

# Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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## CHAPTER NINE

### THE MIDNIGHT WRESTLE

Genesis 32

“The Sun of Righteousness on me  
Hath rose, with healing in His wings.  
Withered my nature’s strength; from Thee  
My soul its life and succour brings;  
My help is all laid up above;  
Thy nature and Thy name is Love!

“Contented now, upon my thigh  
I halt, till life’s short journey end;  
All helplessness, all weakness,  
On Thee alone for strength depend;  
Nor have I power from Thee to move:  
Thy nature and Thy name is Love!”

- Wesley

ON the morning after his interview with Laban, Jacob broke up his camp on the heights of Gilead, and slowly took his journey southwards. He little knew that that day was to be the crisis of his life. “**Thou knowest not what a day may bring forth,**” not of evil only, but of blessing. It may be that this day has been predestined from all eternity to be that of thy transformation from the craft and cunning of years, to a life of subjection to the will of God, and of power over men.

This wondrous scene does not, in my opinion, correspond to that change which we call conversion. That was determined, surely, by the angel vision at Bethel. But it may rather be compared with that further blessing, which sometimes comes to a Christian after some years of religious experience and profession.

There is no reason, in the nature of things, why it should be so. There is no reason why, at the moment of conversion, we should not at once step into the realization and enjoyment of all the possibilities of Christian living. But still, as a matter of fact, it very often happens that some years of wilderness wandering do intervene between the deliverance of the Passover and the passage across the Jordan into the land of promise, and rest, and victory.

Many a child of God who has no doubt of acceptance and forgiveness, is conscious of a broken and fitful experience: often foiled and overthrown; wishing to do good, but unable to do it; full of self-reproach and bitterness of soul. Then there comes a time when he is almost forced into a new experience. He passes into a climate that brings into glorious fruitage the seed-germs which were lying in his nature undeveloped. He receives an abounding freshet of grace, that lifts him sheer above all the former levels of his existence, and launches him on the flood-tide of blessedness.

If you have never known this in happy experience, you can hardly understand what an extraordinary change comes over all things; or how great a contrast severs the new from the old. Such an experience fell to Jacob's lot after that memorable night.

Three events are narrated in this chapter, corresponding to morning, afternoon, and night of that memorable day.

(1) IN THE MORNING, we are told that the angels of God met him.

Those words tremble with mystic and indescribable beauty. How did it befall? Did they come in twos or threes? or, as he turned some corner in the mountain pass, did he see a long procession of bright harnessed angels, marching four abreast, with golden bands girding about them their lustrous robes, whilst the music of Heaven beat time? Would it not remind him of Bethel, that lay across the chasm of five-and-twenty years? Would it not nerve and prepare him for coming danger?

Doubtless these angel-bands are always passing by us; only our eyes are holden so that we do not see them. But whether we see them or not, we may always reckon on their being at hand especially when some heavy trial is near. **“The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.”** This is Mahanaim. Here two hosts are meeting; the mountain is full of horses and chariots of fire around us; more are they that are with us than all they which are against us.

(2) As the day wore on to AFTERNOON, Jacob's spirit was shaken to the center by ominous tidings.

He had sent messengers, as Arab chiefs would do still, to announce to Esau his return, and to ascertain his mind. They now returned in breathless haste to say that Esau was coming to meet him, with four hundred men. at his back. Jacob was panic-stricken; and well he might be. His all was at stake - wives and children; herds and cattle; the careful gains of six laborious years.

The Mizpah-tower barred the way back; his bridge was, so to speak, burnt behind him. Around him were robber tribes, eager to seize on the rich booty, if he showed the least sign of vacillation or fear. But to go on seemed to involve a risk of inevitable ruin. There was just one alternative which most men will only turn to when all other expedients have failed: he could at least pray; and to prayer he betook himself. It may have been a long time since he prayed like this.

For years his nobler self had been overgrown by a noxious growth of weeds, and drugged to unconsciousness by the cares of this life; the deceitfulness of riches; and the lusts of many things. The evil conscience cannot pray. Prayer cannot live in the heart with deceit, and craft, and villainy; but passes out unnoticed and unmissed. But now, under the shock of this terrible danger, the olden spirit revived in him; and the hair of consecration began to grow again (Numbers 6).

Is not this the key to God's dealings with us all? He brings us into sore straits; He shuts us up in a corner; He causes the walls and ceiling and floor of our room to draw together, as if to crush us. At such moments there is only one resource left. It is Himself. We must fly to God, to escape from God. We are driven to our knees, with no language but a cry. And though that cry consists mostly of a confession of unworthiness, yet it is enough: the silence is broken; the avenues are cleared of their choking undergrowth; the child has already left the far country, and is on his way home.

Was not this the experience of the Syro-phenician woman? Her utter misery made her seek Christ; she found Him out in a retirement which would have concealed Him from all save one in her dire need; and His apparent denial drove her to climb an altitude of faith, and to utter words of desperate boldness, from which she would have shrunk except under the pressure of that terrible agony of soul. The love of God is great enough to cause us pain if only it can force us to positions from which we had heretofore shrunk, but from which we shall never again recede. There are many healthy symptoms in that prayer. In some respects it may serve as a mold into which our own spirits may pour themselves, when melted in the fiery furnace of sorrow.

*He began by quoting God's promise: "Thou saidst."*

He did so twice (9 and 12). Ah, he had got God in his power then! God puts Himself within our reach in His promises; and when we can say to Him, "**Thou saidst**," He cannot say nay - He must do as He has said. If Herod was so particular for his oath's sake, what will not our God be? Be sure, in prayer, to get your feet well on a promise; it will give you purchase enough to force open the gates of Heaven, and to take it by force.

*He next went to confession: "I am not worthy."*

There passed before his mind his deceit to his aged father; his behavior to Esau; his years of trickery to Laban. All the meanness of his heart and life stood revealed, as a landscape is revealed when the midnight sky is riven by the lightning-flash. Conscience came forth from its retreat in the dungeons of his nature, and climbed the stairs, and stood in the throne-room of his spirit: as Nathan before David; or John the Baptist before Herod; or Paul before Felix, the Roman governor, who trembled as he spake of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come. And as the sea of memory gave up the dead past to a terrible resurrection, and as it all stood in vivid minuteness before him, was there not plenty to justify his penitent confession? "**I am not worthy.**"

Great soul-anguish will generally wring some such cry from our startled and stricken hearts. If there is one position that better becomes us than another, it is that of the publican with downcast eyes; nor can we improve on his prayer, "**God be merciful to me, a sinner.**"

*Then he passed on to plead for deliverance: “**Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau.**”*

It was, of course, quite right to pray thus; but I cannot feel that it was a whole-hearted prayer: for he had hardly finished it, when he reverted to the plan on which he had been busy before he turned aside to pray. Jacob’s first thought was always a plan. He had a plan for Isaac’s blessing; and another for his property; and now another to appease Esau. Of course, I have no word to say against planning, when that is evidently God’s method of delivering us; but I am desperately afraid lest our planning should take the place of simple waiting on God, till the cloud rises, and moves forward, and shows us our path across the trackless sands.

We are all so apt to pray, and then to try and concoct a plan for our own deliverance. Surely the nobler attitude is, after prayer, to stand still for God to develop His plan, leading us in ways that we had never guessed. There was too much self-hood in Jacob; as there is also in us. This must be broken down, and put in the place of death. The I-life must be crucified before the Christ-life can take its place. The sinews of the old nature must be utterly shriveled; that the new nature, whose only strength is to cling, may be manifested in power. This was the object of that mysterious conflict, which left so deep an impression on Jacob’s life.

### (3) IT WAS MIDNIGHT.

Jacob had already sent across the Jabbok his property, his children, even the beloved Rachel - It seemed as if, amid the awful pressure of that anxiety, he could not bear the noise of the camp; the prattlings of the children; or even the presence of the only woman he ever really loved. **“He caused them to pass over the brook; and sent over that he had. And Jacob was left alone.”**

When the soul enters its Gethsemane, it withdraws a stone’s cast from its most trusted friends. Around him was the profound stillness of those most desolate regions; beside him the murmur of the rapid brook over the stones; above him the infinite depths of Heaven, bejeweled with stars.

There, alone, he considered the past; and anticipated the future; and felt the meanness of the aims for which he had sold his soul; and saw the wretched failure of his life: and so, suddenly, he became aware that a mysterious combatant was at his side, drawing him into a conflict, half-literal and half-spiritual, which lasted till break of day. Was this a literal contest? There is no reason to deny it. We know that the Son of God sometimes anticipated His incarnation by assuming literal physical shapes. **“His delights were of old amongst the sons of men.”** And it would have been as possible for Him to wrestle literally with Jacob, as for Him to offer His hands to the touch of Thomas after His resurrection.

The physical must have been largely present; because, when he resumed his journey, Jacob halted upon his thigh: it was a physical fact; physically commemorated by the Israelites to this day, who abstain from eating of that part in animals which corresponds to the sinew that shrank in Jacob’s thigh. Men do not become lame in imaginary conflicts. But, in any case, the outward wrestling was only a poor symbol of the spiritual struggle which convulsed the patriarch’s soul; and is as real in the experience of earnest men to-day as when the world was young.

*Remember that the conflict originated not with Jacob, but with the angel: “**There wrestled a Man with him.**”*

This passage is often quoted as an instance of Jacob’s earnestness in prayer. It is nothing of the sort. It is an instance of God’s earnestness to take from us all that hinders our truest life; whilst we resist Him with all our might and main. It was not that Jacob wished to obtain aught from God; but it was that He the angel of the Lord had a controversy with this double-dealing and crafty child of His: desirous to break up his self-sufficiency for ever; and to give scope for the development of the Israel that lay cramped and confined within.

There is an illustration of this in the life of Moses. For forty years he lived in the retirement of the desert. At last he set out for Egypt, accompanied by his wife and children. Concerning those children, in deference to their mother’s wish, he seems to have neglected a rite, binding, by Divine command, on every son of Abraham. And it came to pass in the way, that the Lord barred his journey, and even threatened him with death, until he had obeyed the injunction he had ignored; then He let him go. So it was with Jacob. There was much in him that needed to be laid aside; much self-sufficiency requiring to be broken down; much dross that had to be burnt out by a consuming fire; and so the Love of God drew near to him on that solemn night, to wrest these things from him at whatever cost. Has not “**this Man**” that wrestled with Jacob found you out?

- Have you not felt a holy discontent with yourself?
- Have you not felt that certain things, long cherished and loved, should be given up, though it should cost you blood?
- Have you not felt that you should yield your whole being to God, but there has been a rebellious uprising of self-will within you, as if it were impossible for you to make the surrender?
- Have you not felt in an agony, between the stirrings of God’s good Spirit on the one hand, and the preferences of your own choice on the other?
- Have you not felt as if some mighty power were wrestling with you, against you, and for your good?

Surely these convulsive throes; these Heaven-born strivings; these mysterious workings are not of man, or of the will of the flesh, but of God. It is God that worketh in you, and wrestleth with you. Glory be to Him for His tender patience, interest, and love!

*At first Jacob held his own. “**He saw that He prevailed not against him.**”*

The strength that, years before, had rolled the stone from the well for Rachel’s sheep, was vigorous yet; and he was in no humor to submit. And thus we do all resist the love of God. We carry out our own plans; we follow our own will; we are strong in our own self-sufficiency. “**When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst.**”

Each one of us is dowered with that wonderful power of holding our own against God; and He knows, sorrowfully, that He cannot prevail against us, without taking some severe measures which will give us no alternative but to yield.

*Then the angel touched the hollow of his thigh.*

Whatever it is that enables a soul, whom God designs to bless, to stand out against Him, God will touch.

- It may be the pride of wealth; or of influence; or of affection: but it will not be spared God will touch it.
- It may be something as natural as a sinew; but if it robs a man of spiritual blessing, God will touch it.
- It may be as small a thing as a sinew; but its influence in making a man strong in his resistance of blessing will be enough to condemn it and God will touch it.
- And beneath that touch it will shrink and shrivel; and you will limp to the end of life.

Remember that the sinew never shrinks save beneath the touch of the Angel-hand - the touch of tender love. This is why your schemes have miscarried; and your children have faded in untimely decay; and your life has been haunted by disappointment. God has touched the sinew of your strength - and it has dried up.

Oh, you who are still holding out against Him, make haste to yield, lest some worse thing come upon you!

*Then Jacob went from resisting to clinging.*

As the day broke, the Angel would be gone; but He could not, because Jacob clung to Him with a death grip. The request to be let go indicates how tenaciously the limping patriarch clung to Him for support. He had abandoned the posture of defence and resistance; and had fastened himself on to the Angel as a terrified child clasps its arms tightly around its father's neck.

That is a glad moment in the history of the human spirit, when it throws both arms around the risen Saviour; and hangs on Him, and will not let Him go.

- It is the attitude of blessing.
- It is the posture of power.
- It is the sublime condition in which Christ will whisper His own new name, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.

Have you ever come to this? Have you abandoned the art of self-defense for the artlessness of clinging trust? Have you felt able to rejoice in your inability to stand alone, because it has made the Lord Jesus so real? Have you reached the point of self-surrender? If not, ask God to show you what sinew it is that makes you too strong for Him to bless you; ask Him to touch it, so that you shall be able to hold out no more.

And then you will discover the three-fold blessing which is yours.

(1) *The changed name.*

In olden days, names were given not for euphony, or by caprice, but for character. A man's character was in his name. Now, when Jacob came into the attitude of blessing an attitude which has two parts: viz., absolute abandonment of self, and a trust which clings to Christ then immediately the Angel said, "**What is thy name?**" And he said, "Jacob. By nature I am a supplanter, a rogue, and a cheat."

Never shrink from declaring your true character: "My name is Sinner."

**"And he said, thy name shall be no more Jacob; but Israel"** - a prince with God. The changed name indicated a changed character. Jacob was swallowed up of light. He was clothed upon with the name and nature of a prince. There is only one way to princeliness it is the thorn-set path of self-surrender and of faith. Why should you not now yield yourself entirely to God, and give Him your whole being? It is only a reasonable service: and out of it will spring a tenacity of faith; and a power for service; and a royalty of character enough to make you willing to bear the limp, which proves that your own strength has passed away forever.

(2) *Power.* "**For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.**"

We sigh for power - power over ourselves; power for service; power over the principalities of wicked spirits. But before we can receive power with the creature, we must obtain it from the Creator. The man who would have power with men must first have it with God; and we can only get power with God when our own strength has failed, and we limp. "**I glory in infirmity, that the power of Christ may rest upon me; for when I am weak, then am I strong.**"

Oh for the withered sinew of our own strength, that we may lay hold on the strength of God!

(3) *The beatific vision.* "**I have seen God face to face.**"

Our moments of vision come at daybreak: but they are ushered in by the agony of dread; the long midnight vigil; the extreme agony of conflict; the shrinking of the sinew. Yet, when they come, they are so glorious, that the frame is almost overpowered with the brightness of that light, and the exceeding weight of glory. The price is dear; but the vision is more than worth it all. The sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory revealed.

This is life; a long wrestle against the love of God, which longs to make us royal. As the years go on, we begin to cling where once we struggled; and as the morn of Heaven breaks, we catch glimpses of the Angel - face of love, and hear His whispered name: and as He blesses us, we awake to find ourselves living, and face to face with God and that is Heaven itself.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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