with sharply varied experiences. Now the Angel; then the coming of Esau. Now forty days on the brow of Sinai with God; then the golden calf. Now the Mountain of Transfiguration; then the bitter cross. Now Patmos, with its visions; then the cold grey rock, and the commonplaces of captivity and loneliness. Yet, how grateful should we be that it is so!

Life might have been full of Esaus, and no Jacobs; full of Gethsemanes, and no glimpses into Heaven; full of grey commonplaces, and no rapturous visions. The bright days of our lives outnumber the dark ones. There are more sweets than bitters; more smiles than tears; more mercies than miseries.

How often do we find that a great blessing like that which came to Jacob by the fords of the Jabbok is sent to prepare us for a great trial. God prevents us, and prepares us, with the blessings of His goodness. He takes us up the Hill Difficulty; into the House Beautiful: where we sleep in the Chamber of Peace, which looks toward the sun rising. Not that we should stay there - but that we should be rested, and accoutered, and prepared to meet Apollyon in the Valley; and to pass unscathed through the Shadow of Death and Vanity Fair.

Do not be surprised or discouraged if a time of fiery trial should follow a season of unusual blessing; indeed, you may be rather surprised if it does not. But when it comes, be sure to do as Jacob did not do, and draw heavily upon all those resources of strength and comfort which have been stored up during the previous days of clear shining and peace. There are two ways of meeting troubles: the one is the way of the flesh; the other, of the Spirit.

The flesh anticipates them with terror; prepares against them with trembling hands; prays in a panic, and then cringes before them as Jacob, who bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. The way of faith is better far. She clings to God; she hears God say, “**I am with thee, and will keep thee;**” she believes that He will keep His word; she reviews the past, when the hands Of Laban were tied, and argues that God can do as much again; she goes to meet trouble, not cringing but erect, sure that God has already been at work in the heart of difficulty: and that, however grim they may seem in the distance, yet the lions are chained, the wolf-claws are extracted; and the arrows have been deprived of their barbed tips.

I have always admired the refusal of the members of Lord Elgin’s suite to crawl on the ground into the presence of the Emperor of China. When they learnt that that was the posture which all foreigners were expected to assume, they indignantly replied that they certainly would not give to the Emperor of China a homage which their own Most Gracious Sovereign did not require; and, in the end, they were permitted to enter his presence erect. This is the natural posture of an Englishman; but it is more surely the native posture of faith.

Some who read this may be dreading a meeting with their Esaus to-morrow: some creditor; some demand for payment; some awkward problem; some difficulty. And you are to-day worrying, planning, scheming, and contriving, as Jacob did, in arranging his wives, and children, and servants, whilst to-morrow you will go cringing and creeping towards it.

Listen to a more excellent way. Do not lift up your eyes and look for Esau. Those who look for troubles will not be long without finding trouble to look at. But lift them higher to Him from whom our help cometh. Then you will be able to meet your troubles with an unperturbed spirit. Those who have seen the face of God need not fear the face of a man that shall die. To have power with God is to have power over all the evils that threaten us.

Besides all this, when prayer has preceded trial, the trial turns out to be much less than we anticipated.

- When they reached the sepulchre, the women found that the dreaded stone had been rolled away.
- When Peter reached the outer gate, that threatened to be an insurmountable obstacle to liberty, it opened to him of its own accord.

So Jacob dreaded that meeting with Esau; but when Esau came up with him, he ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept.

The heroic Gordon used to say that, in his lonely camel rides, he often in prayer encountered and disarmed hostile chiefs, before he rode, unaccompanied, into their presence. None can guess, if they have not tried it for themselves, what a solvent prayer is for the difficulties and agonies of life.

It is very beautiful to see that, in this, God was better to Jacob than his fears, or his faith. Whilst he was foreboding the worst, his heavenly Friend was preparing deliverance; as, years after, the Lord stretched out His hand and saved from the yeasty waves the faithless Apostle, who had looked away from Himself to the terrors of the storm.

II. THE SECOND FAILURE WAS IN THE SUBTERFUGE TO WHICH JACOB RESORTED, TO FREE HIMSELF FROM ESAU'S COMPANY

When Esau offered him the protection of his armed men, he was at once in a panic; for he dreaded them even more than the Bedouins of the wilds. He tried to evade the proposal by many excuses; especially explaining that his flocks and his children could not keep up with their more rapid pace. And finally, still further to reconcile Esau to the separation, he promised to come at last to Seir, where Esau had fixed his abode.

Now I do not, for a single moment, believe that Jacob really meant to go to Seir; for as soon as he had seen the rear of Esau's retiring forces, he journeyed in the contrary direction to Succoth. All such subterfuge and lying were utterly unworthy of the man who had seen God's angels face to face.

What wretched failure was here! The bright dawn was all too speedily overcast and clouded; and if it had not been for the marvellous tenderness of God, there is no telling how much further Jacob would have drifted, or how indefinitely distant the day would have been in which he should be worthy to bear the name of Israel.

III. THE THIRD FAILURE WAS IN SETTLING AT SHECHEM

God had not said, Go to Shechem; but, **“I am the God of Bethel.”** Bethel, rather than Shechem, was his appointed goal. But alas! we are all too ready to fall short of God’s schemes for our elevation and blessedness. And so Jacob came to Shalem, a city of Shechem. But he did worse; he pitched his tent before the city as Lot did, when he pitched his tent before Sodom. What took him there? Was it that Rachel persuaded him that a little society would be a pleasant relief to the monotony and seclusion of the camp life? Was it that his children urged him to it against his better mind? Was it some idea of obtaining eligible alliances for his children among the children of the land? Whatever may have been his reason, there stands the sad and solemn fact that Jacob pitched his tent before the city.

Are not many Christians doing so still? They live on the edge of the world, just on the borderland; far enough away to justify a religious profession, yet near enough to run into it for sweets. They send their children to fashionable schools, that they may acquire the false veneer of the world, and pass muster in its drawing-rooms. They remove into the fashionable quarters of a town; and adopt a certain style; and throw themselves into the swim of all manner of worldly engagements that they may get in with “society.” They choose their Church, their pastimes, their friendships, on the sole principle of doing as others do; and of forming good alliances for their children. What is all this but pitching the tent towards Shechem?

“But what are we to do?” say they; “our children must have society; they cannot be recluses, or be forever shut up in our homes.” But why need we cater for them by rushing into the world? Are there not plenty of innocent pastimes, on which worldliness has never breathed its withering breath? Are there not enough elements in the bright social intercourse of the family circle; in the play of imagination and wholesome merriment; in games of skill; in the charms of books; in the recital of travel and adventure; in the witchery of wholesome songs and music; and even in the revelations of modern popular science to beguile the hours of long winter evenings, without calling in the aid of worldly society, whose brightest hours leave a sense of vacuity and thirst, to say nothing of a positive sting?

The most earnest religion does not debar us from manly sports: the swift movement of the skater over the frozen lake; the evening row; the exhilarating climb: or from the culture of the faculties of art; and music; and imagination; of science and poesy. Surely, in all these there is enough to brighten Christian homes, without grieving the Holy Spirit, or lowering their tone. But if parents and guardians will insist on something more exciting and stimulating than these, they must reckon on being called upon to pay the price. They may have the dice-box, the theatre, the dance, if they will; but they must learn, by sad experience, the bitter cost. He needs a long spoon who sups with the devil. The fact is, it is much easier to give these things than to arouse oneself to provide something better.

The something better needs time and thought; and staying at home from religious meetings, to give it effect: but the ultimate benefit will more than repay the self-denial.

We cannot put old heads on young shoulders; or our experience into young hearts. We must let our children see a brightness in our behavior which shall not repel them from us, but win them to our Saviour. But in doing this, it is quite unnecessary to go to those empty cisterns which the children of the world have hewn for themselves, and which yield no water. We may find, with a little trouble, other wells, through which the living water rises with a sparkle and a beauty that cannot fail to attract young hearts not yet spoiled by the world's glamour and shew.

But Jacob did still worse. Not content with pitching his tent before the city, he bought the parcel of ground **“where he had pitched his tent.”** Abraham bought a parcel of ground in which to bury his dead; and this was no declension from the pilgrim spirit it rather placed it in clearer relief. But as Jacob paid down his hundred pieces of money, each of which bore the rude imprint of a lamb, he was abandoning the pilgrim spirit and the pilgrim attitude, and was buying that which God had promised to give to him and to his seed. The true spirit of faith would have waited quietly, until God had made good His repeated promise.

It may be that Jacob sought to conciliate his conscience by building the altar, and dedicating it to the God of Israel. Or perhaps he thought to counteract the effect of the idolatrous city, by this means. In some such way professing Christians sometimes try to find an antidote for a week of worldliness in the religious observances of the Lord's day. They allow their children to go into the world; but they insist on their attending family-worship before they retire to rest. Where the altar and the world are put in rivalry, there is no doubt as to which will win the day: the Shechem gate will appeal too strongly to our natural tendencies; and we shall find ourselves and our children drifting into Shechem whilst the grass of neglect grows up around the altar, or it becomes broken down and disused.

“And Dinah, the daughter of Leah, which she bare unto Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land.”

It is a startling announcement; but it contains nothing more than might have been expected. Poor girl! A moth fluttering about a flame! A foolish fish nibbling at the bait! Was she lonely, being the only girl? Did she want to show off some piece of jewelry or dress? Did she long for more admiration, or fascinating society, than she could find at home? Was there a secret drawing to the young men of the place? She went along a path that seemed to her girlish fancy ever so much more attractive than the dull routine of home. She took no heed to the warnings that may have been addressed to her. And it all ended as it has ended in thousands of cases since in misery, ruin, and unutterable disgrace.

She was kindly received. The world will always give a hearty welcome to those who bear a Christian name. Perhaps there is a sense of relief in feeling that it cannot be so bad after all, since Christians do not hesitate to take part with it. The welcome and “well-done” of worldly men should always put us on our guard. “What evil thing have I done,” said a shrewd observer, “that yonder worldling speaks so well of me?”

She fascinated the young prince, and fell. It is the old, old story, which is ever new. On the one hand rank, and wealth, and unbridled appetite; on the other beauty, weakness, and dallying with temptation. But to whom was her fall due? To Shechem? Yes. To herself? Yes. But also to Jacob. He must for ever reproach himself for his daughter's murdered innocence. But of what use were his reproaches, when the deed was done; and the honour of his house was gone; and his name stank among the inhabitants of the land?

Would that some Christian parents, reading these words, might take warning as to the end of a pathway on which they are encouraging their children to tread! To stay now may save them tears of blood, and years of fruitless agony. In the strongest terms, let me entreat them not to play on the rim of the whirlpool: lest its hurrying waters catch the too-hazardous craft before they are aware; and whirl them round in an ever giddier dance; and finally engulf them in its eddying vortex. And all this came because Jacob stepped down from the Israel-level, back to his old unlovely self.

Have you done the same? If so, learn what the results may be of the fatal lapse; and ere it be too late, seek the forgiveness of God; ask the Good Shepherd to restore your soul: and never rest till you sit again together with Christ in those heavenly places where failure does not dim the light of God's face; or lower the tone of your confession; or involve your dear ones in irretrievable loss. And, when once restored, trust Christ to keep you on His own glorious level making you walk, with hind's feet, on your high places.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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