

CHAPTER IX

Jacob

Gen. 27 to 33

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Hints to Bible Study

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Jacob is more than a character in Biblical history, he is an epoch. In the history of Jacob, for the first time in Bible narrative, we touch Cosmic Vision. It is this Vision which, by common consent of civilized man, designates this series of books as The Book, the supreme book of all time.

If we read the story of Jacob in its outer significance, we have a peculiar Hebraic story. It traces the origin of the name Israel to this distinct ancestor, it casts a curious interest about two otherwise insignificant villages, Bethel and Peniel. This is national, narrow and of merely local interest. To read in this way, however, will not give the meaning of the character, it will hide it. This character is of far more symbolic interest than historic. It is the record of an experience common to all mankind.

Put aside the form of this narrative and look into the heart and meaning of it. It will instantly be seen that it is no longer anything local or Hebraic, but a great truth, wide as human nature. We have before us the record of an inward spiritual struggle, as real now in the twentieth century as then; as real in every earnest soul, as it was in the soul of Jacob. It reveals to us two things, on which all religion must ever stand, the soul's search for the inner reality, God, and God's revelation of this secret reality to the soul. It reveals that there can be no such thing as an outward church; that the Church of Christ is, as Jesus so definitely tells Peter in Matthew 16:14-19, the consciousness that can receive its revelation direct from God. The gates of hell will and can prevail against every one who has not received the new name Israel, one who has wrestled and prevailed with God.

In his early life and with the connivance of his mother, Jacob committed a deliberate sin. He deceived his father, he overreached his open, free-handed, careless brother, Esau. This alone is the excuse for Rebecca and Jacob; Esau neither appreciated nor valued his birthright, nor would he have valued the blessing had he received it. Jacob gains both by craft, and must flee from his father's house to escape the wrath of his brother.

In youth the conviction of sin does not press home to us; Jacob, when he flees from his brother's wrath, does not yet realize that he has sinned. Fresh from his sin, he has the wonderful vision of youth; the vision of a ladder reared against the sky and the angels are ascending and descending upon it. His aspirations reach God, the vision tells him; and messages of reciprocal love are sent back to him. Leaving his father's

home a banished man, this first meeting takes place. Fresh from his sin, God meets him in forgiveness and tenderness. The line between heaven and earth has not been severed, the divine Love watches over him and the way between God and his sinful child is clear and unimpeded still.

Then Jacob makes a covenant with his father's God. Note this, Jacob has no religion of his own, nor does this first vision of youth give him one. He covenants with this God of his fathers, and bargains with Him for hire. "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on; so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God." This is not religion--it is the first law of nature, self-preservation.

Twenty years pass. In all of this time Jacob is Jacob, the crafty supplanter, still. He is under the law of action and reaction. He had deceived his father and Esau; Laban deceives him. He in turn deceives Laban and is again justified by his own conscience. Our *father's God* is never the redemptive God, He leaves our characters unchanged. After a score of years he turns homeward. Never in all of that time had he seen his brother. As he journeys homeward, word is brought him of the approach of his brother Esau, which makes a meeting inevitable. Jacob makes all provision to conciliate his brother. He prepares presents, he sends his flocks, servants and family over the brook Jabbok to meet him, and to soften his heart towards him. Then he alone is left in the still dark night on the eve of the meeting.

There are moments when we stand face to face with a crisis to which great issues are linked; when we have done all that foresight can devise, and the hour of action being passed, the hour of reaction is at hand. The soul at this time is passive and helpless, gazing toward the anticipated event which is moving toward it. We go over again and again the whole circle of our own resources, and find them nothing, and we feel ourselves powerless in the grasp of destiny. In this feeling of insecurity the consciousness of a need of something greater than ourselves, greater than the combined power of all that we know as mankind, forces itself upon us. We reach out into the great Vastness for something to lean upon, something greater than human power or intelligence.

At this crisis there came into the soul of Jacob a conflict so violent that it seemed an actual struggle with a living man. In the darkness he hears a Voice, and comes into contact with a Form, and feels a Presence, the reality of which there is no mistaking. We know that this is not a form of flesh and blood, but something infinitely more real than flesh and blood can ever be. The realities of life are not those which the eye sees or the hand touches. Jacob here discovers the secret and mystery of existence. This is not the God whom he met twenty years before. That was the Father, but this is the Judge; and this meeting is the dread day of judgment, and no flesh can stand in it. No longer is it the protecting presence, the covenanting love; it is the power that pierces into the intent of the heart. It is that searching inward gaze in which the soul stands revealed to itself. One knows then how utterly hopeless it is for one to try to live the

life of love and truth, except as he yields himself without reservation to the Divine Love. In and of ourselves we are nothing, only as we lose our lives do we gain them. We learn in this experience the helplessness and impotency of the soul that is not allied to God.

From our human point of view we should have expected the reverse of this. We should have expected the darker vision first, and the vision of peace to follow it. However, spiritual experiences are always the exact reverse of what the mortal expects them to be. This is the true account by tried experience. God allows the wheat and the tares to grow together until the harvest; it is in the separation time that the tares must be cast out and thrown into the consuming flame.

The end and aim of Jacob's struggle is to know God. "Tell me, I pray thee, thy name." A very unimportant demand this looks at first sight. By whatever name He is sought in sincerity, He is found of us. What signifies a name? There is a deeper truth here. We have a name for God before we have been to Peniel; after we have met Him there, He is nameless, too vast to be limited by one.

In this second meeting of Jacob with God, he has no petition to make, he makes no promises. He is on the eve of meeting Esau, who had sought to kill him, but he asks no protection from Him. Deeper things are grappling the soul of Jacob, to know God's character, to know Him and what He is, for that he struggles from sunset to sunrise. We move through a world of mystery and the soul is not satisfied until it knows the real meaning of life. What is this haunting Presence that fills the universe? What is the name of this Being that floods us with light in our highest moments, that presses in heaviest weight when we are under a conviction of sin, crippling us in the sinews of the thighs, our tenderest points on which we lean, no longer leaving us the old prop of materiality? Who are you? Tell me, I pray thee, thy name? This is the struggle of all earnest lives.

"Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?" This is worthy of the nameless One. God when He visits us gives us truths of feeling. Words change their meaning and lose their significance. A witty Frenchman once said, "We invented language when we wished to conceal our thoughts." Language is valuable for the things of this life, but for the things of the Spirit we should be better off perhaps without it. If religion were always based on truths of feeling, the world would be full of love and light.

Words often hide from us our ignorance even of earthly things. How often the child asks for information and we satiate his curiosity with words. Who does not know that we satisfy ourselves when we learn the name of a law of God, even as we do of natural things. We learn the name of a bird or a plant and fancy we know all about it. We are more hopelessly ignorant than we were before, for thinking we know all about it because we have the name we investigate no more, and the name covers over the abyss of our ignorance. If God had given Jacob a name, that might have satisfied him,

but God impressed on him in that strange scene, His own character which would develop and change the man into the same character. Jacob felt the Infinite, who is more truly known when the least named. Words would have reduced Him to the finite; to know all about God is one thing, to know the living God is another.

Very significantly we are told that the divine Antagonist seemed anxious to depart as the day was about to dawn; but Jacob held fast to Him, as if aware that the daybreak would deprive him of his blessing. Again we have the distinctions of the religion of our childhood and our manhood. A little girl who was very willing to say her evening prayers, objected to saying them in the morning, "I can take care of myself in the light." But it is in the daylight that we need God the most. God is approached more nearly in that which is indefinite, than in that which is definite and distinct. He is felt in awe and wonder and worship, rather than in clear conceptions. There is a sense in which darkness has more of God than light has. "He dwells in the thick darkness." When the day breaks and distinctions come, the great thoughts that surged through us in the night time evaporate. We are then facing the cares and joys and distractions of our earth life. It is at this time we must cling to Him and not let Him go.

Literally more of infinity is revealed in the night time than in the light. Every morning God draws the curtain of His garish light across His Infinity. We look down upon earth instead of up to heaven. "We lay aside the telescope and take up the microscope and see smallness instead of Vastness." But in the blessed evening we again "blend" into Infinity, and are changed into the same Image.

The forgiveness and tenderness of God twenty years before had not altered the character of Jacob. "Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labor until the evening." [Jacob] is but half sincere; but when he comes into contact with the God of his manhood, the God who weighs him in the balance and takes his measure according to the strength of his soul, he becomes Real at once. Every insincere habit of thought shrivels up in the face of God. One clear glance into the depths of Being, and the whole man is altered. No longer Jacob the supplanter, but Israel the Prince of God, the champion of the Lord who has fought the mortal and conquered it.

N.B. I am indebted to Robinson's sermons for much of this chapter.