

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER TWO

THE SALE OF THE BIRTHRIGHT

Genesis 25

“We shape ourselves the joy or fear
Of which the coming life is made
And fill our future’s atmosphere
With sunshine or with shade.

The tissue of the life to be
We weave with colours all our own;”
And in the fields of Destiny
We reap as we have sown.”

- Whittier

BROTHERS were these two men, yes, twin brothers; but brothers could not differ more widely. Before their birth their difference was foretold. At their birth it was evident. From their birth it began to broaden and increase. The linked hands of the brothers, reaching across the tiny rill of their earliest infancy, were soon parted, as the stream of life widened between them, and they passed to their destiny along the opposite banks.

They differed in appearance.

Esau was rough, ruddy, and hairy. He would give the impression of great bodily strength; capacity for vast physical fatigue; and a temperament which would incline him to exciting and hazardous pursuits. Jacob was the reverse: smooth in skin; dark in feature; slight in build; no match for his burly brother in physical force, but more than his match in guile.

They differed in pursuits.

Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field and chase. Had he been living now, he would have been foremost in all manly, daring, out-door sports. Nor would it be difficult to find his duplicate to-day amongst our high-born youth: with handsome face, generous disposition, and open hand; quick to resent, and quick to forgive; perfect in dress; polished in manner; a rare shot, a splendid rider, an expert in all manly exercise; and certain to marry well as Esau did and found a strong and noble house. Jacob, on the other hand, loved the home life.

The violent exercise and hazards for which Esau pined, as an imprisoned eagle for its rocky, storm-beaten crags, had no fascination for him. And while Esau was away, he was content to dwell among the flocks and herds of the camp; content with the peaceful occupations of an uneventful pastoral life. Each man to his taste!

They differed most in character.

There is much in Esau which makes us like him; and we should have been certainly more quickly attracted to him than to his brother. If he was impetuous, he was generous. If he was rash, he was frank. If he was singularly wanting in religious fervour, he was a good son. If his heart doted on the pleasures of the chase, he was splendid company, and every inch a man. But, for all this, he was decidedly sensual. Scripture calls him profane i.e., he was a slave to his senses; he hailed anything that would thrill him with pleasant though transient excitement; he was willing to purchase pleasure at any price, though he had to pawn the most priceless jewels of his spirit; he was, indeed, too enamoured with the claims of the passing hour to care for unseen realities; or to seek the eternal harvest which lies beyond the bitter sowing times of patience, and waiting, and pain. Alas, that he should have had such a host of imitators!

Jacob was a “**plain**” [quiet] man; but under that calm exterior there were depths and depths. Amid all the craft and duplicity of his nature, there was immense capacity for religious fervour and religious faith. He could understand, as Esau never could, the meaning of the birthright, with all its spiritual glow and glory. He could draw aside the veil of the unseen, and weigh its promises, and compare its treasures with the shows of earth. He could dream angel-haunted dreams, that threw a mystic ladder over the abyss of space, linking all worlds. And while Esau was occupied with pleasure, Jacob would feel within him the strange stirrings of a nature which could not be satisfied with anything within the narrow limits of his tents; but which yearned for that spiritual heritage which was summed up in the word “**birthright.**”

Let us consider the Birthright; the Barter; and the Bitter Cry.

I. THE BIRTHRIGHT

What was it? It was not worldly prosperity; for though Esau lost it, he had an abundant fortune: four hundred armed retainers followed at his heel; the great country of Edom owned his sway; till, after a life of splendid and unbroken prosperity, he went down to the grave in peace and a good old age. There is nothing in the brief record which we have of him to make us think that he lived a broken or disappointed life. All that this world could give was his. The sunshine of worldly prosperity touched with golden light all the wavelets that broke upon the beach of his life.

The exceeding bitter wail of momentary disappointment was soon forgotten in his satisfaction at having lost nothing which he really cared for, while so much was still left to him that his soul loved. Whatever the birthright was, it evidently was not worldly prosperity; for of this, Esau, who lost it, probably had more than Jacob, who won it.

It was not immunity from sorrow. When Jacob had secured it, it seemed as if the mystic box of Pandora had been opened in his home; for every human ill was let free into his life. Staff in hand, he tears himself from home, and seeks a distant country. A hireling in a kinsman's house, he spends the best years of manhood's prime. Halting on his thigh, he bows before Esau; buries his favorite Rachel; chafes over the open sores of his home life; is bereaved of his children; and moans that the days of the years of his pilgrimage have been evil and few. Few have trodden a more rugged path, or bound about their brows a crown more set with thorns. It was a sad and weary life that breathed itself out in that hieroglyphed chamber in the land of the Pharaohs, when for the last time he gathered his feet into his bed, and was gathered unto his people. Whatever the birthright was, it evidently was not freedom from pain and grief; for of these, Jacob, who won it, had infinitely more than Esau, who lost it.

The birthright was a spiritual heritage.

- It gave the right which ever belonged to its possessor of being the priest of the family or clan.
- It carried the privilege of being the depositary and communicator of the Divine secrets.
- It constituted a link in the line of descent by which the Messiah was to be born into the world.
- The right of wielding power with God and men;
- The right of catching up and handing on as in the old Greek race the torch of Messianic hope;
- The right of heirship to the promises of the covenant made to Abraham;
- The right of standing among the spiritual aristocracy of mankind;
- The right of being a pilgrim of eternity, owning no foot of earth, because all heaven was held in fee this, and more than this, was summed up in the possession of the birthright.

It was a fair heritage; but a fairer one is the birthright of every reader of these lines.

- You have been born into a world which has been trodden by the feet and wet by the tears of the Son of God.
- You have been born of a race whose redemption has been purchased at the exceeding great price of His precious Blood.
- You have been born of a nature which has been taken up by Him, who passed by that of angels.

And such a birth carries with it rights, given by the matchless grace of God, which as much outshine the birthrights of the old world, as the regalia of England does the crown of Alfred.

Your birth gives you:

- The right to be translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son;
- The right to claim of the Holy Ghost the second birth;
- The right to be forgiven and saved;
- The right to become the sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty;
- The right to stand side by side with the Son in His glory, joint-heirs with Him of all that is His;
- The right to be more than conquerors over all the power of your foes;
- The right to be delivered from sin, and
- The right to join the jubilant throng that stands on the shores of the sea of glass mingled with fire.

This may be your glorious heritage. It cannot be purchased, or won by might of arm. It is reserved for those only who, having been born of woman, have also been born of the Holy Ghost. It may be amid tears and storm that the heart will first realize its right to participate in this inheritance; yet, even then, the thought and hope of its future heritage will cheer the spirit when passing through the stern discipline of life, on its way to the promised rest. That hope shall not be ashamed. And surely it will be the standing marvel of eternity that a destiny so bright was ever put within the reach of the fallen children of this sin-cursed earth.

II. THE BARTER

One day Jacob was standing over a caldron of savoury pottage, made of those red lentiles which to the present day form a dish highly relished in Syria and in Egypt. The appetizing odour soon filled the air, enticing enough for a full, to say nothing of a hungry man. At that moment, who should come in but Esau, faint with hunger. He did not know the name: his active life left him little time for such trifles as domestic cookery; but the sight and smell were quite enough to convince him that Jacob's preparations would be marvelously suitable to stay the cravings of his hunters hunger. "**Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage,**" he cried impatiently.

Now Jacob was not wholly a selfish man; but it suddenly occurred to him that this would be a good opportunity of winning the right to be the spiritual leader of the clan. So, knowing well how little his brother counted on his rights, he made the extraordinary proposal to exchange the mess of pottage for the birthright.

Esau closed with the proposal. "**Behold,**" said the bluff hunter, "**I am at the point to die; and what profit shall this birthright do to me?**" On the one hand was the birthright a myth, so far as he could see, a vision of the far future, wholly unseen and spiritual. On the other hand was this pottage, right before him, and very tempting to his hunger. So he made over his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave him bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and went his way not, I think, without some qualms of conscience: and thus Esau despised his birthright.

We cannot exonerate either of these men from blame. Jacob was not only a traitor to his brother, but he was faithless towards his God. Had it not been distinctly whispered in his mother's ear that the elder of the brothers should serve the younger? Had not the realization of his loftiest ambition been pledged by One whose faithfulness had been the theme of repeated talks with Abraham, who had survived during the first eighteen years of his young life? He might have been well assured that what the God of Abraham had promised He was able also to perform; and would perform, without the aid of his own miserable schemes. But how hard is it for us to quietly wait for God!

We are too apt to outrun Him; to forestall the quiet unfolding of His purposes; and to snatch at promised blessings before they are ripe.

And as for Esau, we can never forget the beacon words of Scripture: "**Looking diligently . . . Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright**" (Hebrews 12:15-16).

Yet let us, in condemning him across the ages, look close at home. How many are there amongst ourselves, born into the world with splendid talents; dowried with unusual powers; inheritors of noble names; heirs to vast estates; gifted with keys to unlock any of the many doors to name, and fame, and usefulness who yet fling away all these possibilities of blessing and blessedness, for one brief plunge into the Stygian pool of selfish and sensual indulgence! The strongest and bravest men in build and muscle are often the weakest in resisting the appeals of momentary passion.

- Esau is mastered by the fragrance of a mess of pottage;
- Samson by the charms of a Philistine girl;
- Peter by the question of a servant.

There is no strength apart from the strong Son of God.

And the appeals to sense come oftenest when we are least expecting them. When we say, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction comes. The foe creeps through the postern gate. The arrow penetrates the joints of the harness. The moment of crisis is the moment when we come in from the dangers of the chase to the home which promised us immunity from the attack. **“Watch ye therefore, and pray always; that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things.”**

These appeals, moreover, come in the most trivial things. One mess of pottage; one glass of drink; one moment's unbridled passion; one afternoon's saunter; a question and an answer; a movement or a look. It is in such small things small as the angle at which railway lines diverge from each other to east and west that great alternatives are offered and great decisions made. When we fail in some such thing, we often comfort ourselves with the reflection that we could and would do right in some all-important crisis.

- We cannot pray in a bedroom; but we could burn at a stake.
- We cannot speak to an individual; but we could preach at a Pentecost.

We little understand ourselves. We do not see that trifles are the truest test of character; and that if we cannot run with footmen, we certainly could not contend with horses; and if we have been wearied in the land of peace, we certainly shall stand no chance when we are called to battle with the swellings of Jordan. There are no trifles in Christian living. Everything is great; because the mightiest events revolve on the smallest pivots; and the greatest harvests for good and ill spring from the tiniest seeds.

Had we been at Esau's side, how eagerly should we have laid our hand upon his shoulder, entreating him to pause and consider, before he bartered the spiritual for the physical; the eternal for the temporal; the unseen for the seen. “Will it pay?” “Is it wise?” “Will you get an equivalent for that which you forfeit now for ever?” And such questions are asked still of all Esaus who are tempted to barter their peace, their manhood, their Heaven, for one mess of the devil's pottage. It steams. It smells savoury. It promises to do more good to you than all the Bible put together.

The tempter whispers, "Thou shalt not surely die. Bow down and worship me, and all shall be thine. Give me that which thou hast; and I will give thee this and much more." Then it is that a still small voice asks, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the world and lose himself? How much less will it profit him to lose his all for one small mess of pottage, which will only secure a brief respite from the cravings of appetite."

Learn to master appetite in Christ's strength; this will serve thee better far than warding off its urgency for a time, leaving it to return with whetted hunger, like a pack of wolves which have tasted blood. "**Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown**" (Revelation 3:11).

III. THE BITTER CRY

When Esau saw that God had taken him at his word, and had taken away from him the birthright of spiritual primacy. "**he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry**" (Genesis 27:34). But that cry came too late to alter the consequences of his rash act. "**He found no place of repentance**" (no way to change his father's decision), "**though he sought it carefully with tears**" (Hebrews 12:17).

"**No place of repentance!**" On many hearts those words have rung the knell of hope. As the heart-broken sinner has reviewed a blighted past with bitter tears and cries, the adversary of souls has whispered that he has sinned too deeply for repentance, and wandered too far to return; and he has backed the insinuation with these terrible words "**no place of repentance.**" And is it so? Is it possible for a soul, on this side of death, to reach a position where tears and prayers will strike against the brazen heavens, and rebound, only an echo? It cannot be. It is possible that a man should become too callous and hard to desire salvation: this is the sin unto death; this is the sin that hath never forgiveness; and it has no forgiveness because the sinner does not desire or seek it. But:

- It is impossible for a man to desire to repent and not find a ready help in the grace of the Holy Ghost.
- It is impossible for a man to seek forgiveness with bitter tears, and not obtain it.
- It is impossible for a man to knock at the door of mercy, and not find it open at last, though after long delay:

"**All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men.**" In point of fact, these desires and tears and prayers are blessed symptoms that the work of grace and forgiveness has begun within the soul. They are not of man; or of the will of the flesh: but of God. And when God puts His hand to the plough in a human spirit, He never looks back.

But the "**repentance**" mentioned here is not repentance to salvation; but the power of reversing the past. Esau could not undo what he had done. He had long despised his birthright. That act of surrender was not a solitary one, but the outcome of a state of heart. It simply revealed thoughts that had been long admitted guests in the inner chamber of his being. But when once this temper had taken effect in a definite promise, asseverated by an oath, God held him to it yea, nature and righteousness and conscience held him to it too; and he could not alter it by his tears or bitter cries.

The sinful past is irrevocable. Eve might bitterly regret her choice; but as she stood with Adam outside the cherub-guarded gate, with the faded rose in her hand of which Rabbis tell us her bitter regrets could not replace the apple on the tree, or reinstate her within the golden bowers of Paradise. Peter went out and wept bitterly; but those tears of uncontrollable anguish could not recall the words of denial, or blot from his memory that look of pain. The Virgins might beat their breasts in bitter self-reproach; but no complaints, however pitiable, could reverse the decision of the Bridegroom's lips.

We all know this. We remember bursts of passion which have broken hearts; sundered ties of love; clouded sunny skies; withered hopes; and shattered promising prospects. We would give worlds to blot out the record, and to make them as if they had never been. But it is impossible. We cannot bring back the shadow on the dial. We cannot reverse the writing of the faithful chronicler. We cannot find a chance for altering the decisions, which had been long floating in solution in our minds, but which have had one fatal and irrevocable crystallization in word or act. There is no place of repentance, though we seek it carefully and with tears. You cannot undo.

But though the past is irrevocable, it is not irreparable. In the garden of Gethsemane our Lord said mournfully to the chosen three, "**Sleep on now, and take your rest;**" but He instantly added, "**Arise: let us be going.**"

- In the first sentence, He taught the irrevocableness of the past; they might as well sleep, for any good that watching could now do.
- But in the second sentence, He taught that there was still a future before them, with new chances, and opportunities, and hopes.

So shall it ever be. God Himself cannot undo the past. But He can and will forgive. He will not mention the past; but give us a fair fresh start. He will even "**restore the years that the canker-worm has eaten.**"

He will give us new opportunities of showing how truly we repent the decisions of the past; and how loyally we desire to serve Him in the decisions of the future. He will not even mention the thrice denial; but He will give us three opportunities of saying how much we love Him, as He thrice bids us tend His flock.

- "The King is dead!" - that is the proclamation of the irrevocable past.
- "Long live the King!" - that is the announcement of an available future.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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