

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE TO THIRTY-ONE

“THEN Jacob went on his journey, and came into the land of the people of the east.”

As we have just seen, in Chapter 28, Jacob utterly fails in the apprehension of God’s real character, and meets all the rich grace of Bethel with an “if,” and a miserable bargain about food and raiment. We now follow him into a scene of thorough bargain-making.

“Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

There is no possibility of escaping from this. Jacob had not yet found his true level in the presence of God; and therefore God uses circumstances to chasten and break him down.

This is the real secret of much, very much, of our sorrow and trial in the world. Our hearts have never been really broken before the Lord; we have never been self-judged and self-emptied; and hence, again and again, we, as it were, knock our heads against the wall.

No one can really enjoy God until he has got to the bottom of self, and for this plain reason, that God has begun the display of Himself at the very point at which the end of flesh is seen. If, therefore, I have not reached the end of my flesh, in the deep and positive experience of my soul, it is morally impossible that I can have anything like a just apprehension of God’s character. But I must, in some way or other, be conducted to the true measure of nature.

To accomplish this end, the Lord makes use of various agencies which, no matter what they are, are only effectual when used by him for the purpose of disclosing, in our view, the true character of all that is in our hearts.

How often do we find, as in Jacob’s case, that even although the Lord may come near to us and speak in our ears, yet we do not understand His voice or take our true place in His presence.

“The Lord is in this place, and I knew it not . . . How dreadful is this place!”

Jacob learnt nothing by all this, and it therefore needed twenty years of terrible schooling, and that, too, in a school marvelously adapted to his flesh; and even that, as we shall see, was not sufficient to break him down.

However, it is remarkable to see how he gets back into an atmosphere so entirely suited to his moral constitution.

The bargain-making Jacob meets with the bargain-making Laban, and they are both seen as it were, straining every nerve to outwit each other. Nor can we wonder at Laban, for he had never been at Bethel: he had seen no open Heaven with a ladder reaching from thence to earth; he had heard no magnificent promises from the lips of the Lord, securing to him all the land of Canaan, with a countless seed: no marvel, therefore, that he should exhibit a grasping, groveling spirit; he had no other resource.

It is useless to expect from worldly men aught but a worldly spirit and worldly principles and ways; they have gotten naught superior; and you cannot bring a clean thing out of an unclean. But to find Jacob, after all he had seen and heard at Bethel, struggling with a man of the world, and endeavoring by such means to accumulate property, is peculiarly humbling.

And yet, alas! it is no uncommon thing to find the children of God thus forgetting their high destinies and heavenly inheritance, and descending into the arena with the children of this world, to struggle there for the riches and honors of a perishing, sin-stricken earth, indeed, to such an extent is this true, in many instances, that it is often hard to trace a single evidence of that principle which John tells us “**overcometh the world.**”

Looking at Jacob and Laban, and judging of them upon natural principles, it would be hard to trace any difference. One should get behind the scenes, and enter into God’s thoughts about both, in order to see how widely they differed. But it was God that had made them to differ, not Jacob; and so it is now.

Difficult as it may be to trace any difference between the children of light and the children of darkness, there is nevertheless a very wide difference indeed, - a difference founded on the solemn fact that the former are “**the vessels of mercy, which God has afore prepared unto glory,**” while the latter are “**the vessels of wrath, fitted** (not by God, but by sin) **to destruction**” (Romans 10:22, 23). *

*** It is deeply interesting to the spiritual mind to mark how sedulously the Spirit of God, in Romans 9, and indeed throughout all Scripture, guards against the horrid inference which the human mind draws from the doctrine of God’s election. When he speaks of “vessels of wrath,” he simply says, “fitted to destruction.” He does not say that God “fitted” them.**

Whereas, on the other hand, when he refers to “the vessels of mercy” He says, “whom he had afore prepared unto glory.” This is most marked.

If my reader will turn for a moment to Matthew 25:34-41, he will find another striking and beautiful instance of the same thing.

When the king addresses those on his right hand, he says, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Verse 34).

But when he addresses those on his left, he says, “Depart from me, ye cursed.” He does not say, “Cursed of my Father.” And, further, he says, “into everlasting fire, prepared,” not for you, but “for the devil and his angels” (Verse 41).

In a word, then, it is plain that God has “prepared” a kingdom of glory, and “vessels of mercy” to inherit that kingdom; but He has not prepared “everlasting fire” for men, but for the “devil and his angels;” nor has He fitted the “vessels of wrath,” but they have fitted themselves.

The Word of God as clearly established “election” as it sedulously guards against “reprobation.” Everyone who finds himself in Heaven will have to thank God for it; and everyone that finds himself in hell will have to thank himself.

This makes a very serious difference. The Jacobs and the Labans differ materially, and have differed, and will differ forever, though the former may so sadly fail in the realization and practical exhibition of their true character and dignity.

Now, in Jacob’s case, as set forth in the three chapters now before us, all his toiling and working, like his wretched bargain before, is the result of his ignorance of God’s grace, and his inability to put implicit confidence in God’s promise.

The man that could say, after a most unqualified promise from God to give him the whole land of Canaan, “If God will give me food to eat and raiment to put on,” could have had but a very faint apprehension of who God was, or what His promise was either; and because of this, we see him seeking to do the best he can for himself. This is always the way when grace is not understood: the principles of grace may be professed, but the real measure of our experience of the power of grace is quite another thing.

One would have imagined that Jacob’s vision had told him a tale of grace; but God’s revelation at Bethel, and Jacob’s actings at Haran, are two very different things; yet the latter tell out what was Jacob’s sense of the former.

Character and conduct prove the real measure of the soul’s experience and conviction, whatever the profession may be. But Jacob had never yet been brought to measure himself in God’s presence, and therefore he was ignorant of grace, and he proved his ignorance by measuring himself with Laban, and adopting his maxims and ways.

One cannot help remarking the fact that inasmuch as Jacob failed to learn and judge the inherent character of his flesh before God, therefore he was in the providence of God led into the very sphere in which that character was fully exhibited in its broadest lines.

He was conducted to Haran, the country of Laban and Rebekah, the very school from whence those principles, in which he was such a remarkable adept, had emanated, and where they were taught, exhibited, and maintained.

If one wanted to learn what God was, he should go to Bethel; if to learn what man was, he should go to Haran. But Jacob had failed to take in God's revelation of himself at Bethel, and he therefore went to Haran, and there showed what he was,- and oh, what scrambling and scraping! what shuffling and shifting!

There is no holy and elevated confidence in God, no simply looking to and waiting on him.

True, God was with Jacob, - for nothing can hinder the outshinings of divine grace. Moreover, Jacob in a measure owns God's presence and faithfulness. Still nothing can be done without a scheme and a plan. Jacob cannot allow God to settle the question as to his wives and his wages, but seeks to rule all by his own cunning and management. In short, it is "**the supplanter**" throughout.

Let the reader turn, for example, to Chapter 30:37-42, and say where he can find a more masterly piece of cunning.

It is verily a perfect picture of Jacob.

In place of allowing God to multiply "**the ringstraked, speckled, and spotted cattle,**" as he most assuredly would have done, had He been trusted, he sets about securing their multiplication by a piece of policy which could only have found its origin in the mind of a Jacob. So in all his actings, during his twenty years' sojourn with Laban; and finally, he most characteristically "**steals away,**" thus maintaining in everything his consistency with himself.

Now, it is in tracing out Jacob's real character from stage to stage of his extraordinary history, that one gets a wondrous view of divine grace.

None but God could have borne with such an one, as none but God could have taken such an one up. Grace begins at the very lowest point. It takes up man as he is, and deals with him in the full intelligence of what he is. It is of the very last importance to understand this feature of grace at one's first starting; it enables us to bear with steadiness of heart then after discoveries of personal vileness which so frequently shake the confidence and disturb the peace of the children of God.

Many there are who at first fail in the full apprehension of the utter ruin of nature as looked at in God's presence, though their hearts have been attracted by the grace of God, and their consciences tranquillized in some degree by the application of the Blood of Christ. Hence, as they get on in their course, they begin to make deeper discoveries of the evil within; and, being deficient in their apprehensions of God's grace and the extent and efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ, they immediately raise a question as to their being children of God at all.

Thus they are taken off Christ and thrown on themselves, and then they either betake themselves to ordinances in order to keep up their tone of devotion, or else fall back into thorough worldliness and carnality. These are disastrous consequences, and all the result of not having "**the heart established in grace.**"

It is this that renders the study of Jacob's history so profoundly interesting and eminently useful.

No one can read the three chapters now before us and not be struck at the amazing grace that could take up such an one as Jacob; and not only take him up, but say, after the full discovery of all that was in him, "**He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel**" (Numbers 23:21).

He does not say that iniquity and perverseness were not in him. This would never give the heart confidence,- the very thing above all others which God desires to give.

It could never assure a poor sinner's heart to be told that there was no sin in him; for alas! he knows too well there is; but to be told there is no sin on him, and that, moreover, in God's sight, on the simple ground of Christ's perfect sacrifice, must infallibly set his heart and conscience at rest.

Had God taken up Esau, we should not have had by any means such a blessed display of grace; for this reason, that he does not appear before us in the unamiable light in which we see Jacob.

The more man sinks, the more God's grace rises.

As my debt rises in my estimation from the fifty pence up to the five hundred, so a sense of grace rises also, my experience of that love which, when we "**had nothing to pay,**" could "**frankly forgive**" us all. (Luke 7:42).

Well might the apostle say, "**it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace: not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein**" (Hebrews 13:9).

~ end of chapter 31 ~

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