

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GLIMPSES OF ISRAEL-NATURE

Genesis 47

“I held it truth with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.”

- Tennyson

AS a brook runs, it clears itself. It was so with Jacob's life. The discipline of life, like a refining fire, did not fail in its purpose. The dross of his nature was at last well-nigh worked out; and the nobler Israel-nature became more and more apparent. This change is marked by the change in the name by which he is designated on the inspired page. The old term, Jacob, is used but sparingly; and for the most part Israel is the title of his nobility.

Before we can study the traces of his increasing princeliness of character, we should do well to notice that the name Jacob, though used sparingly, is not wholly dropped. We can never forget what we were. We can never forget what we might be, were it not for the restraining grace of God. I cannot agree with those who think that the Jacob-nature may be expunged, wiped out from our being. In my judgment, both Scripture and experience are dead against them.

“**The flesh lusteth against the Spirit**”; and will lust, though with ever-decreasing force, unto the end. But it is my joyful belief, also, that “**the Spirit lusteth against the flesh**”; and represses it with such growing power that it is reduced to the last extremity: and we are kept from doing the things that we otherwise would.

Indeed, the self-life can scarcely be said to live, since it makes but the faintest response to temptation. If only we walk in the Spirit, and live in the Spirit, and are led by the Spirit, we shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh: we shall hardly be aware of their presence in our being; we shall be as good as dead to them.

But, in the moment that we cease to abide in living union with the Blessed Spirit, we shall find that the old nature will revive again, in horrid resurrection; and will sweep us down to a sin like that which blackened and saddened all David's later years.

Germ of disease may be constantly breeding in an infected house; but, so long as the disinfecting fluid is well sprinkled on the floors and pendant sheets, they are killed off as soon as they are formed. So sin, though present in the heart, may be choked off, so as to be almost unperceived; because the Holy Ghost is ever at work acting as a disinfectant: but, so soon as His grace is withdrawn, sin regains its old deadly sway, and breathes forth its pestilential poison. It is of the utmost importance, then, to keep in with the Holy Ghost. One more illustration, though some may deem it far-fetched, will clench and illustrate my meaning.

A mesmerist may weave a spell, by passing hands over a man of weaker mind, so as to cast him into all the appearances of death. But he is not dead; and when the charm is broken, the processes of life resume their course. So, beneath the spell of the grace of God's Holy Spirit, our evil self-life may lie as dead, only giving faint signs of life; and yet, if that spell be spoken, it will spring up with robust and deadly vigor. It becomes us then to watch and pray, lest we enter into temptation.

There is a beautiful experiment, which the readers of these lines may try for themselves; and which will give them a vivid idea of how the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus can make them free from the law of sin and death. If you take a heavy book and hold it at arm's length, the pull of the law of gravitation will soon draw it downwards; but if some friend will pour down that arm a constant stream of electricity, the flow of the electric current will set you free from the effect of the downward pull. It will still be there, though you will have become almost unconscious of it. Thus it will be when we are filled by the Spirit of God: the downward tendency may be in us yet; but it will be more than counteracted by the habit of that new life, in which the power of the living Saviour is ever at work, through the grace of the Holy Ghost.

In the earlier stages of the Christian life, the habit of abiding ever in communion with the Spirit of God is difficult to form and maintain. Some seem to acquire it more habitually and unbrokenly than others. Where this is the case, the Jacob-nature begins to disappear with a suddenness that reminds us of a rapid thaw, which, in a single night, may rid the streets of tons of snow.

In the case of those who learn the sweet lesson of unbroken fellowship more slowly, the Jacob-nature keeps breaking in upon the Israel-life, as the underlying rock-strata will break up through the green sward of a highland valley. Yet, as the years pass on, and the habit of fellowship becomes a permanent possession, these irruptions become less and less frequent; so that at last the Israel-nature has the almost undisputed sway in the life.

We have to notice some manifestations of this Israel-nature in Jacob, like the out-shinings of the sun: which, in the early morning, has fought with heavy mists for his supremacy; but at last shines out in a cloudless sky, and sets in radiant glory.

For more than twenty years Jacob mourned for Joseph as dead. The monotony of those years was only broken by new misfortunes, which came upon each other's heels, as the messengers of calamity to Job. We only catch some few sobs from that stricken heart; like the cries of the Crucified from amid the dense gloom of the cross.

On first seeing the bloodstained coat, **“I will go down into the grave mourning”**; on learning the first tidings about the rough governor, the lord of the land, **“Me have ye bereaved of my children;”** on the appeal of his sons to spare Benjamin, **“My son shall not go down with you, lest ye bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave;”** on their renewed appeal, **“Wherefore dealt ye so ill with me as to tell the man ye had a brother?”** on giving his final consent, in addition to his direction that they should take some few delicacies from their almost emptied stores, he said sadly and almost despairingly, **“God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may send away your other brother, and Benjamin. If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.”**

But the night of weeping was followed by the morning of joy. Joy looked in at the old man’s window; and sorrow and sighing fled away. What a confusion of emotion must have filled his heart when the completed band of his sons stood once again before him with such amazing tidings! Benjamin was there, and Simeon. Love had welded them together in the furnace of sorrow, like a twelve-linked chain, no link of which would ever again be missing. The God of their fathers had met with them; and henceforward would supply their needs so fully, that they could have no further lack, though the famine should last thrice seven years. And, above all, Joseph was yet alive; and he was governor over all the land of Egypt. What wonder that the aged heart stood still, and its machinery almost threatened to break down, beneath the pressure of sudden rapture. At first he could not believe it all. But the sight of the wagons convinced him. Then there came forth a gleam of the royal spirit of faith the spirit of Jacob revived, and Israel said, **“It is enough: Joseph my son is yet alive; I will go and see him before I die.”**

Before he left Canaan, he had one final interview with his Almighty Friend. It happened at Beersheba - the last halting-place amid the green pasture lands of the Land of Promise, and before they struck into the sand-waste that lay between them and Egypt. Everything there reminded him of his own early life which was spent there. He could find the ruins of his father’s altar; and the well which his father had sunk; and **“he offered sacrifices unto the God of his father Isaac.”**

At that time his mind was engaged in eager debate as to the path of duty. On the one hand, love to Joseph and his necessities drew him to Egypt; on the other, the memory of how much evil had befallen his ancestors whenever they went down to Egypt, made him eagerly question whether he was justified in going. It was at that time that God made his path clear, by saying, **“Fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation: I will go down with thee into Egypt; and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes.”**

How comfortably our God speaks to us when we are sore perplexed. If we will only wait, we shall hear a voice behind us saying, **“This is the way, walk ye in it.”** But, since the voice speaks from behind, we must not run on too far or fast in front.

(1) There is a glimpse of the Israel-nature in his meeting with Joseph.

How feverishly the old man anticipated it! and when, on the confines of Egypt, he learnt that the second chariot in the land was bringing his long-lost son to his embrace, he roused himself to meet him; not as the Jacob of olden days, but as Israel the Prince.

“And Israel said unto Joseph, Now let me die, since I have seen thy face, because thou art yet alive.”

(2) There is yet another glimpse of the Israel-nature in his blessing of Pharaoh.

Joseph might almost have been ashamed of his aged father, and left him in the background. He was old, and decrepit, and lame. He had spent all his life in tents and sheep-farms, and was totally ignorant of the manners of a court. He was an exile, an emigrant, a man who had failed. His very presence there was due to his ruinous losses. What a contrast between him and the glorious Pharaoh, whose court teemed with science and wit; with soldiers and priests; with wealth and splendor! And yet, when he stood before Pharaoh, there was so much moral grandeur about him that the greatest monarch in the world bent eagerly beneath his blessing. **“How old art thou?”** was the kind inquiry of the mighty monarch, to commemorate whom a massive pyramid, destined to outlast his race, was in course of erection.

The question was perhaps suggested by his bent form and withered look. The reply was sad enough; and it was the Jacob-nature that uttered it. It seemed like an anticipation of the cry of Ecclesiastes, **“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”** It was lit up by no single ray of thankfulness, or faith, or hope: **“And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage”** (Genesis 47:9).

Few, in comparison with those of Terah, Abraham, and Isaac. Evil, in comparison with that of Esau, who stood at the head of a great kingdom, the progenitor of a line of kings. And yet, with this confession ringing in his ears, Pharaoh was blessed by those outstretched trembling hands, and by that quavering voice. Esau never could have done that.

“Without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better.” Jacob must have had something about him that rendered him superior to the greatest monarch of his time. There were two kings in that royal chamber decorated by weird hieroglyphs and long lines of fantastic figures: the one, royal with the adventitious distinction of birth and rank; the other, a way-worn pilgrim, royal with the divine patent of royalty a noble character. And, as they stood together, it was shown to all the world that the spiritual is greater than the material; and that God can endow a human spirit with such moral splendor as to compel the world’s conquerors to confess themselves conquered before its power. You may be crafty, mean, and bargain-loving; yet if you will but yield yourself to God, and submit to his loving discipline, He will make you truly royal, and give you the moral power, which masters all other power beside.

(3) There is yet another glimpse of the Israel-nature in his solemn injunctions to Joseph about his burial. “The time drew nigh that Israel must die: and he called his son Joseph, and said unto him . . . And Israel bowed himself upon the bed’s head.” It is the death-scene which shows the true nature of a man; and its darkness set Jacob’s better nature in full relief.

He was evidently a man of faith.

He knew the ancient promise made by God, of which Abraham may have often spoken to him in his early life that their seed should inherit Canaan. He was sure, therefore, that his people would not always abide in Egypt however fertile its Goshens, or friendly its peoples. The trumpet would sound the summons for their departure. If then he were buried in Egypt, he would be left behind, a stranger among strangers; and this could not be. He must be where his people were. To him, therefore, burial in the most splendid mausoleum that was ever constructed in that land of silent tombs was not for one moment to be compared with burial in Machpelah's solitary and humble cave; which at that time was a mere outpost in a distant and hostile land. And he desired it, not only because the mortal remains of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, and of Leah lay there; but because he foresaw the time when it would be surrounded by the teeming myriads of his children.

He could only see this by faith.

He **“had not received the promises; but, by faith, he had seen them afar off, and was persuaded of them, and embraced them.”** It was by faith that he was able to say, **“Behold I die: but God shall be with you, and bring you again unto the land of your fathers . . . Bury me not in Egypt; but I will lie with my fathers, and thou shalt carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burying-place.”**

Was it not Israel that spake thus? Faith made him royal; as it will ennoble the coarsest and commonest nature, lifting the beggar from the dunghill, and making him sit among princes. And these noble utterances prove how truly God had done his work of ennoblement; and how royal was the spirit of the dying patriarch.

(4) There is yet another glimpse of the Israel-nature in his dealings with Joseph's sons.

In the chapter that records that solemn scene, it is almost entirely on Israel that our attention is fixed.

- **“Israel strengthened himself on his bed.”**
- **“Israel beheld Joseph's sons.”**
- **“Israel stretched out his right hand.”**
- **“Israel said unto Joseph.”**

The sands of time had nearly run out in that aged and battered body; and when Joseph arrived at his dwelling, the gift of his own munificence, the dying man seems to have been lying in the extreme of physical exhaustion. But the sound of the beloved name of “Joseph” rallied him and, propped by pillows, he sat up upon his bed. Then, with that wonderful accuracy of memory which is so remarkable in the dying, he reviewed the past. The vision of the wondrous ladder, with its troops of angels; the precious words of promise, which one hundred years could not obliterate from the tablets of memory; the scene on the hilly road to Bethlehem, where he buried Rachel; and the successive instances of the guardian care of the Angel who had tended him as a shepherd does his flock, all his life long until that day all passed before his eye, dim with age, but bright with memory and hope.

Amid this reverie, the old man became aware of the presence of Joseph's two sons, and inquired who they were; and when he knew, he asked that they might be brought near enough for him to give them an old man's blessing. He did this with great affection and solemnity. He kissed and embraced them; and asked that his good Angel might bless the lads. He ranked them among his own sons: and was led by prophetic insight to distinguish between them, crossing his hands, and laying his right on the head of the younger, whom Joseph had placed before his left; and his left on the head of the elder, whom the father had placed before his right.

When Joseph remonstrated with him, thinking it was a mistake due to his age and blindness, the old man still held to his choice, as one conscious of a prerogative in which not even Joseph must interfere.

This touching interview ended by the gift to Joseph of the parcel of ground which he had wrested from the Amorites in Shechem. It had long ago returned to its original owners; but he saw, down the vista of the future, that there would be a reversion of the whole to him and his and it was of that future that he spoke in faith.

The whole of this scene is replete with a dignity, born of moral greatness, and worthy of Israel, the Prince.

Time fails to bring out the traits of royalty in the closing scene of all, which must yield us material for our next chapter. It is enough to remind you of them, ere we close. They are evident enough. Twelve strong, bearded men stand around him. He is in the last extreme of physical decrepitude; but he does not cower or shrink before them, as in other days. His face may be shadowed with death; but his eye gleams with the light of prophecy. He calls out their names one by one. He arraigns them at the bar of judgment. He reviews their past. He apportions them their praise or blame. He allots their future.

“These are the twelve tribes of Israel; and this is it that their father spake unto them.”

We need not go into further particulars; because enough has been said to convince the most careless reader of the royalty that shone forth from this aged man, as the gleaming torch-lights flashed from the breaking pitchers of Gideon's host.

And there is enkindled in our hearts the hope that God will do as much for us, through Him who loveth us, and by His death hath made us kings unto God, with whom we shall one day reign on the earth.

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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