

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WE are now called to trace Jacob in his movement from under his father's roof, to view him as a homeless and lonely wanderer on the earth. It is here that God's special dealings with him commence.

Jacob now begins to realize, in some measure, the bitter fruit of his conduct, in reference to Esau; while, at the same time, God is seen rising above all the weakness and folly of his servant, and displaying his own sovereign grace and profound wisdom in his dealings with him. God will accomplish his own purpose, no matter by what instrumentality; but if his child, in impatience of spirit, and unbelief of heart, will take himself out of his hands, he must expect much sorrowful exercise and painful discipline. Thus it was with Jacob: he might not have had to flee to Haran, had he allowed God to act for him. God would, assuredly, have dealt with Esau, and caused him to find his destined place and portion; and Jacob might have enjoyed that sweet peace which nothing can yield save entire subjection in all things to the hand and counsel of God.

But here is where the excessive feebleness of our hearts is constantly disclosed.

We do not lie passive in God's hand; we will be acting; and, by our acting, we hinder the display of God's grace and power on our behalf. "**Be still and know that I am God**" is a precept which naught, save the power of divine grace, can enable one to obey.

"Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing, but in every thing: by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." What will be the result of thus acting? "**The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep [garrison] your hearts and mind by Christ Jesus.**" (Philippians 4:5-7).

However, God graciously overrules our folly and weakness, and while we are called upon to reap the fruits of our unbelieving and impatient ways, he takes occasion from them to teach our hearts still deeper lessons of His own tender grace and perfect wisdom.

This, while it, assuredly, affords no warrant whatever for unbelief and impatience, does most wonderfully exhibit the goodness of our God, and comfort the heart even while we may be passing through the painful circumstances consequent upon our failure.

God is above all; and, moreover, it is his special prerogative to bring good out of evil; to make the eater yield meat, and the strong yield sweetness; and hence, while it is quite true that Jacob was compelled to be an exile from his father's roof in consequence of his own restless and deceitful acting, it is equally true that he never could have learnt the meaning of "Bethel" had he been quietly at home.

Thus the two sides of the picture are strongly marked in every scene of Jacob's history.

It was when he was driven, by his own folly, from Isaac's house that he was led to taste, in some measure, the blessedness and solemnity of **"God's house."**

"And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep."

Here we find the homeless wanderer just in the very position in which God could meet him, and in which he could unfold his purposes of grace and glory.

Nothing could possibly be more expressive of helplessness and nothingness than Jacob's condition as here set before us beneath the open canopy of Heaven, with a pillow of stone, in the helpless condition of sleep.

Thus it was that the God of Bethel unfolded to Jacob his purposes respecting him and his seed.

"And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to Heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed. And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of."

Here we have, indeed, **"grace and glory."**

The ladder **"set on the earth"** naturally leads the heart to meditate on the display of God's grace, in the Person and work of his Son. On the earth it was that the wondrous work was accomplished which forms the basis, the strong and everlasting basis, of all the divine counsels in reference to Israel, the Church, and the world at large.

On the earth it was that Jesus lived, labored, and died; that through his death He might remove out of the way every obstacle to the accomplishment of the divine purpose of blessing to man.

But **"the top of" the ladder reached to heaven."**

It formed the medium of communication between Heaven and earth; and “**behold the angels of God ascending and descending upon it,**”- striking and beautiful picture of him by whom God has come down into all the depth of man’s need, and by whom also he has brought man up and set him in his own presence forever, in the power of divine righteousness! God has made provision for the accomplishment of all his plans, despite of man’s folly and sin; and it is for the everlasting joy of any soul to find itself, by the teaching of the Holy Ghost, within the limits of God’s gracious purpose.

The prophet Hosea leads us on to the time when that which was foreshadowed by Jacob’s ladder shall have its full accomplishment.

“And in that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow, and the sword, and the battle, out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely. And I will betroth thee unto me forever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in mercies; I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the Lord. And it shall come to pass in that day, I will hear, saith the earth, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth; and the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel. And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God” (Hosea 1:18-23).

There is also an expression in the first chapter of John, bearing upon Jacob’s remarkable vision; it is Christ’s word to Nathanael, “**Verily, verily, I say unto you, hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man**” (Ver. 51).

Now, this vision of Jacob’s is a very blessed disclosure of divine grace to Israel.

We have been led to see something of Jacob’s real character, something, too, of his real condition; both were evidently such as to show that it should either be divine grace for him, or nothing.

By birth he had no claim; nor yet by character. Esau might put forward some claim on both these grounds; i. e., provided God’s prerogative were set aside; but Jacob had no claim whatsoever; and hence, while Esau could only stand upon the exclusion of God’s prerogative, Jacob could only stand upon the introduction and establishment thereof.

Jacob was such a sinner, and so utterly divested of all claim, both by birth and by practice, that he had nothing whatever to rest upon save God’s purpose of pure, free, and sovereign grace. Hence, in the revelation which the Lord makes to his chosen servant, in the passage just quoted, it is a simple record or prediction of what he himself would yet do.

“I am . . . I will give . . . I will keep . . . I will bring . . . I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.”

It was all Himself. There is no condition whatever. No if or but for when grace acts there can be no such thing. Where there is an if, it cannot possibly be grace. Not that God cannot put man into a position of responsibility in which he must needs address him with an "if." We know he can; but Jacob asleep on a pillow of stone was not in a position of responsibility, but of the deepest helplessness and need; and therefore he was in a position to receive a revelation of the fullest, richest, and most unconditional grace.

Now, we cannot but own the blessedness of being in such a condition that we have nothing to rest upon save God Himself; and, moreover, that it is in the most perfect establishment of God's own character and prerogative that we obtain all our true joy and blessing.

According to this principle, it would be an irreparable loss to us to have any ground of our own to stand upon, for in that case God should address us on the ground of responsibility, and failure would then be inevitable. Jacob was so bad, that none but God himself could do for him.

And, be it remarked, that it was his failure in the habitual recognition of this that led him into so much sorrow and pressure. God's revelation of himself is one thing, and our resting in that revelation is quite another.

God shows himself to Jacob, in infinite grace; but no sooner does Jacob awake out of sleep, than we find him developing his true character, and proving how little he knew, practically, of the blessed One who had just been revealing himself so marvelously to him.

"He was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

His heart was not at home in the presence of God; nor can any heart be so until it has been thoroughly emptied and broken. God is at home, blessed be his name, with a broken heart, and a broken heart at home with him.

But Jacob's heart was not yet in this condition; nor had he yet learnt to repose, like a little child, in the perfect love of one who could say, "**Jacob have I loved.**"

"Perfect love casteth out fear;" but where such love is not known and fully realized, there will always be a measure of uneasiness and perturbation.

God's house and God's presence are not dreadful to a soul who knows the love of God as expressed in the perfect sacrifice of Christ.

Such a soul is rather led to say, "**Lord, I have loved the habitation of thy house, and the place where thine honor dwelleth.**" (Psalm 26:8). And again, "**One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple**" (Psalm 27:4). And again, "**How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth, for the courts of the Lord**" (Psalm 84).

When the heart is established in the knowledge of God, it will assuredly love his house, whatever the character of that house may be, whether it be Bethel, or the temple at Jerusalem, or the Church now composed of all true believers, **“builted together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.”**

However, Jacob’s knowledge, both of God and his house, was very shallow, at that point in his history on which we are now dwelling.

We shall have occasion, again, to refer to some principles connected with Bethel; and shall now close our meditations upon this chapter with a brief notice of Jacob’s bargain with God, so truly characteristic of him, and so demonstrative of the truth of the statement with respect to the shallowness of his knowledge of the divine character.

“And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, 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; and this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God’s house: and of all that thou shalt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto thee.”

Observe, **“if God will be with me.”**

Now, the Lord had just said, emphatically, **“I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land,”** &c. And yet poor Jacob’s heart cannot get beyond an **“if;”** nor, in its thoughts of God’s goodness, can it rise higher than **“bread to eat, and raiment to put on.”**

Such were the thoughts of one who had just seen the magnificent vision of the ladder reaching from earth to Heaven, with the Lord standing above, and promising an innumerable seed and an everlasting possession.

Jacob was evidently unable to enter into the reality and fulness of God’s thoughts. He measured God by himself, and thus utterly failed to apprehend him. In short, Jacob had not yet really got to the end of himself; and hence he had not really begun with God.

~ end of chapter 28 ~

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