

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“AND Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.”

Still God’s grace follows him, notwithstanding all. “Nothing changeth God’s affection.” Whom he loves, and how he loves, he loves to the end. His love is like himself, **“the same yesterday, to-day, and forever.”** But how little effect **“God’s host”** had upon Jacob may be seen by his actings as here set before us.

“And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother, unto the land of Seir, the country of Edom.”

He evidently feels uneasy in reference to Esau, and not without reason. He had treated him badly, and his conscience was not at ease; but instead of casting himself unreservedly upon God, he betakes himself to his usual planning again, in order to avert Esau’s wrath. He tries to manage Esau, instead of leaning on God.

“And he commanded them, saying, Thus shall ye speak unto my lord Esau; thy servant Jacob saith thus, I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed there Until now.”

All this bespeaks a soul very much off its centre in God.

“My lord,” and **“thy servant,”** is not like the language of a brother, or of one in the conscious dignity of the presence of God; but it was the language of Jacob, and of Jacob, too, with a bad conscience.

“And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We came to thy brother Esau, and also he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him. Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed.”

But what does he first do? Does he at once cast himself upon God? No; he begins to manage.

“He divided the people that was with him, and the flocks, and herds, and the camels, into two bands. and said, If Esau come to the one company and smite it, then the other company which is left shall escape..”

Jacob's first thought was always a plan, and in this we have a true picture of the poor human heart. True, he turns to God after he makes his plan, and cries to him for deliverance; but no sooner does he cease praying than he resumes the planning.

Now, praying and planning will never do together. If I plan, I am leaning more or less on my plan; but when I pray, I should lean exclusively upon God. Hence, the two things are perfectly incompatible; they virtually destroy each other. When my eye is filled with my own management of things, I am not prepared to see God acting for me; and in that case prayer is not the utterance of my need, but the mere superstitions performance of something which I think ought to be done, or it may be asking God to sanctify my plans. This will never do. It is not asking God to sanctify and bless my means, but it is asking him to do it all himself. *

*** No doubt, when faith allows God to act, He will use his own agency; but this is a totally different thing from His owning and blessing the plans and arrangements of unbelief and impatience. This distinction is not sufficiently understood.**

Though Jacob asked God to deliver him from his brother Esau, he evidently was not satisfied with that, and therefore he tried to **"appease him with a present."** Thus his confidence was in the **"present,"** and not entirely in God.

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."

It is often hard to detect what is the real ground of the heart's confidence. We imagine, or would fain persuade ourselves, that we are leaning upon God, when we are in reality leaning upon some scheme of our own devising. Who, after hearkening to Jacob's prayer, wherein he says, **"Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children,"** could imagine him saying, **"I will appease him with a present."**

- Had he forgotten his prayer?
- Was he making a god of his present?
- Did he place more confidence in a few cattle than in the Lord, to whom he had just been committing himself?

These are questions which naturally arise out of Jacob's actings in reference to Esau, and we can readily answer them by looking into the glass of our own hearts.

There we learn, as well as on the page of Jacob's history, how much more apt we are to lean on our own management than on God; but it will not do; we must be brought to see the end of our management, that it is perfect folly, and that the true path of wisdom is to repose in full confidence upon God.

Nor will it do to make our prayers part of our management. We often feel very well satisfied with ourselves when we add prayer to our arrangement, or when we have used all lawful means and called upon God to bless them.

When this is the case, our prayers are worth about as much as our plans, inasmuch as we are leaning upon them instead of upon God. We must be really brought to the end of everything with which self has aught to do; for until then, God cannot show himself. But we can never get to the end of our plans until we have been brought to the end of ourselves.

We must see that **“all flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field”** (Isaiah 40:6).

Thus it is in this interesting chapter; when Jacob had made all his prudent arrangements, we read, **“And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.”**

This is a turning-point in the history of this very remarkable man.

To be left alone with God is the only true way of arriving at a just knowledge of ourselves and our ways. We can never get a true estimate of nature and all its actings, until we have weighed them in the balance of the sanctuary, and there we ascertain their real worth.

No matter what we may think about ourselves, nor yet what man may think about us; the great question is, What does God think about us? And the answer to this question can only be heard when we are **“left alone.”**

Away from the world; away from self; away from all the thoughts, reasonings, imaginations, and emotions of mere nature, and **“alone”** with God,- thus, and thus alone, can we get a correct judgment about ourselves.

“Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him.”

Mark, it was not Jacob wrestling with a man; but a man wrestling with Jacob; this scene is very commonly referred to as an instance of Jacob's power in prayer. That it is not this is evident from the simple wording of the passage. My wrestling with a man, and a man wrestling with me, present two totally different ideas to the mind. In the former case I want to gain some object from him; in the latter, he wants to gain some object from me.

Now, in Jacob's case, the divine object was to bring him to see what a poor, feeble, worthless creature he was, and when Jacob so perniciously held out against the divine dealing with him, **“he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him.”**

The sentence of death must be written on the flesh,- the power of the cross must be entered into before we can steadily and happily walk with God. We have followed Jacob so far, amid all the windings and workings of his extraordinary character,- we have seen him planning and managing during his twenty years' sojourn with Laban; but not until he **“was left alone,”** did he get a true idea of what a perfectly helpless thing he was in himself. There, the seat of his strength being touched, he learnt to say, **“I will not let thee go.”**

“Other refuge have I none:
Clings my helpless soul to thee.”

This was a new era in the history of the supplanting, planning Jacob.

Up to this point he had held fast by his own ways and means; but now he is brought to say, “**I will not let thee go.**”

Now, let my reader remark, that Jacob did not express himself thus until “**the hollow of his thigh was touched.**”

This simple fact is quite sufficient to settle the true interpretation of the whole scene. God was wrestling with Jacob to bring him to this point. We have already seen that, as to Jacob’s power in prayer, he had no sooner uttered a few words to God than he let out the real secret of his soul’s dependence, by saying, “**I will appease him (Esau) with a present.**”

Would he have said this if he had really entered into the meaning of prayer, or true dependence upon God? Assuredly not.

If he had been looking to God alone to appease Esau, could he have said, “**I will appease him by a present?**”

Impossible: God and the creature must be kept distinct, and will be kept so in every soul that knows much of the sacred reality of a life of faith. But, alas! here is where we fail, if one may speak for another.

Under the plausible and apparently pious formula of using means, we really cloak the positive infidelity of our poor deceitful hearts; we think we are looking to God to bless our means, while, in reality, we are shutting him out by leaning on the means, instead of leaning on him.

Oh, may our hearts be taught the evil of thus acting.

May we learn to cling more simply to God alone, that so our history may be more characterized by that holy elevation above the circumstances through which we are passing!

It is not, by any means, an easy matter so to get to the end of the creature, in every shape and form, as to be able to say, “**I will not let thee go except thou bless me.**”

To say this from the heart, and to abide in the power of it, is the secret of all true strength.

Jacob said it when the hollow of his thigh was touched; but not till then. He struggled long ere he gave way, because his confidence in the flesh was strong. But God can bring down to the dust the stoutest character. He knows how to touch the spring of nature’s strength, and write the sentence of death thoroughly upon it; and until this is done, there can be no real “**power with God or man.**” We must be “**weak**” ere we can be “**strong.**”

“The power of Christ” can only **“rest on us”** in connection with the knowledge of our infirmities. Christ cannot put the seal of his approval upon nature’s strength, its wisdom, or its glory: all these must sink that He may rise. Nature can never form, in anyone way, a pedestal on which to display the grace or power of Christ; for if it could, then might flesh glory in his presence; but this, we know, can never be.

And, inasmuch as the display of God’s glory, and God’s name or character, is connected with the entire setting aside of nature, so, until this latter is set aside, the soul can never enjoy the disclosure of the former. Hence, though Jacob is called to tell out his name, to own that his name is **“Jacob, or a supplanter,”** he yet receives no revelation of the name of him who had been wrestling with him, and bringing him down into the dust.

He received for himself the name of **“Israel, or prince,”** which was a great step in advance; but when he says, **“Tell me, I pray thee, thy name;”** he received the reply, **“Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?”**

The Lord refuses to tell His name, though He had elicited from Jacob the truth as to himself, and he blesses him accordingly. How often is this the case in the annals of God’s family!

There is the disclosure of self in all its moral deformity; but we fail to get hold practically of what God is, though he has come so very close to us, and blessed us, too, in connection with the discovery of ourselves. Jacob received the new name of Israel when the hollow of his thigh had been touched. He became a mighty prince when he had been brought to know himself as a weak man; but still the Lord had to say, **“Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?”**

There is no disclosure of the name of him who, nevertheless, had brought out the real name and condition of Jacob.

From all this we learn that it is one thing to be blessed by the Lord, and quite another thing to have the revelation of his character, by the Spirit, to our hearts.

“He blessed him there;” but he did not tell his name.

There is blessing in being brought, in any measure, to know ourselves, for therein we are led into a path, in which we are able, more clearly, to discern what God is to us in detail. Thus it was with Jacob.

When the hollow of his thigh was touched he found himself in a condition in which it was either God or nothing.

A poor halting man could do little: it therefore behooved him to cling to one who was almighty.

I would remark, ere leaving this chapter, that the book of Job is, in a certain sense, a detailed commentary on this scene in Jacob’s history.

Throughout the first thirty-one chapters, Job grapples with his friends, and maintains his point against all their arguments; but in Chapter 32, God, by the instrumentality of Elihu, begins to wrestle with him; and in Chapter 38, he comes down upon him directly with all the majesty of his power, overwhelms him by the display of his greatness and glory, and elicits from him the well-known words, **“I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes”** (Chapter 42:5, 6).

This was really touching the hollow of his thigh.

And mark the expression, **“mine eye seeth thee.”**

He does not say, “I see myself” merely; no; but **“thee.”**

Nothing but a view of what God is, can really lead to repentance and self-loathing. Thus it will be with the people of Israel, whose history is very analogous with that of Job.

When they shall look upon him whom they have pierced, they will mourn, and then there will be full restoration and blessing. Their latter end, like Job’s will be better than their beginning.

They will learn the full meaning of that word, **“O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help”** (Hosea 13:9).

~ end of chapter 32 ~

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