

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE STIRRING-UP OF THE NEST

Genesis 31

O Father! the untrodden path how shall we dare to tread?
We see not what is in the clouds now hanging o'er our head.
Thou hid'st the future from our ken. Oh, be Thy children's light!
Guide Thou our halting footsteps in the day or in the night."

- Marianne Farningham

IN that sublime song with which the great Law-giver closed his words to Israel, we are carried through the steeps of air, to stand beside an eagle's eyrie, perched amid the inaccessible cliffs.

Here we may find a clue to explain the ways of God to man. The young eaglets are old and strong enough to fly; but they cling to the familiar nest, with its scant shelter. They dare not venture forth upon the untried air, or trust their fluttering wings. But they must learn to fly. There are joys awaiting them in the wide oceans of space, which far outvie those of the rude nest in which they have been nurtured. And so the eagle stirs up the nest, and drives them forth.

What anguish the young birds feel, as they see that nest destroyed; and themselves thrust forth, as it might seem, to certain destruction! But when once they are launched upon the upbearing air, and learn by glad experience the freedom, the ecstasy of flight how grateful should they be to the parent bird, who flinched not from the unwelcome task; and who still swoops and flies beneath them, ready to catch them up if their powers should flag, and to bear them sunwards. There, in mid-Heaven, she lets them fall again; and again she catches them: and thus, each moment they increase in confidence and strength; and develop powers of sustained flight, of which they were unconscious when they lingered by the nest.

It is a beautiful parable of human life. We all cling to the old nest the old home where we were born; the dear protection of strong, true hearts, that screen us from every breath; the place where we are known; the faces with which we are familiar; the competence which we have won. We say, with eager petulance, "Let us stay here forever. Do not speak to us of that great outer world; or of the opportunities which lie hidden there; and which, you say, might bring out powers of muscle, and brain, and heart, of which we now know nothing. We would rather that they should remain hidden, than that we should have to suffer the anguish of their development amid the strain and trial of that rude, strange world of which we now catch but distant rumours. We are content; let us stay."

But the great love of God has provided some better thing for us. He knows that there are heights and depths of life hidden from us till we go forth. Keen may be the agony of the moment in which we see the nest stirred up, and find ourselves flung forth into a strange element. But it is not worthy to be compared with the glory instantly revealed; for that light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory: the glory of a faith that poises itself on the unseen; the glory of a hope that breasts the thundercloud; the glory of a love that soars ever upward to the sun.

“They shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles.”

These thoughts give the key to the next experience in Jacob’s troubled life. There is a reason for every step in our education, whether we see it or not: and, though Jacob could not have guessed it at the time, yet, as we look back, we can easily understand why his residence at Haran was suddenly closed; and his home broken up; and he driven across the desert, as a fugitive, hotly pursued much as he had been years before, only in the reverse direction.

In point of fact, Jacob was becoming too contented in that strange land. Like Ulysses and his crews, he was in danger of forgetting the land of his birth; the tents of his father; and the promises of which he was the heir. He was fast losing the pilgrim spirit, and settled into a citizen of that far country. His mean and crafty arts to increase his wealth were honeycombing his spirit, and eating out his nobler nature, prostituting it to the meanest ends.

His wives, infected with the idolatry of their father’s house, were in danger of corrupting the minds of his children; and how then would fare the holy seed, destined to give the world the messages of God? It was evident that his nest must be broken up in Haran; that he must be driven back into the pilgrim-life to become a stranger and a sojourner, as his fathers were. And this was another step nearer the moment when he became an Israel, a prince with God.

This may be your destiny, my reader; and, if it be, accept meekly the discipline which forces you towards it. It is the hand that was pierced with nails that breaks up the nest of the past, and beckons you to the untried but blessed realities in front.

I. THE SUMMONS TO DEPART

“And the Lord said unto Jacob, Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee.”

Whether there was voice audible to the outward ear I cannot tell; but there was certainly the uprising of a strong impulse within his heart. Sometimes on a sultry summer day we suddenly feel the breeze fanning our faces, and we say that the wind is rising; but we know not whence it comes, or whither it goes: so does the Spirit of God frequently visit us with strong and holy impulses. There is a divine restlessness; a noble discontent; a hunger created in the heart, which will not be satisfied with the husks on which the swine feed. We cannot always understand ourselves; but it is the Lord saying to us, Arise and depart; for this is not your rest.

There are many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification; and sometimes it is difficult to know the voice of the Lord. But the more truly we partake of the nature of "**His own sheep**," the more unerringly shall we detect the voice of the Good Shepherd.

If you are not quite sure, wait till you are. It is the Shepherd's business to make His presence and wish understood by the timid and perplexed in His flock. The only necessity is to be willing to do His will so soon as it is clearly seen. If you are in doubt, wait in faith till every other door is shut, and one path only lies open before you, and you are able to say: "**He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.**" God's voice to the heart is generally corroborated by the drift of outward circumstances. "**Jacob beheld the countenance of Laban, and, behold, it was not towards him as before.**"

For some time their relations had been strained. Ten times in six years had Laban altered the method of computing his wages; and now there were symptoms of open rupture. It is always wise to be on the outlook for any evident symptoms of God's will; and here was one. It is very bitter to behold a change passing over men and women in their behavior towards us; a change which we cannot avert. We dread it as the timid passenger by the night mail dreads the roar of the waves, as they seethe, white with rage, outside the harbor bar. And yet God is undoubtedly in all this. It is the way which He is taking through the deep. Listen to the Divine assurance, "**I am with thee.**"

- The Good Shepherd Himself is putting you forth from the warm fold, now almost bare, that He may conduct you to green pastures and living waters.
- The Master Himself is emptying you from vessel to vessel; lest you should settle on your lees.
- The Husbandman Himself is exposing you to that painful process of transplanting, which is said to be one of the surest methods of luxuriant growth.

Take heart: it is only part of the process of making you a prince; you need it badly enough in no other way can your mean Jacob-nature be replaced by something better.

II. THE TENACITY OF CIRCUMSTANCES

When the pilgrim-spirit essays to obey the voice of God, the house is always filled with neighbours to dissuade from the rash resolve.

"As Christian ran,
some mocked;
others threatened;
and some cried after him to return."

There was something of this in Jacob's case. The bird-lime clung closely to him, as he began to plume his wings for his home-ward flight. He was evidently afraid that his wives would hinder his return. It would have been natural if they had. Was it likely that they would at once consent to his proposal to tear them from their kindred and land? This fear may have greatly hindered Jacob. He at least thought it necessary to fortify himself with a quiverful of arguments, in order to carry his point.

In those arguments we catch another glimpse of his cowardly and crafty nature. They are a strange medley of lies, and cant, and truth. He might have saved himself from all this, if he had only trusted God to roll away the stones from the path of obedience. For God had been at work before him; and had prepared their hearts, so that they at once assented to his plan, saying: "We have no further ties to home; now then, whatsoever God hath said unto thee, do." If we would only go forward in simple obedience, we should find that there would be no need for our diplomacy; He would go before us, making the crooked straight, and the rough smooth.

In the endeavors of Laban to retain Jacob, we have a vivid picture of the eager energy with which the world would retain us, when we are about to turn away from it forever.

- It pursues us, with all its allies, for seven days and more (ver. 23).
- It asks us why we are not content to abide with it (ver. 27).
- It professes its willingness to make our religion palatable, by mingling with it its own tabret and dance (ver. 27).
- It appeals to our feelings, and asks us not to be too cruel (ver. 28).
- It threatens us (ver. 29).
- It jeers us with our sudden compunction, after so many years of contentment with its company (ver. 30).
- It reproaches us with our inconsistency in making so much of our God, and yet harboring some cunning sin. "**Wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?**" (ver. 30).

Ah, friends, how sad it is, when we, who profess so much, give occasion to our foes to sneer, because of the secret idols which they know we carry with us!

Sometimes it is not we who are to blame, so much as our Rachels our wives, or children, or friends. But we should never rest till, so far as we know, our camp is clear of the accursed thing.

At last, our Labans, who would hold us fast, having tried every expedient, content themselves with groaning, "**What can I do this day?**" Blustering often ends in bewailing over an unalterable destiny.

Thus the heap of witness is raised at length. Oh that you might break away from that life of worldliness in which you have tarried too long! Make a clean break with it! Only do not do it secretly, as Jacob did. Better so, than not at all: but it is mean-spirited and cowardly; it always arouses intenser opposition; and it is not worthy of one whose escort is God Himself. The straightforward and outspoken course which nails its colours to the mast is always the easiest, and safest, and best.

A midshipman, who was about to leave the sailor's home, where he had been converted, came to the superintendent on the day of going on board, and asked him to write on a card, in plain bold characters, the words, "I am a Christian." When he was asked his object, he said, "As soon as I get on board, I shall go to my hammock, and put this card where everybody can see it: it will save a lot of trouble; for everyone will know at once which side I am on, and will expect me to keep true to it." This is raising the heap of witness.

Let us raise that heap: let me help you rear it; gather stones, and pile them into the form of that cross by which the world was crucified to Paul, and he to the world. Eat there the feast that speaks of life through death. Call your friends to witness your solemn act; above all, call God to witness your resolve that never again shall the world, the flesh, or the devil, come over to you, or you pass over to them. This is the true Mizpah, of the Lord's watch.

III. THE DIVINE CARE

Well might Jacob have thrilled with joy, as he said to his wives, "**The God of my father has been with me.**" When God is for us, and with us, who can be against us? Blessed is he who is environed by God, and for whom God fights. He must be more than a conqueror. So Jacob found it; and, at the end of his encounter with Laban, he was able to repeat his assurance, that the God of his father had been with him (ver. 42).

At the head of his flocks and herds, with wives and children and slaves, he struck across the Euphrates and the desert, at the utmost speed possible to his encumbered march; but God's angels accompanied him. He met their radiant hosts afterwards (32:1). His flight remained unsuspected for three days; then Laban set off with swift camels in pursuit, and overtook them, when still threading their way among the richly wooded and watered hills of Gilead. It was a moment of real danger; and it was then that God interposed. "**God came to Laban the Syrian by night.**" That dream laid an irresistible spell on Laban, which prevented him from carrying out his design to do Jacob hurt.

Jacob was an erring and unworthy child; but God did not leave or forsake him. He does not love us (as we so often falsely tell little children) because we are good; but to make us so. As He does not set His love on us because of our deserts, so He does not turn it away from us because of our sins. He hates our sins; but He loves ourselves with a love that sin can neither wear out, nor turn away. Thus He was able to throw His protection round His erring child; and this was part of the loving discipline which was leading Jacob to a goal of which he never dreamed.

Jacob conceived that he was a model shepherd (ver. 38); but he little realized how lovingly he was being protected by the shepherd-care of Him who keepeth Israel, and who neither slumbers nor sleeps. That protection may be ours.

O Thou, who art the Good Shepherd; who dost guard Thy flock, in drought and frost, with untried and unabated tenderness; who dost go after that which is gone astray, until Thou dost find it, bringing it back upon Thy shoulders we, too, have gone astray like lost sheep. Seek Thy servants; at whatever cost, disentangle us from the meshes of the world; and take care of us until Thine own ideal is realized in our lives.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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