

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

REST, AND THE REST-GIVER

Genesis 49

“Oh, the little birds sang east, the little birds sang west!
And I said, in underbreath, all our life is mixed with death:
And who knoweth which is best?

Oh, the little birds sang east, the little birds sang west!
And I smiled to think God’s goodness flows around our incompleteness;
Round our restlessness He’s rest!”

- Mrs. E. B. Browning

THERE is much of interest in these dying words of Jacob, through which Israel the Prince shines so conspicuously. We can but touch them as we pass, as the sea-bird touches the wave; for higher themes allure us. It would, for instance, be interesting to mark their accuracy.

- Reuben, though the firstborn, never excelled; no judge, prophet, or ruler, sprang from his tribe.
- Simeon was almost absorbed in the nomad tribes, of Southern Palestine.
- The cities in which the sons of Levi dwelt were scattered throughout all the tribes.
- Vestiges of terraced vineyards still attest how well the hilly province assigned to Judah suited the culture of the vine.
- Zebulun embosomed the lake of Galilee, and stretched away toward the coast of the blue Mediterranean.
- Esdraelon, the battle-field of Palestine, where Assyria from the North and Egypt from the South often not in deadly feud, lay within the limits of Issachar.
- Dan was small as an adder; but, like it, could inflict dangerous wounds on any invader who had to pass by it towards the heart of the country.
- Gad, much pressed by border war;
- Asher, notable for fertility;
- Naphtali, famous for eloquence;
- Benjamin, cruel as a wolf.

All these justified the prophecy of their dying ancestor; whilst the mighty tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, sprung from the sons of Joseph, inherited to the full **“the blessings of Heaven above; blessings of the deep that lieth under; blessings of the breasts and of the womb; blessings to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills”** (49:25).

It would be interesting, also, to mark the beauty of these dying words. They abound in observation and description of animal nature; indicating the habits of the shepherd's life, with which, from his earliest days Jacob must have been familiar.

- The lion's whelp, couching in his lair, refusing to be roused up, because satisfied with a sufficient meal.
- The ass, and her colt browsing on the young grapes of the vine.
- The serpent lurking in the sand; and springing out as the horse passes him, with venomous sting.
- The wolf, with stealthy tread, seeking his prey at night.
- The slender, gentle hind.

Then, too, the vineyards, rich with grapes; that stain the garments of the peasants with blood-red juice, as they stamp them in the vats. The boughs running over the vineyard walls, in rich bounty, and giving refreshment to weary passersby. The bubbling waters of the spring. The beach of the distant sea. The blue outline of the everlasting hills in the far distance. All these bespeak a mind that loved natural beauty.

It would be interesting, also, to mark the close connection between the awards and the character of the bearded sons who stood around the withered, propped-up body of that dying man; whilst his spirit was flaming out in one last splendid outburst of prophetic and prince-like glory, too much for the frail tenement to endure.

Take, for example, the case of Reuben: he had committed a nameless sin years before; he might have hoped that it was all long since forgotten; but no, here it re-appears, dragged into inevitable light as ours must be, unless hidden beneath the Blood of Jesus. That sin deprived him of the primacy that one sin. Was not this, arbitrary? Not so: since it was the index of his character, and was the unerring evidence of an unstable nature; for sensuality and instability are one. As sensual indulgence palsies the nerves of the body, so it paralyses the strength and decision of the spirit.

And there was this further dread effect of Reuben's sin: he not only entailed a loss of position and prestige on his descendants, but he transmitted to them his own character. On the threshold of Canaan they asked for land east of Jordan; they could not wait: they showed all the characteristics of the man of appetite, who places the present above the future, and seen above the unseen. And Deborah, in her war song, chanted the requiem of the martial valor of the tribe.

But amidst all this change of character, condition, and estate, there comes, in these dying words, the announcement of a personality, mysterious, ineffable, sublime, which dwarfs all others as Mont Blanc the lesser elevations of his mountain realm; and before which that aged spirit bows in worship, illumining the withered face with a light not born of earth. What does he mean by those mystic words, describing the Shiloh; and His coming; and the gathering of the peoples to Him? There is a power in them that strangely stirs our spirits. We feel instinctively that we are face to face with Him before whom angels bow, veiling their faces with their wings. Again the words ring in our hearts:

**“The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,
nor a lawgiver from between his feet,
until Shiloh come;
and unto Him shall the gathering of the peoples be.”**

I. LET US TRY TO UNDERSTAND THEM

The primacy of Israel, forfeited by Reuben, was transferred to Judah. The sceptre, or staff, surely indicates legislative authority; the lawgiver, some kind of legislator: and the drift of meaning in the verse is that Judah should retain the primacy of the tribes; and should not fail to have some kind of government, and some kind of governor, until One came, of whom Jacob spoke as Shiloh. And who is this Shiloh? The greatest modern Hebrew critics tell us that it is like the German Frederick Rich in Peace; the Rest- Giver; the Man of Rest. And of whom can this be true, but of One? Amid the vice and crimes of their times, an aged pair gave to their new-born son the name of Noah - Rest; and hoped that he would live to comfort them. It was, alas! a vain hope; the waters of the deluge were destined to sweep over their home and world.

No man can give us rest. He who shall give rest to the toiling populations of earth, must be more than man; and must be superior to those changes that toss us on their tumultuous billows. The true Shiloh can be none other than the Son of God; who, standing amongst earth's toiling millions, said, **“Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”**

I have sometimes wondered where Jacob learnt this most sweet and true name of our Lord Jesus. Was it flashed into his heart, at that moment, for the first time? It may have been. But there is another supposition, which has often pleased me. You will remember that at Peniel, Jacob asked the mysterious combatant His name. What answer did he receive? When Manoah asked a similar question, the angel of the Lord told him it was secret. But no such negative was spoken to Jacob. The angel simply said: **“Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after My name? And He blessed him there.”**

I have sometimes thought that, as He blessed him, He whispered in his ear this lovely title; which lingered in the old man's mind, as the years went on, and became invested with ever fuller and richer meaning, as he felt to need more urgently the balm and strength which it contained. To him that overcometh Christ promises to give a white stone; and in that stone a new name written, which is only known to him that receiveth it. Why should He not have done as much for that old-world patriarch, who had overcome in his defeat; and had gone from wrestling in full strength to halting on shrunken thigh? And it would be only natural that, at the moment of full surrender, He should teach him the secret of rest. This is the universal order of Christian living: first the resistance; then the shrunken sinew; then the yielding and clinging; and finally rest.

Jacob, then, believed that the Rest-giver would come at length; and that, when He came, people would be gathered to Him not driven, as he had seen long strings of Nubian slaves driven through the streets of Egyptian towns: but gathered as a hen gathers her chickens beneath her wing; or as the magnet attracts steel-filings to itself.

II. LET US NOTE, ALSO, THEIR LITERAL FULFILMENT

For long centuries, Judah held the proud position assigned by the dying chieftain. The lion of the tribe of Judah brooked no rival. Jerusalem lay in his territory. David sprang from his sons. Throughout the long captivity, princes still claimed and held their right; for we are told, when Cyrus issued the proclamation that gave them liberty, **“there arose up the chief of the fathers of Judah, and numbered unto them Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.”**

It was Judah that returned from the captivity and gave the title Jew to every member of the race; and even up to the times of our Lord, there were vestiges of the ancient government in the council before which He was arraigned.

But the system had become decrepit, and showed signs of passing away.

We are told, for instance, when the Idumaeen Herod was placed upon the throne, all Jewish patriots were in deep consternation. Men with wild and haggard looks, their garments rent, and ashes on their heads, went about the streets crying, “Woe unto us! woe unto us! for the sceptre is departed from Judah; and a lawgiver from between his feet.” Still the complex machinery of inferior and superior courts lingered on, until that mighty explosion burst beneath the Jewish State leaving not a single Jew within fifty miles of Bethlehem; and making it utterly impossible for Shiloh to come out of Judah.

Before this entire break-up of the Jewish system, the Shiloh came.

When they were expecting Him at the front door, He stole in at the back. Whilst they were expecting Him with outward show, He came as the spring comes, and as day breaks. He had rest in Himself. What else could have kept Him so calm amid the tumult at Nazareth; and the raging of the storm on the Lake of Galilee; and the mob in Gethsemane? And He gave rest: rest from weary years of pain; rest from tears and heartache; rest from sin.

And as He has spoken through the centuries, His still small voice has been heard above the fevered throb and pulse of human life, saying, “Come unto Me, come unto Me!” and spirits have arisen and gone forth to Him: drawn to Him as the publicans and sinners were of old; gathering to Him as the oppressed in the old kingdom of Saul gathered to David in Adullam’s cave, furnishing material for a host which was to carry everything before its victorious arms.

“Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth” (Psalms 110:3).

III. LET US REALIZE THEIR TRUTH

What a variety of weary eyes will read these words! weary eyes, aching heads, tired bodies, breaking hearts. Tired of sitting at the task which barely suffices to get bread for hungry little ones; tired of waiting for one who never comes; tired of bearing the slow torture of never-ceasing pain; tired of the strain of competition, ever waxing keener and more merciless; tired of the conflict against the evil around; tired of the war with self and sin within; tired of life:

“Lord, oftentimes I am a-weary quite
Of my own self, my sin, my vanity;
Yet be not Thou (or I am lost outright)
Weary of me.”

Would to God that each of these could understand that Jesus Christ, the true Shiloh, is able to give them, now and for evermore rest!” **Come unto Me, all ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you REST.”**

It is a royal word. If this were the only scrap of His words, we should feel Him to have been the most royal man that ever trod our world. He knows exactly what men want; and He feels that He has the secret, and is Himself the universal and unfailing reservoir of rest. What must not be the ocean-fulness of His heart! which can fill up every void and vacancy in all human spirits: as the tides of the Pacific, the stormless, restful ocean, fill up all the myriad indentations of every continent, and coral reef, and emerald isle, washed by their waves! What certainty is here! no doubt, or question, or fear of failure; no faltering in that clear voice; no hesitancy in that decisive accent. We may trust Him, brothers and sisters. He at least has learnt the law of equilibrium.

He speaks that which He knows. He has Himself the rest He promises. Put yourselves into His hand. It will not take Him longer to give you rest, than it took Him to still the waves; they did not even need to rock themselves to rest: **“immediately there was a great calm.”**

The Shiloh-rest is not for Heaven.

We need not ask for the wings of a dove to fly away to it. We should not find it hereafter, if we did not first find it here. “We which believe DO enter into rest.” The rest remaineth, only in the sense of being unexhausted by all who have gone before. It awaits us in unstinted abundance.

The Shiloh-rest is not in Circumstances.

That thought lies at the root of the teaching of the Epicurean, the Stoic, the worldly philosopher. But circumstances will never bring it; any more than change of posture will bring permanent relief to the pain-racked body. Here is a truer science: rest within rest within the heart, while storms, and perplexities, and trials are swirling through the world; as the ocean depths are still enough to permit of perpetual deposits while hurricanes sweep the surface; and as there is a point of calm in the midst of the fiercest whirlwind that ever marched across the desert sands.

The Shiloh-rest is not in Inaction.

He invites us to no bank of roses; to no Elysian plain; to no parade-ground. In Heaven, though they rest, yet they rest not. They rest in their blessed service. They serve without breaking their rest. There is the strenuous putting forth of energy; but no strain, no effort, no sense of fatigue. And such is the rest He gives. Does He not speak of a **“burden”** and a **“yoke”** in the same breath as He speaks of Rest?

And it is not hard to get it. See! He gives it; and it does not need much effort to take a gift. He shows just where to look for it; and it is easy enough to find a thing if we know just where it lies. There seems to me but three conditions to be fulfilled by us.

(1) *Surrender all to Him.*

As long as you try to wield that sceptre, or permit your will to be the lawgiver of your life, the Shiloh cannot come to you.

- You must give up your own efforts to save yourself your own ideas of getting right with God; your own choice; your own way; your own will.
- You must as absolutely cease from your own works as God did from His on the Sabbath of His rest.
- You must hand over your sinful spirit to be saved by Him;
- You must surrender the keys of every room in your heart;
- You must be willing for Him to be supreme monarch of every province of your being;
- You must lie naked and open to Him as the victim before the priest.

So only can you expect rest. And if you cannot bring your nature into this posture, ask Him to do it for you. Let your will crown Him as our own Alfred was crowned, when the most of England was still ravaged by the Danes. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till He have put down all rule and authority and power, and made Himself supreme throughout heart and life.

(2) *Trust Him, by handing over all to Him.*

Hand over to Him all your sins and all your sorrows. He taketh away the sin of the world.

- Do not wait till sins have accumulated into a cloud or a mountain.
- Do not tarry till the time has come for evening prayer.
- Do not delay till you are alone.

But as swiftly as you are conscious of any burden, pass it on to Jesus; cast all your care upon Him, for He careth for you. His eye is quick to see each effort to believe; and His heart is large enough to hold the troubles of the world.

So soon as you give, He takes; and what He takes He also undertakes; and will see it made right for you, to your rejoicing and to His glory. This is the Blessed Rest of Faith; the Land of Promise into which our Joshua waits to lead all who trust Him.

(3) *Take His yoke, and learn of Him i.e., do as He did.*

What did He do? What was His yoke? A yoke means submission. To whom did He submit? Not to man; not even to His mother; not to the suggestions of Satan: but to the Father's will. Whenever He saw the handwriting of that will, He meekly yielded submission. This was the secret of His rest.

To live in the will of God - this is rest. Be ever on the outlook for it: in every event; in every kindness or insult; in every letter; in every new friendship; in every discipline of Providence; and in every text of Scripture. And whenever you see it, take it. Do not wait for it to be forced on you; as a yoke on a heifer unaccustomed to it, which struggles till a deep wound is cut in its flesh. But take the yoke; be meek and lowly; imitate Him who said, "**The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?**"

The language which best befits such an one is that wonderful sentence, in which simplicity and sublimity struggle for mastery: "**Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in Thy sight.**"

A gentleman once visited a school of deaf and dumb children, and was asked to write them a question on the black-board; and he wrote, "Why did God make you deaf and dumb, while I can hear and speak?"

Tears filled their eyes; and after a slight pause, a little boy stepped forward, and took the chalk and wrote beneath, "**Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in Thy sight.**"

If you can say that, you have learnt the secret of rest; and Shiloh has already come to you; and you are one of those that are being gathered to Him through the long weary ages to share His ultimate triumph and reign.

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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