

Genesis Devotional Commentary

GENESIS DEVOTIONALS W H GRIFFITH-THOMAS

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Genesis 25:11-28 The Birth of Jacob

"GOD buries His workmen and carries on His work."

This is the simple but significant truth taught in the verse that immediately follows the record of the burial of Abraham.

"And it came to pass after the death of Abraham that God blessed his son Isaac."

God calls His servants to Himself, but His purposes abide. Abraham dies, but God lives, and the Divine blessing continues to rest upon the son of His servant. Abraham's seed was already experiencing the commencement of the fulfilment of the Divine promise, "In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." We have now to follow the course of the Divine purpose and see how it was carried out; how the unchanging God continued with His servants, blessing them and fulfilling His own word of truth and grace.

The second half of Genesis contains the generations of Ishmael (Ge 25:12-18), of Isaac (Ge 25:19-35:29), of Esau (Ge 36:1-43), and of Jacob (Ge 37:2-Ge 50:26). The record deals very briefly with the stories of Ishmael and Esau, the brevity indicating the definite purpose of Genesis, which is to show the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham and the development of God's purpose of redemption (Ge 3:15).

The lives of Abraham and Jacob stand out prominently in the record. Of Isaac much less is said. His life was practically devoid of striking incident, his character was quiet and passive, and, except as a link in the chain of the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise, he is of no special importance in the patriarchal history. It is different with Jacob. God is known as the God of Abraham, but still more definitely as the God of Jacob. The latter title is particularly appropriate in view of the fact that Jacob was the direct and immediate ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The life of Jacob is of interest and value, not merely as revelation of human character, but also and chiefly as a manifestation of Divine grace. Viewed from the standpoint of his nature, Jacob is unattractive and even repulsive; but as we study his history step by step we become conscious that God's grace is at work, molding and fashioning him by the discipline of sorrow, suffering, and loss. There is no character in Holy Scripture which more clearly manifests the glory of Divine grace in dealing with the most forbidding of materials. And because the record in Genesis holds the mirror up to nature and also reveals the glory of grace, the story of Jacob has a perennial interest for us all. We see ourselves in the story of Jacob; our weaknesses, and yet our aspirations; our failures, and yet our fresh starts; our cowardice, and yet our endeavour to trust God.

At the point at which we take up the story of Genesis, we are introduced to the family life of the patriarch Isaac. He has been married many years, his father is still alive, and nothing of moment in connection with the development of the Divine purposes seems to have occurred since the day of his marriage. Consider carefully each element in this picture of family life.

I. The Husband (Ge 25:20, 21)

Isaac was experiencing a great disappointment. It was now nearly twenty years (Ge 25:26) since that memorable day when he first saw the wife of God's choice. And yet his home was still without a child. Year after year had passed, and there was no fulfilment of the Divine promise. This was a real trial and a definite test of his faith. The Divine message had been clear that in Isaac, not in Ishmael, Abraham's seed was to be called; and yet now it seemed almost impossible that the promise could be fulfilled. God's delays, however, are not necessarily denials, and the fulfilment of the promise was not the only element in the Divine purpose. The

training of faith and the discipline of character were also in view, and we feel sure God delayed the fulfillment of His word in order that all human hope which rested solely on natural powers should give way, and the Divine action might be made still more prominent.

In his difficulty and trial Isaac did the very best possible thing; he took it to the Lord in prayer.

The answer soon came. God had only been testing His servant's faith, and we are clearly intended to understand that the gift of the children was a definite grant from God, a Divine interposition in order to make it still more evident that the promise to Abraham was by grace and not by nature. God often delays in the bestowal of His grace in order that we may the more thoroughly rely upon Him and the more definitely realize that our expectation is from Him, and not merely from secondary causes or natural laws.

II. The Wife (Ge 25:22, 23)

Even now everything was not clear, and it was Rebekah's turn to experience distress and perplexity. She could not understand God's dealings with her, and wondered as to the cause of it. Like her husband, however, she did the very best thing; she turned to God and inquired of Him. How often it has occurred since that day that God's children have received answers from Him very different from what they have expected, and have experienced perplexity as to the meaning of the Divine discipline! Sometimes in the pathway of duty, when the soul is sincerely conscious of uprightness and whole-hearted consecration to God, there is trouble, trial, difficulty, and anxiety. A man believes he has been right in following a certain pathway, only to find himself surrounded by almost overwhelming anxieties and difficulties. The forces of evil seem more active than ever, and he begins to wonder whether he was right, after all, in doing what he has done. Like Rebekah, he must again resort to God and seek out the Divine will.

The answer is very striking. Rebekah was taught that her trouble involved great and far-reaching results. She was first of all told that she was to have two sons, not one; then that the two sons would represent two nations which are to be opposed to each other from the very first; and, last of all, that the elder was to serve the younger. Thus Rebekah was the unconscious instrument of carrying out the Divine purpose. Her trouble had nothing whatever to do with herself individually, but was part of a great Divine plan which God was about to work out for His own glory.

In all this we see the marvel and glory of the Divine sovereignty. Why the younger son should have been chosen instead of the elder we do not know. It is, however, very striking to find the same principle exercised on several other occasions. It is pretty certain that Abraham was not the eldest son of Terah. We know that Isaac was the younger son of Abraham, and that Joseph was not the eldest son of Jacob. All this goes to emphasize the simple but significant fact that the order of nature is not necessarily the order of grace. All through, God desired to display the sovereignty of His grace as contrasted with that which was merely natural in human life. The great problem of Divine sovereignty is of course insoluble by human intellect. It has to be accepted as a simple fact. It should, however, be observed that it is not merely a fact in regard to things spiritual; it is found also in nature in connection with human temperaments and races. All history is full of illustrations of the Divine choice, as we may see from such examples as Cyrus and Pharaoh. Divine election is a fact, whether we can understand it or not. God's purposes are as certain as they are often inscrutable, and it is perfectly evident from the case of Esau and Jacob that the Divine choice of men is entirely independent of their merits or of any pre-vision of their merits or attainments (Ro 9:11-note). It is in connection with this subject that we see the real force of St. Paul's striking words when he speaks of God as acting "according to the good pleasure of His will" (Ep 1:5-note) ; and although we are bound to confess the "mystery of His will" (Ep 1:9-note) , we are also certain that He works all things "after the counsel of His will" (Ep 1:11-note). There is nothing arbitrary about God and His ways, and our truest wisdom when we cannot understand His reasons is to rest quietly and trustfully, saying, "Even so, Father, for so it seemeth good in Thy sight." "In His Will is our peace."

III. The Sons (Ge 25:24, 25, 26, 27, 28)

From the moment of their birth the sons differed in appearance, and their unlikeness was a symbol of that hostility which characterized their after-life and the history of their descendants. The outward signs were expressive of real differences. As they grew they were also very different in pursuits, Esau being a clever hunter, a man of outdoor life; while Jacob was just the opposite—a quiet (Revised Version, margin), home-keeping man. Their names were given with reference to the facts which were evident at their birth. Esau was so called because of his hairy aspect, and Jacob from his laying hold of his brother's heel at their very entrance upon life.

They also differed in regard to the paternal affection bestowed upon them. Esau was his father's favorite, Jacob his mother's. Isaac, the quiet, passive man, saw in Esau, the bold hunter, the energetic nature of the woman whom he had loved as a wife all those years. Rebekah, the strong, self-assertive woman, saw in the quiet, gentle Jacob the quiet, passive husband whom she had loved so long. It is often found that the father loves the boy or girl who resembles the mother, while the mother is frequently found to favor the boy or girl whose nature is most akin to the father; but when, as in this case, partiality is carried to great extremes, nothing but trouble can be the result. God's revelation about the younger ruling the elder was obviously no secret. Both parents and sons must have known of it, and it is this knowledge that makes the partiality more heinous, and at the same time more deplorable in its results.

1. In times of difficulty or perplexity let us wait and pray.

Both Isaac and Rebekah experienced the real difficulty of not knowing how God's will and purpose were to be fulfilled. They did the very best possible thing; they handed their difficulty over to God in trust and prayer. In the midst of perplexity it is not wise or well to be too much occupied in telling others of our troubles. Our wisdom and comfort will be found in telling the Lord Himself. "Half the breath thus vainly spent" should be sent to Heaven in supplication. Waiting for God and waiting on God will always be our greatest consolation.

2. In the face of deep problems of life let us trust and pray

Rebekah could not understand the circumstances which were causing difficulty and anxiety; and even after the revelation of God concerning the younger son there must have been not a little perplexity to know the meaning of it all. Our greatest wisdom in all such circumstances is found in simple trust and earnest prayer. God's ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts (Isa 55:8). We may perhaps have no real thought beyond our own little horizon, but it may be that God is working out His purpose through us on a large scale. What matters it what we endure, so long as God's will is being done through us? Let us abide in humble trust and hopeful prayer and "believe to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

3. In the presence of home troubles and trials let us watch and pray.

Isaac and Rebekah clearly brought upon themselves a great deal of their trouble by their partiality for the sons, and when home life is thus disturbed by jealousies and quarreling we may be sure that God's blessing is withheld.

"**Watch and pray lest ye enter into temptation**" (Mt 26:41) is as important in connection with home life as it is with anything else, and those are most likely to meet all such difficulties successfully who watch that the enemy shall not take occasion to lead them astray, and who pray for needed grace daily to do the will of God.

Genesis 25:29-34 The Birthright

THE revelation of the Divine will concerning the two brothers (Ge 25:23) was evidently no secret. It is clear that both Esau and Jacob knew of it. This fact is in some respects the key to the true interpretation of this incident.

I. The Bargain of the Brothers

The contrast in appearance which marked the two boys was continued in their characters as men. Their daily pursuits were expressive of their natures and temperaments. Esau comes in one day from hunting, tired and hungry. The savor of the pottage is enticing, and the hungry and weary man cries out to his brother to feed him with that red stuff of which he does not even know the name. Now is Jacob's opportunity, for which he has probably been waiting. He had doubtless already taken his brother's measure and knew how to deal with him, and so he proposes a bargain: "Sell me this day thy birthright." The birthright seems to have included temporal and spiritual blessings; it carried with it a double portion of the paternal inheritance (Dt 21:17; 1Chr 5:2) ; it gave the holder precedence as head of the family or tribe; above all, it constituted the possessor priest and spiritual head of his people. All this Jacob evidently knew, and in the light of what God had said to his mother he already appreciated the value of the birthright.

It is not at all improbable that long before this moment Esau had learned to set little store by the family privileges which belonged to him as the firstborn son. To him the position and opportunity meant little or nothing; and now he impulsively cries out that as the birthright is of no profit to him, since he is at the point of death, he is willing to sell it for a meal of red lentils. It seems clear from the narrative that there was no likelihood whatever of his dying for want of food. The words are expressive of his utter disregard of and indifference to the position and privileges associated with the birthright.

Jacob, knowing his brother's weakness and bearing in mind the issues involved in the transaction, calls upon Esau to take a solemn oath. This Esau is quite ready to do, and so the transaction is closed. He sold his birthright and in return received the meal that he so eagerly desired. "Thus Esau despised his birthright." In these few words we have the illuminating touch which explains the whole position. This was no sudden impulse on the part of Esau, just as it was no sudden brilliant idea on the part of Jacob. On the one hand, there was the attitude of despising the birthright and on the other the attitude of full appreciation. These things do not spring up suddenly and at once; they are plants of longer growth. It is this fact that compels us to go beneath the surface and try to discover the explanation of both sides of the transaction.

II. The Characters of the Brothers

On the surface of the story Esau is a good specimen of the man of the world—frank, warmhearted, and every inch a man. There is a superficial attractiveness about him, and we easily dub him a fine fellow. In reality, however, he was at once sensuous and sensual. The one word "profane" (Heb 12:16-note) in its literal meaning sums up his character. It comes from pro-fanum, "outside the temple," and refers to that plot of ground just in front of the fane which was common to everyone, as being outside the sacred enclosure. Gradually the word came to mean that which was purely earthly and common, as opposed to that which was sacred, consecrated, and dedicated to God. Esau's life was entirely earth-bound. God was not in all his thoughts. He was intent only on present gratification, and set no value on the Divine gifts. To him future blessings were intangible and unreal, and as he thought he was going to die he did not see any reason why he should grasp at blessings which could never be personally enjoyed. Everything about the present was real to him, while everything about the future was unreal, vague, and misty; and so, whatever we may say about Jacob's part in the transaction, Esau cannot be exculpated. So far from being an injured man he really supplanted himself. To him this world was everything and God nothing.

"He is the kind of man of whom we are in the habit of charitably saying that he is nobody's enemy but his own. But, in truth, he is God's enemy, because he wastes the splendid manhood which God has given him. Passionate, impatient, impulsive, incapable of looking before him, refusing to estimate the worth of anything which does not immediately appeal to his senses, preferring the animal to the spiritual, he is rightly called a "profane person."

"Alas!" while the body is so broad and brawny, must the soul lie blinded, dwarfed, stupefied, almost annihilated?" (Carlyle) ."

Jacob's character, on the other hand, was unattractive and even repulsive on the surface. He was cool and calculating, could hold his appetites and desires in check, and wait—if necessary for years—for the accomplishment of his purpose. He evidently knew his brother well, and had been watching his opportunity. When the psychological moment came he took advantage of it at once. All this tends to repel us from the man as unworthy and contemptible, and no one for a moment can doubt that his crafty and subtle method was in every way objectionable and deplorable. And yet underneath the surface there was not a little in him of an entirely opposite character. He had a keen and true appreciation of that which Esau despised. He realized the spiritual nature of the birthright; and though we utterly object to the method by which he attempted to obtain it we must never forget that his object was good, and that he desired to obtain that which he knew God intended for him. Thus Jacob was appreciative of the spiritual meaning of the birthright, and was at any rate to some extent truly sensitive to the Divine word. He wanted spiritual blessings, even though he went the wrong way to obtain them. He also shines out in contrast with his brother in his constancy. Esau was one of the most inconstant of men, everything by turns and nothing long, a shallow nature full of impulse and ungoverned feelings; today despising his birthright, tomorrow wanting it back; today absolutely indifferent, tomorrow sorrowing over his loss. Jacob on the other hand was tenacious and persistent, and possessed a reserve of strength which, even though it was often directed into wrong channels, was in itself one of the most valuable features of human life.

Thus while superficially we are attracted to Esau and repelled by Jacob, as we penetrate towards the depth of their characters we see the true natures of the brothers and their differences of attitude to and outlook on life and things spiritual.

1) Lessons from Esau

(a) The real proof of life is personal character.

It was the act in Esau's case that revealed the true state of affairs and showed what he was. We see in him "that inexorable law of human souls, that we are preparing ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good or evil that gradually determines character" (George Eliot). No one becomes base all at once, and we may be perfectly sure that Esau's character had already deteriorated before he made this choice. Character is continually growing, and when the crisis comes we act, not solely according to what we wish at the moment, but according to what we really are, for our wishes are the expressions of our actual character. Esau possessed no spiritual insight, no appreciation whatever of the blessings of the great Abrahamic covenant. He cared only for this life and for present enjoyment. The result was that when the test came the true man was revealed. According as he had lived previously, so his character showed itself.

**The tissues of the life to be
We weave with colors all our own;
And in the field of Destiny
We reap as we have sown.**

(b) The supreme test of character is found in little things

It seemed but a small matter, a feeling of hunger and a desire for food, and yet it was the means of testing and revealing Esau's real character. It is a sad and solemn picture, a strong man who cannot wait a moment for food and cries out to be fed. How often in

history have insignificant events been turning points of human lives! We are tested more by trifles than by great crises. Many men can shine in emergencies who are not able to stand the test of faithfulness in little things.

(c) The imperative necessity in life is to subdue the flesh to the spirit

Esau failed to see, because he had lost the power to see, that the mind and soul need food as well as the body. And if life is "harmony with environment," then nothing purely physical can nourish the soul. It is only too easy to crush and kill our higher aspirations by undue attention to the demands of our lower nature. This is true not only of the purely earth-bound like Esau, but also of great and noble natures like Darwin's, who by absorption in intellectual pursuits become atrophied in taste and feeling. No part of our complex nature must remain unnourished, but we must see to it that physical and even intellectual enjoyments do not dwarf and eventually kill the spiritual side of our being. When the animal and spiritual collide, it will involve sacrifice if the spiritual is to be considered. The little girl's explanation of St. Paul "keeping under his body" was not far wrong: "by keeping his soul on top."

(d) The one thing needful is to put God first in our life

So far as we can see, God had no place in the life of Esau. With all his bodily vigor and general attractiveness there was one part of his nature entirely uncultivated. He was God-less. He lived for the present, not for the future; for things physical, not spiritual; for time, not eternity. In this he is like many men today. They have everything that this world can give—wealth, money, natural powers, position—everything but God. And yet, with all their advantages, they must necessarily fail. "In the beginning God." And when God is first, then all else finds its place—purpose, power, and perpetual peace and progress.

2. Lessons from Jacob

(a) The necessity of right principle

Jacob's purpose in desiring the birthright was undoubtedly genuine and exemplary, but the way in which he went to work to obtain the birthright was in every way deplorable and wrong. He was one of the earliest, but unfortunately has not been by any means the last, of those who have considered that the end justifies the means. This is one of the deadliest foes of true living. The end does not justify the means; and right ends must always be accomplished by right means, or else left unaccomplished.

(b) The value of waiting for God

If only Jacob had been willing to wait God's time and way, what a difference it would have made to him! The birthright would have been his in any case, but he was unwilling to allow God to give it to him. How like we are to Jacob in this respect! We take God at His word, and yet we will not wait God's time; and the result is we bring untold sorrow and trouble upon ourselves and others. It is essential that we keep in view the two requirements of the true life, faith and patience (He 6:12-note). It is not enough to believe what God has said; we must "wait patiently for Him." (Ps 37:7-note)

(c) The certainty of righteous retribution

We must never forget that God permitted Jacob no possession of the birthright until he had first of all acknowledged Esau as his lord (Ge 32:4,5ff), and had renounced all claim to it as the result of this evil bargain. He did not enter upon the birthright until it came quite naturally into his possession after Esau had abandoned it (Ge 36:6). How different his life would have been if only he had believed that God was able to carry out His purposes unaided—at least, unaided by cleverness and deceit!

(d) The conclusion of the whole matter is that the only guarantee of true living is God in the heart and life as absolutely and permanently supreme. When God dwells in the heart as Saviour, in the conscience as Master, in the life as Lord, then—and only then—do we become assured of the possession of God's spiritual birthright and of its enjoyment in God's own way.

Genesis 26:1-33

Isaac

ALTHOUGH Isaac lived the longest of all the patriarchs less is recorded of him than of the others. This is the only chapter exclusively devoted to his life. His was a quiet, peaceful, normal life. He was the ordinary son of a great father, and the ordinary father of a great son. We are accustomed to speak of such lives as commonplace and ordinary, and yet the ordinary life is the "ordered" life, and in the truest sense the "ordained" life. Like the rest of us, Isaac's experiences were marked by light and shade, by sin and discipline, by grace and mercy. The chapter before us is full of illustrations of how difficulties should and should not be met.

I. Difficulty met by Divine Guidance (Ge 26:1-5)

Once again there arose a famine in the land of Canaan and the difficulty about food quickly became urgent with Isaac and his large household. Trials are permitted to come into the life of the best and holiest of men, and it is by this means that God sometimes teaches His most precious lessons. As the result of this famine Isaac left his home and journeyed southwards into the land of the Philistines to Gerar. The question naturally arises whether he was right in taking this journey, whether he had consulted God about it, whether it was undertaken by the will of God, or prompted by his own unaided wisdom. In any case the Lord appeared to him and prevented him from going farther southward into Egypt as his father had done under similar circumstances. "Go not down into Egypt." Egypt was not the promised land, and there were dangers there to body and to soul from which it was necessary that Isaac should be safeguarded. With the prohibition came the definite Divine instruction to remain in the land of Canaan, and the promises to his father Abraham were thereupon repeated and confirmed. Careful study should be made of the various occasions on which the Divine promise was given to Abraham, and then a comparison should be instituted with these words to Isaac. It will then be seen that each time there is some new feature of the Divine revelation and a confirmation of the Divine promise. It is impossible to avoid asking the question whether in view of the sequel Isaac was right in going even as far as to Gerar. It would almost seem as though he had been walking by sight rather than by faith and had not consulted God before starting out from home.

II. Difficulty met by Human Sin (Ge 26:6-11)

Isaac continued to dwell in Gerar and it was not very long before he was asked by the inhabitants of the place about his wife. Following his father's evil example he told a deliberate lie and said, "She is my sister." In this he was actuated by cowardly fear and by deplorable selfishness; "Lest the men of the place should kill me for Rebekah." It is sometimes wondered how it was that Isaac did exactly what his father before him had done, and the similarity of the circumstances has led some to think that this is only a variant of the former story. Would it not be truer to say that this episode is entirely consonant with what we know of human nature and its tendencies? What would be more natural than that Isaac should attempt to do what his father had done before him? Surely a little knowledge of human nature as distinct from abstract theory is sufficient to warrant a belief in the historical character of this narrative. Besides, assuming that it is a variant of the other story, we naturally ask which of them is the true version; they cannot both be true, for as they now are they do not refer to the same event. The names and circumstances are different in spite of similarities.

This belief in Rebekah as Isaac's sister was evidently held by the people of Gerar for some time, for it was only after Isaac had been there "a long time" that the King of the Philistines detected the sin and became convinced that Isaac and Rebekah were husband and wife. Like his predecessor before him Abimelech was a man of uprightness, for he very plainly rebuked Isaac and reminded him of the serious consequences that might have accrued to him and to Rebekah if the facts of the case had not become known. Is there anything sadder in this world than that a child of God should be rebuked by a man of the world? The corruption of the best is indeed the worst, and when a believer sins and his sin has to be pointed out to him by men who make no profession whatever of religion, this is indeed to sound the depths of sorrow and disappointment. Abimelech took immediate steps to prevent any harm coming to Isaac and Rebekah from what had been done, and it is not difficult to imagine Isaac's feelings as he realized the results of his deliberate untruth.

III. Difficulty met by Divine Blessing (Ge 26:12-17)

Isaac still lived on at Gerar, and quite naturally occupied himself with his daily agricultural work. He sowed seed, and in the very same year received an hundredfold owing to the blessing of the Lord. This was an exceptional result even for that exceptional land, and the Divine blessing is of course the explanation. Not only so, but his flocks grew and his household increased more and more "until he became very great." This marked Divine blessing following soon after his deliberate sin is at first sight a difficulty, for we naturally ask how God's favor could possibly rest upon him so quickly after the discovery of his grievous error. The answer may be found in a somewhat frequent experience of the people of God. They are often permitted to receive publicly a measure, and a great measure, of the Divine blessing even when they may not be in private fully faithful to the Divine will. God may at times honor His people in the sight of men while dealing with them in secret on account of their sins. As Richard Cecil once said, "A minister of Christ is often in highest honor of men for the performance of one half of his work, while God is regarding him with displeasure for the neglect of the other half." It seems to have been something like this with Isaac. In the presence of his enemies the Philistines God indeed, "prepared a table" before him, but it is pretty evident from what follows that God had other ways of dealing with him on account of his sin. God may not suffer His servants to be dishonored before the world, but He will take care to discipline them in faithfulness, and even with severity in the secret of His fellowship with them.

This prosperity soon had its inevitable outcome. "The Philistines envied him," and this envy was shown in what was perhaps the severest and most trying way. "All the wells which his father's servants had digged in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them and filled them with earth." The digging of wells was a virtual claim to the possession of the land, and it was this in particular that the Philistines resented. They were not prepared to allow Isaac to regard himself as in any sense the owner of this property, and they therefore made it difficult and even impossible for him to remain there. Water especially for such a household as his was an absolute necessity, and the stopping up of the wells compelled him to take action. Abimelech too was not happy about

this increasing property, and begged Isaac to depart, saying that he was mightier than the Philistines. Isaac thereupon departed, and yet even then did not go back to his own home, but remained in the valley of Gerar and dwelt there. Once again we cannot help feeling conscious that Isaac was not exercising sufficient faith in the power of his father's God, or he would never have remained so near Gerar in the land of the Philistines.

IV. Difficulty Met by Human Patience (Ge 26:18-22)

This reluctance to go far away soon had its effect. Isaac was necessarily compelled to dig again the wells of water that had been stopped up, but this was at once met by a strife with the herdsmen of Gerar for the possession of the wells. Again Isaac's herdsmen dug a well, and the men of Gerar strove for that also. All this was evidently intended to make things uncomfortable for Isaac until he should be willing to return to his own home. Compelled by circumstances to make another move, a third attempt was made at well-digging, and at length the people of Gerar did not continue to strive. This was regarded by Isaac as a mark of Divine favor. "He called the name of it Rehoboth; and he said, For now the Lord hath made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." The spirit of yielding is very noteworthy, more particularly as peacemakers are very rare in the East. A strife of this kind is scarcely ever likely to be met by such a spirit of willingness to yield. On the contrary, there is every likelihood of such action leading to further strife and insistence upon personal rights. God was at work gently but very definitely leading Isaac back again to his own home.

V. Difficulty met by Divine Favor (Ge 26:23-33)

At length Isaac was impelled, not to say compelled, to leave the land of the Philistines, "and he went up from thence to Beersheba." Let us observe carefully what follows these words. They are very striking and significant. "The Lord appeared unto him the same night." Does not this show clearly that God never meant him to go even to Gerar? By this Divine appearance "the same night" it is evident that Isaac was at last in line with God's will, and could receive a Divine revelation. "I am the God of Abraham thy father: fear not, for I am with thee, and will bless thee, and multiply thy seed for My servant Abraham's sake." This is the first time that we have the now familiar title, "the God of Abraham." Isaac is told not to fear, that he can rely upon the divine presence and blessing, and upon the fulfilment of the promise to his father Abraham. When God's servants get right with Him they are certain to receive His full revelation of truth and grace. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and He will show them His covenant." (Ps 25:14-[note](#))

Isaac at once responded to this Divine revelation. "He builded an altar there, and called upon the Name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there: and there Isaac's servants digged a well." Let us mark carefully these four stages in the patriarch's restored life. First comes the altar with its thought of consecration, then prayer with its consciousness of need, then the tent with its witness to home, and then comes the well with its testimony to daily life and needs. The altar and the home sum up everything that is true in life. First the altar and then the home, not first the home and then the altar. God must be first in everything.

Personal blessing from God and the consciousness of a life right with God were not the only result of Isaac's return to Beersheba. "Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar." The point of time is very noteworthy, "Then Abimelech went," that is, when Isaac had returned to the pathway of God's will, those who were formerly his enemies came to him and bore their testimony to the presence of God with him. Isaac naturally asked why they had come, seeing that they had sent him away from them. Their reply is very significant, "We saw plainly that the Lord was with thee ... thou art now the blessed of the Lord." How true it is that "when a man's ways please the Lord He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." It is scarcely possible to doubt in view of all these verses record that Isaac ought never to have left his home, but should have trusted God to keep him in spite of the famine in the land. But at last he was right with God, and both Divine favor and human acceptance wait upon him. He responded with alacrity to the desire of Abimelech for a covenant of peace, and after a feast of fellowship his visitors departed from him in peace. When God is honored by man, man is always honored by God.

Isaac's life, as recorded in this chapter, is full of simple yet searching lessons for people who, like him, are called upon to live ordinary, every-day lives.

1. The Secret of true living is here revealed

God must at all costs be first. Divine revelation is the foundation of all true life, and Divine guidance is its only safety. Not a step must be taken without His direction, not a work undertaken without His grace and blessing. "In the beginning God" must actuate and dominate every life that seeks to live to His glory. It is a profound mistake to think that we need only concern ourselves with God's will in the great events, the crises of life. The story of Isaac shows with unmistakable clearness that there is nothing too trivial for God's guidance, and nothing too small for the need of His grace and power.

2. The need of strength of character is here emphasized

There is always a very serious peril in being the son of a great father. Life is apt to be made too easy, and the son often occupies his father's position without having had his father's experience. Isaac entered upon his inheritance without having passed through the

various ways of discipline that Abraham experienced, and the result was that things were so easy for him that he did not realize the need of individuality of character and definite personal assertion of himself in the Divine life. In opening the wells that had been filled up he was copying Abraham's example without obtaining Abraham's success, and he was doubtless thereby taught that it was necessary for him to have a personal hold on God and duty for himself instead of merely imitating what his father had done. It is always dangerous when life is made too simple and easy for young people; "it is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth," and it was the absence of this yoke that doubtless ministered in great measure to that weakness of character which seems to have marked Isaac almost throughout his whole life.

3. The importance of separation from the world is here seen

As long as Isaac was in or near Gerar he did not experience much happiness. He was envied, thwarted, and opposed by the jealous Philistines. He was wanting not only in happiness but also in power, for it was not until he returned to Beersheba that Abimelech came to him bearing testimony to his conviction that God was with Isaac and blessing him. Thus for happiness, comfort and power with others, separation from the world is an absolute necessity. There is no greater mistake possible than to imagine that we can be one with the world and yet influence them for Christ. Lot found out this mistake to his cost, and so it has ever been. Separation from the world, paradoxical though it may seem, is the only true way of influencing the world for Christ. We must be in the world but not of the world if we would glorify God, bring blessing to our own souls, and be the means of blessing to others.

IV. The spirit of meekness is here illustrated

It is noteworthy that all through his life Isaac's temperament was of a passive rather than of an active nature. During his childhood he was subject to the insults of Ishmael, in his manhood he was taken to Moriah and bound there for sacrifice, and a wife was chosen for him by his father. He accepted the rebuke of Abimelech with meekness, he and his servants yielded to the Philistines about the well, and in his later life we can see the same spirit of passive yielding in his relations with Rebekah and his two sons. And yet in spite of all this meekness the Philistines testified to him as a man of power and might, and begged that he would not do them any harm. What a testimony this is to the spirit of true gentleness and meekness. The world thinks very little of meekness, but it is one of the prime graces of Christianity. "Let your sweet reasonableness be known unto all men" is the apostolic word echoing the Master's beatitude, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." Not only so, but this meekness is an echo of God's own life, for does not the Psalmist say "Thy gentleness hath made me great"? (Ps 18:35-[note](#)) As the French aphorism truly says, La douceur est une force. Meekness means the self-sacrifice of our own desires and interests, and in this spirit of gentleness is the secret of truest character and finest victory over self and others. Egoism is always a cause of weakness, for a constant consideration of ourselves is so absorbing that it tends to rob us of the very finest powers of our character. On the other hand, as we cease to regard self and concentrate attention upon others we find our own character becoming stronger as it becomes more unselfish, and with that is quickly added influence over others, and a beautiful recommendation of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Genesis 27:1-40

The Blessing

NOWHERE, perhaps, is the real character of the Bible more evident than in this chapter. The story is given in all its naked simplicity, and, although no precise moral is pointed, the incidents carry their own solemn lesson to every reader. All four persons concerned with the history are portrayed without hesitation or qualification, and the narrative makes its profound impression upon the reader by its simple but significant recital of facts. It is an unpleasant picture that we have here presented to us, a family life full of jealousy and deceit. If love is not found in the home, where may we expect it? And if, in particular, jealousies are found associated with the profession of faith in God, how terrible is the revelation!

I. The Father's Plot (Ge 27:1-4)

Isaac's part in the history here recorded is sometimes overlooked, and yet it is evident that he was in large measure responsible for the sad results. In the time of old age he calls his elder son and speaks of his own approaching death, inviting his son to prepare food that he may eat, and at the same time give his elder son the parental and patriarchal blessing. There does not seem to have been any real sign of approaching death, and, as a matter of fact, Isaac lived for over forty years after this event. The hurry and secrecy which characterized his action are also suspicious, and not the least of the sad and deplorable elements is the association of old age with feasting, personal gratification, and self-will. It is perfectly clear that he knew of the purposes of God concerning his younger son (Ge 25:23), and yet here we find him endeavoring to thwart that purpose by transferring the blessing from the one for whom it was divinely designed. This partiality for Esau, combined with his own fleshly appetite, led the patriarch into grievous sin, and we cannot but observe how his action set fire to the whole train of evils that followed in the wake of his proposal.

Esau was quite ready to fall in with his father's suggestion. He must have at once recalled the transaction with his brother whereby the birthright had been handed over to Jacob. He must also have known the divine purpose concerning him and his brother; and although his marriage with a Canaanitish woman had still further disqualified him for spiritual primogeniture, it mattered nothing so long as he could recover what he now desired to have. He realized at last the value of that which his brother had obtained from him, and he is prompt to respond to his father's suggestion, since he sees in it the very opportunity of regaining the lost birthright.

II. The Mother's Counter-Plot (Ge 27:5-17)

We have now to observe with equal care the part played by Rebekah. Isaac had evidently not counted on his wife's overhearing his proposal to Esau, nor had he thought of the possibility of her astuteness vanquishing his plot. It is necessary that we should be perfectly clear about Rebekah's part in this transaction. Her object was to preserve for Jacob the blessing that God intended for him. Her design, therefore, was perfectly legitimate, and there can be very little doubt that it was inspired by a truly religious motive. She thought that the purpose of God was in danger, and that there was no other way of preventing a great wrong being done. It was a crisis in her life and in that of Jacob, and she was prepared to go the entire length of enduring the Divine curse so long as her favorite son could retain the blessing that God intended for him. Yet when all this is said, and it should be continually borne in mind, the sin of Rebekah's act was utterly inexcusable. We may account for it, but we cannot justify it. She was one of those who take upon themselves to regard God as unable to carry out His own purposes, thinking that either He has forgotten, or else that His will can really be frustrated by human craft and sin. And so she dared to do this remarkably bold thing. She proved herself to be quite as clever as Isaac and Esau.

Jacob's compliance was not immediate and hearty, for he evidently perceived the very real risk that he was running (Ge 27:12). He also saw the sin of it in the sight of God, and feared lest after all he should bring upon himself the Divine curse instead of the Divine blessing. Yet, influenced and overpowered by the stronger nature of the mother, he at length accepted the responsibility for this act, and proceeded to carry out his mother's plans.

III. The Younger Son's Deception (Ge 27:1-29)

The preparations were quickly and skillfully made, and Jacob approached his father with the food that his mother had prepared for him. The bold avowal that he was the first-born was persisted in, and his aged father entirely deceived. Lie follows lie, for Jacob had to pay the price of lies by being compelled to lie on still. Nothing in its way is more awful than this deception. We pity Jacob as the victim of his mother's love, but we scorn and deplore his action as the violation of his conscience and the silencing of his better nature. The terrible thoroughness with which he carried out his mother's plans is one of the most hideous features of the whole story.

The father's benediction is now given; and although it is mainly couched in terms of temporal blessing, we see underlying it the thought of that wider influence suggested by the promise of universal blessing given to Abraham and his seed.

IV. The Elder Son's Defeat (Ge 27:30-40)

It was not long before the true state of affairs came out. Isaac must have been astonished at the discovery for more than one reason. He had thought doubtless that in blessing, as he considered, his elder son, he had overreached both Rebekah and Jacob, and now he finds after all that the Divine purpose has been accomplished in spite of his, own willful attempt to divert the promise from Jacob. It is, however, to Isaac's credit that he meekly accepts the inevitable, and is now quite prepared to realize that God's will must be done.

We are not surprised at Esau's behavior, for we know the true character of the man. His bitter lamentation was due to the mortification he felt at being beaten. His cry of disappointment was probably, if not certainly, due to the fact that he had lost the temporal advantage of the birthright and blessing, not that he had lost the spiritual favor of God associated with it. His indignation at Jacob, like all other anger, is characterized by untruth; for whilst Jacob undoubtedly supplanted him, the taking away of the birthright was as much his own free act as it was due to Jacob's superior cleverness. We cannot help being touched by his tearful request to his father to give him even now a blessing. He realizes, when it is too late, what has been done, and although a partial blessing is bestowed upon him it is quite beyond all possibility that things can be as he had desired them to be. Esau had despised his birthright, but, however it came about, he was evidently conscious of the value of the blessing; and when the New Testament tells us that "he found no place for repentance," it means, of course, that there was no possibility of undoing what had been accomplished. He found no way to change his father's mind, though he sought earnestly to bring this about (Heb.12:17-note). There is a sense in which the past is utterly irretrievable, and it is only very partially true that "we may be what we might have been."

We have been concerned mainly with the four human actors in this family drama, and we have seen how one after another was dealt with; but that which lies behind the entire narrative is the thought of the God who reigns and rules over all. What does God teach us from this whole story?

1. "Let us not do evil that good may come." (Ro 3:8-note)

Right objects must be brought about by right means. It is one of the most remarkable features of human life in all ages that lofty purposes have been associated with the most sordid of methods, and one proof of this is found in that intolerable phrase "pious fraud." Yet clearly one of these words always contradicts the other. If a thing is pious it cannot be a fraud; if a thing is a fraud it cannot be pious. We must not convert our opponent by using untruth as an argument, we dare not win victories for Christ by any unworthy efforts. As it has been well said, the heights of gold must not be approached by steps of straw. Righteousness can never be laid aside, even though our object is yet more righteousness. In personal life, in home life, in Church life, in endeavors to win men for Christ, in missionary enterprise, in social improvement, and in everything connected with the welfare of humanity we must insist upon absolute righteousness, purity, and truth in our methods, or else we shall bring utter discredit on the cause of our Master and Lord.

2. "Be sure your sin will find you out." (Nu 32:23)

This message is writ large on every line of the story. All four found this out to their cost, as we see in the subsequent history of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau. They were never the same afterwards, and their sins in some respects dogged their footsteps all the rest of their days. If only Isaac had realized this at the outset, how much he might have saved himself and his family!

**Oh! what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive.**

3. "Walk in the light as He is in the light." (1Jn 1:7)

It has been well said (Eugene Stock, Lesson Studies in Genesis) that this chapter is a chapter of desires and devices. Isaac had his desires and devices; so had Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau. Each one of them attempts to accomplish their desires by means of the most unworthy devices; and sorrow, disappointment, trouble were the inevitable result. How different it would have been with them if they had lived in the presence of God! How different it always is with us if, instead of following the devices and desires of our own hearts, we are able to say like the Psalmist, "All my desires are before Thee"! For if only "we delight ourselves in the Lord" He will give us "the desires of our hearts." And as we delight ourselves in Him our desires become His desires, and His desires ours, by the transformation of Divine Grace.

4. "The Lord reigneth." (Ps 97:1-note)

This is perhaps the chief and fundamental lesson of the whole story. It is utterly futile to suppose that we can thwart the Divine purpose. "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand" (Pr 29:21). God maketh "the devices of man to be of none effect" (Ps 33:10-note), for we well know that "the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand" (Isa 46:10). Whenever man has attempted to play the part of Providence, the issue has always been disaster. "A man's heart deviseth his way ; but the Lord directeth his steps" (Pr. 16:9). The true secret of living is to realize that we are not agents, but only instruments in carrying out the Divine will; and if with all our hearts we truly seek Him, waiting upon Him in prayer, trust, and obedience, we shall find ourselves taken up into the line of His wise providence, used to carry out His purposes, and enabled to live to His glory.

Genesis 27:41-28:9 Interlude

THIS section seems to suggest the after-swell of a storm; the waters are pent up, longing to rush forth. After the crisis recorded in the preceding section we notice the actors in the drama evidently impressed and affected by the terrible experience through which they have passed.

I. Esau's Anger (Ge 27:41, 42)

Mortified at his loss of the blessing, and hating his brother on that account, Esau forms a resolve marked by cold-blooded calculation. He expects the death of his father at no distant date, and makes up his mind to wait for that event and then to kill his brother. He will not cause grief to his father, but he does not allow any feelings for his mother to enter into his project. It is evident from all this that there was no genuine repentance in him. While Isaac meekly accepted the Divine decision Esau was determined not to do so. To him life was nothing so long as he could not get rid of his brother. The words "comfort himself" (Ge 27:42) show the grim satisfaction that actuated him as he contemplated his brother's murder.

But the days of mourning did not come. His father lived, and the postponement of the revenge led to the failure of the project. Full of passion and impulse he could not keep his plan to himself, for while at the outset he only spoke "in his heart," it was not long before the project was heard of by Rebekah.

II. Rebekah's Plan (Ge 27:43, 44, 45, 46)

To hear of Esau's determination was to take action, and with characteristic promptitude and vigor she tells Jacob what has happened, at the same time urging him to flee to his uncle at Haran and stay there a short time until his brother's anger should pass away. Rebekah well knew the short-lived passion of her elder son.

This, however, was not all that was in her mind. She saw much further ahead than the few days necessary for the dissipation of Esau's anger. She did not inform Jacob of any deeper project, but in her conversation with Isaac this entirely different idea is brought forward. Rebekah's characteristic cleverness is again in evidence. She is quite at home in all these plans and projects. She will not speak to Isaac of her fears of Esau's murder of Jacob, but she introduces a suggestion about Jacob's marriage which has the desired effect. She tells her husband that she is sore troubled because of Esau's unfortunate marriage with the daughters of Canaan, and she fears still further trouble if Jacob should follow his example. There was no need to suggest to Isaac where Jacob was to go, for he would doubtless remember from whence he had taken his own wife. Rebekah's view of the marriage was assuredly correct, and it is perhaps true to say that there never has been any Divine blessing from mixed marriages between God's people and people of the world.

Rebekah, however, little knew what she was doing in proposing this scheme to Isaac. It was impossible for her to foresee every contingency. She could outwit her husband and her son, but it would seem as though she had either forgotten or did not know that in Laban she had a brother who was quite her own equal in craft and cleverness. Not for an instant did she imagine that she would never see Jacob again, and that her old age would be bereft of the company of her favorite son. Thus does shrewdness overreach itself, bringing sorrow and trouble upon its own head.

It is impossible to take leave of Rebekah without observing once again her remarkable cleverness and masterfulness. She is certainly one of the ablest women whose lives are recorded in Holy Writ. Full of plans and projects, ever impatiently questioning, she is typical of those resourceful people who leave nothing to chance, but take every precaution within their reach to accomplish what they desire to do. From the moment she first comes upon the scene we have suggestive hints of her capacity and power. Her first question is concerned with the great problem of her own acute suffering (Ge 25:22). Her resourcefulness and determination are evident all through the story of the last section, while in the passage before us we see on the one hand her fear lest she should be deprived of both sons (or it may be of husband and favorite son) in one day, and also her intense sorrow and disappointment at the bare possibility of Jacob marrying a wife of whom she herself could not approve.

While vigor and capacity are very important, far more important and necessary are patient trust in God and consistent integrity. Most human catastrophes have been brought about by men and women regarding themselves as agents instead of instruments, and by thinking that the world cannot possibly be managed except by their shrewdness and sharp practice. Ability must be consecrated to God if it is to be of real service.

III. Isaac's Blessing (Ge 28:1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

Rebekah's suggestion is sufficient to compel Isaac to take action. He accepts the indication of Divine providence, and realizes now that Jacob is the real heir of the promise to Abraham. He therefore calls his son, and charges him not to take a wife of the daughters of Canaan, but to go to Padan-aram and take a wife of the daughters of Laban, his mother's brother. Then follows the patriarchal benediction; the blessing of "God Almighty" is invoked upon him, that title of God which was first revealed to his forefather Abraham (Ge 17:1). Added to the blessing is a prayer that God would make him fruitful, and multiply him according to the blessing of Abraham.

It is touching to realize that Isaac lived over forty years after this event, and nothing is recorded of him. His life generally was much quieter and far less full of incident than those of his father and of his son, and yet it would almost seem as though the utter silence concerning these forty years was intended to remind us of the comparative failure of Isaac after his deliberate attempt to divert the blessing from his son Jacob. At any rate, God often has to set aside even honored workers by reason of unfaithfulness, and it is possible that Isaac's sin led to these years of quiet without any incident worthy of being recorded by Divine inspiration. At the same time this may not be the true interpretation of the silence, which may be due simply to the absence of anything in his life worthy of special note. Quiet lives can glorify God just as much as public ones. It is perfectly true that "full many a flower is born to blush unseen," but not to "waste its sweetness on the desert air." God can use the lives unseen of men to bring about blessing and glorify Himself.

IV. Jacob's Obedience (Ge 28:5).

In all this section Jacob appears quite passive. First he listens obediently to his mother's voice about fleeing to Haran, and then with equal readiness he accepts his father's command and sets out on his long journey. Ge 38:5, according to the well-known Hebrew literary characteristic, anticipates the detailed record by stating quite briefly his journey and destination. Jacob little knew at the time

what this all meant. Apparently it was but a small incident, a stay of a short time while his brother's anger cooled; but God had wider purposes to fulfil, and that which seemed an ordinary journey and a short stay was to be made part of a great project involving many other lives than his own. When he said "Good-bye" to his mother and father, in the full expectation of a speedy return, he was entering upon some of the profoundest experiences of his life. He went away ostensibly to avoid his brother's anger and to seek for himself a wife. He found very much more than this, for, as we shall see, he came in contact with God, and learned lessons that lasted him all his days. Events that seem trivial to us are often fraught with momentous results.

V. Esau's Marriage (Ge 28:6, 7, 8, 9).

The narrative once more turns by contrast to Esau, who now makes another attempt to regain the blessing. He is quick enough to see at length that his father and mother disapprove of his own marriage, and had sent Jacob to seek a wife from Laban, and now Esau attempts to steal a march on Jacob and reverse the blessing. He tries to please his parents, for obviously he has no thought of doing what he proposes from any higher motive. He adds to his two Canaanitish wives a daughter of Ishmael, his own cousin. It makes no difference to him that Ishmael is not of the same direct line as himself, nor does it matter to him in the least that God had passed over Ishmael for his father. Esau has no idea of spiritual realities. All that he is concerned about is to please his parents, and if possible to win back the blessing. This again shows the real character of the man and the utter absence of any spiritual reality actuating his life. Esau is one of those who, as it has been truly and acutely said, tries to do what God's people do in the vain hope that somehow or other it will be pleasing to God ([Dods, Genesis, in loc. The Expositor's Bible](#)). He will not do precisely what God requires, but something like it. He will not entirely give up the world and put God first in his life, but he will try to meet some of God's wishes by a little alteration in his conduct. Instead of renouncing sin he will cover it with the glory of small virtues; but it is one thing to conform to the outward practices of God's people, it is quite another to be thoroughly and truly godly at heart. Men of the Esau type may attend the House of God and Join in its service, but at heart they are essentially without God and regardless of His claims on their lives.

1. God has a plan for every life.

One of Horace Bushnell's great sermons has the title [Every Man's Life a Plan of God](#). God had a plan for Jacob's life, and that plan could not be hindered by the action of Isaac or Esau, nor could it be really furthered by the cleverness and craft of Rebekah. It gives dignity, force, and peace to life to realize that God has a plan for it, and it is at once our duty and privilege to seek out that plan and to discover God's will concerning us.

2. God has His own ways of realizing His plan for us.

Rebekah's thought in sending out Jacob was very different from God's idea. There were surprises in store that Jacob never dreamt of. God's ways are higher than ours, and it is our truest wisdom to let God show us His way and enable us to fulfil His purpose concerning us.

3. God is willing to reveal His plan for us.

Two requirements are necessary if we are to know God's plan for our lives. There must be the sympathy of trust and the faithfulness of obedience.

**Sympathetic trust
is always the parent of
spiritual insight.**

God ever reveals Himself to the trustful, loving heart. Faithful obedience is another and connected secret of spiritual insight. "If any man wills to do... he shall know" (John 7:17). "Then shall we know, if we follow on" (Hos 6:3). Trustful obedience, step by step, is the sure guarantee of spiritual knowledge. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and He will show them His covenant." (Ps 25:14-[note](#))

Genesis 28:10-22 Bethel

THE story of God's special and personal dealings with Jacob commences with this incident. Hitherto he has not appeared in a very favorable light, and it is only indirectly that we have been able to gather anything of his relation to God. Now, however, we are to have a series of revelations of his character as he is being tested and trained by the wisdom and grace of God. The story is one of chastisement and mercy. Jacob again and again reaps the fruit of his sins, and yet we shall see the triumphs of Divine grace in one

of the most naturally unattractive and even forbidding of temperaments.

1. The Journey (Ge 28:10, 11)

His departure from home in search of a wife was very different from that of his father's servant on the memorable occasion when Abraham sent him to bring back Rebekah. Jacob is alone, no steward to accompany him, no cavalcade, no companions; he is really fleeing for his life. It is not wholly imaginative to try to realize something of his thoughts and feelings on this memorable occasion, fresh from the loving farewell with his mother. It is almost certain that he commenced to review the past as well as contemplate the future. Should he ever return to his father's house in peace? Should he ever possess the blessing that had been bestowed upon him? Was it after all so very precious and valuable? In what respect was he better than his brother Esau? Would it not have been better if he had never sought the birthright and obtained the blessing? Such thoughts as these probably coursed through his mind as he realized that he was virtually being banished from all that was near and dear to him.

He is like many another since his day who has gone out from the old home to seek his fortune elsewhere, although in his case the departure was not the natural and inevitable development of young life, but was due to his sin. There is always something of a crisis when the old home is left and a new life is entered upon. Most young people have to face this fact and to experience all the emotions that are associated with it.

II. The Dream (Ge 28:12).

From Beersheba, 12 miles to the south of Hebron, Jacob journeys, and at length reaches the place afterwards known as Bethel, which was situated in the mountains of Ephraim, about three hours' journey north of Jerusalem. The place was a bleak moorland in the heart of Palestine. "The track winds through an uneven valley, covered, as with gravestones, by large sheets of bare rock; some few here and there standing up like the cromlechs of Druidical monuments." (Stanley's Sinai and Palestine) Here he lies down to rest, and, influenced no doubt by the surroundings, in his sleep the stones seem to be like stairs reaching from earth to heaven. To the lonely man there seemed "a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven," and on the ladder angels of God were ascending and descending. As on so many other occasions, God spoke by means of this dream. The ladder was intended first of all to remind Jacob of the gulf between his soul and God. By craft he had obtained his brother's birthright, by lying and deceit he had snatched away the blessing, and now the fugitive is reminded of the separation between his soul and God and the absolute necessity of some means of communication. The ladder also reminded him of the way in which his soul could come back to God in spite of his sin, and the fact that it reached from earth to heaven signified the complete provision of Divine grace for human life. Right down to his deepest need the ladder came, right up to the presence of God the ladder reached, and the vision of the angels on the ladder was intended to symbolize the freedom of communication, telling of access to God, and of constant, free, easy communication between earth and heaven.

III. The Revelation (Ge 28:13, 14, 15).

The ladder was only the symbolical part of his dream; he also received that which was far more and deeper than anything symbolical. Above the ladder stood the God of his father, and from that Divine presence came his first direct message from above. There was first of all the revelation of God as "Jehovah, the God of Abraham and of Isaac." Then came the specific revelation concerning the land whereon Jacob was lying, and the promise of that land to him and to his seed. It will be remembered that the blessings bestowed upon Jacob by Isaac his father (Ge 27:27, 28, 29 and Ge 28:3, 4) were couched in very general terms, but now Jacob received the specific, clear assurance that the covenant with Abraham and Isaac was to be continued with him, and through him to his seed.

Then followed a four-fold assurance which must have been very precious to the soul of the fugitive

- (a) The Divine Presence: "I am with thee";
- (b) the Divine protection: "and will keep thee";
- (c) the Divine preservation: "and will bring thee again into this land";
- (d) the Divine promise: "I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of."

Observe in this passage the threefold repetition of "Behold"; "Behold the angels" (Ge 28:12), "Behold the Lord" (Ge 28:13), "Behold, I am with thee" (Ge 28:15). Thus Jacob was encouraged and assured by a Divine revelation.

IV. The Response (Ge 28:16, 17).

The vision aroused Jacob of his sleep, and he was astonished at finding God where he tied himself alone. Hitherto he does not seem to have had personal knowledge of God, everything having been mediated to him through his father and mother. Now he understands and realizes God as his personal God, and is surprised to find that heaven is so near, though he is far from home.

Henceforward life takes a different color and "earth's crammed with heaven" for him. No wonder he is afraid, for he realizes that this is the place where God dwells, the house of God, the gate of heaven. When the soul comes in contact with God for the first time it is a good sign that the result is awe, reverence, fear. "Holy and reverend is His is Name."

V. The Memorial (Ge 28:18, 19).

Jacob seems to have gone to sleep again and rested until the morning, and then on rising he took the stone which he had put for his pillow and consecrated it to God in commemoration of that wonderful night. This was a fine and worthy idea; to him the place would be evermore sacred as the spot at which he first met God. He did not wish to lose any part of the impression of so memorable an occasion. The place of our conversion is one to be remembered and recalled.

"He felt that, vivid as the impression on his mind then was, it would tend to fade, and he erected this stone that in after days he might have a witness that would testify to his present assurance. One great secret in the growth of character is the art of prolonging the quickening power of right ideas, of perpetuating just and inspiring impressions. And he who despises the aid of all external helps for the accomplishment of this object is not likely to succeed" ([Dods' Genesis, The Expositor's Bible](#)).

It is evident that Jacob was deeply impressed with the vision, the ladder, and the voice of God, and his responsiveness to the Divine revelation is worthy of careful notice in view of his former craft and deceit. It shows that, in spite of everything, he had that in his soul which reached out towards the Divine will, however unworthy and wrong were the methods that he used. We cannot imagine the purely secular, sensuous, and even sensual Esau entering into the spirit of this vision or allowing it to have any influence upon his life.

VI. The Vow (Ge 28:20, 21, 22).

With the memorial stone comes the story of the first vow recorded in Scripture. Jacob acknowledges his need of God, which is another testimony to the genuineness of the man, and he vows, 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."

The precise attitude of Jacob in this vow has been variously interpreted. Some have thought that his **if** really means "Since God will be with me," and following the margin of the Revised Version it is suggested that the protasis should not be in Genesis 28:21 but in Genesis 28:22, and that we should read: "Since God will be with me and will keep me ... and will give me ... and the Lord will be my Guide then this stone ... shall be God's house."

Others think that Jacob cannot be excused a low and mercenary feeling in this vow. We must be careful not to read too much into it, but it is equally necessary not to read too little into it. Let us remember that this is what we should call Jacob's conversion, the commencement of a life of grace, and we are therefore not to be surprised if he is unfamiliar with God and cannot at once rise to a high level of spiritual attainment. Even supposing it is true that he met God's "I am with thee" with "If God will be with me," he is only doing what Peter did under very different circumstances. When the Lord said, "It is I," Peter replied, "If it be thou." It is a great thing that Jacob realizes his need of God and that he makes this resolution, under whatever condition, acknowledging God as his God and pledging himself to God's service. If only some of those who are inclined to criticize Jacob would do what he promised and give the tenth of their income to God, what a different state of affairs would obtain in connection with God's work at home and abroad!

The story of Bethel left its mark on the people of Israel, for it is found referred to, at least twice in after ages (Hos. 12:4; John 1:51). It is full of lessons for the life of the believer, and we shall do well to ponder it closely as a revelation of Divine grace.

1. God's condescending grace.

The vision of Bethel was used by our Lord as a symbol and type of Himself: "Ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." (Jn 1:51) As the ladder was to Jacob so is the Lord Jesus Christ to mankind, a revelation of God's wonderful condescension and mercy. Set up on earth in Bethlehem, the top of it reached to heaven at the Ascension, and now the Lord Jesus is our Divine ladder, first of revelation and then of communication. All that we know of God comes through Him, and all that we receive from God comes through Him. Ever since the Incarnation of our Lord earth has been no desert, but a place where God is manifest to the eye and heart of faith.

2. God's all-sufficient grace.

How appropriate this story is for those who are standing on the threshold of life, who have just left home and are feeling all the loneliness associated with this time! It is on such an occasion that God meets us and offers us Himself, shows us the ladder

between earth and heaven, assures us that His grace is all-sufficient, and that though we are far from home we are very near to him:

"My grace is sufficient for thee." (2Cor 12:9-note)

3. God's overruling grace.

There was really no need for Jacob to have fled from his brother, for God could have dealt with Esau and put everything right; but Jacob has to suffer the results of his impatience and imprudence, and God will overrule his mistakes and sins and teach him still deeper lessons. Though he had left his father's house, God was still with him, and in this vision he was taught that God was now taking him in hand and would not leave him till the work of grace was done. How wonderfully God overrules our mistakes, and faults, and sins, and gathers up the threads of our troubles and even weaves them into His pattern for our life!

4. God's sovereign grace.

It was necessary that Jacob should learn how utterly helpless he was to bring about the Divine purposes concerning him. It was only when he was asleep, needy and helpless, that God revealed Himself. Jacob had hitherto considered it necessary to use craft and cleverness in order, as he thought, to bring about the purposes of God. He was now to be told that God could dispense with him and yet accomplish His own Divine aims. It is a very salutary lesson to learn the sovereignty of grace, to realize that we have no claim on God, to be conscious that God does not require our cleverness or ability, and to lean our hearts increasingly upon the Divine word: "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit." (Zech 4:6)

5. God's teaching grace.

At Bethel God really commenced the education and making of Jacob. To educate is to "educate" or draw out that which is within, and while we might have thought that there was no material worthy of God's consideration, the Divine Teacher could see the possibilities of this man, and was willing, in marvellous patience, to attempt the work of training. God did this in three ways:

(a) He revealed Jacob's character to himself; He brought him to the end of himself and revealed to him something of his evil heart.

(b) He also showed to Jacob his utter helplessness from earthly sources.

Bereft of father and home, in danger from his brother, and powerless himself, Jacob was perforce compelled to turn to God.

(c) Above all, the Lord revealed Himself to Jacob.

He introduced him to a larger life and wider experience, reminding him that the Divine presence was to be found everywhere. So "He led him about, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye."

6. God's longsuffering grace.

When Jacob awoke after the vision his true life commenced. We are not altogether surprised at the low level of his spiritual life, for he was evidently unfamiliar with God and needed very much more experience before he could enter fully into all the Divine purposes concerning him. Even if we acquit him of bargaining we can still see that his knowledge of God was only superficial, and he was not yet able to enter into the fulness and glory of the Divine thought concerning him and his seed. But God had commenced His work in Jacob's soul and with marvelous patience God continued His dealings with him. Since at our conversion we know very little of God, we and others must not be surprised if our lack of familiarity with Divine realities leads us into error; but the great thing is to commence the true life, for as we yield ourselves to God and wait upon Him we shall find ourselves taught, upheld, and blessed by the wonderful patience of His grace. Only let us be clear that when God says, "I am with thee" we do not reply with "If," but say, out of a full heart, "I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me," and, like Abraham of old, go forward "fully persuaded that what He has promised He is able also to perform."

Genesis 29:1-30

The New Life

JACOB is now in the greatest of all schools, that of experience, and there are many lessons to learn. These three chapters (Genesis 29-31) cover forty years of his life, and are the record of a large part of his training.

1. The New Start (Ge 29:1).

The Hebrew is very suggestive: "Then Jacob lifted up his feet." A new hope had dawned in his breast, and now he starts on his way from Bethel with alacrity. The revelation of God and the assurance of God's presence and blessing had brought light and cheer to his heart, and, like every young convert fresh from the experience of meeting God for the first time, "he went on his way rejoicing." Who does not remember those early days, when everything seemed different, when joy illuminated the pathway, and hope sprang up, covering the pathway with its rainbow of blessed assurance! The long journey (450 miles from Beersheba) was at length accomplished, and he arrived in the country of his kinsfolk, "the people of the East."

II. The Memorable Meeting (Ge 29:2-14).

As he neared his journey's end he came across a well with flocks of sheep lying by it, and on asking the shepherds whence they were, received the answer, "From Haran." Another question followed about Laban, and he was soon told that his uncle was in health, and that Rachel his daughter was coming with the sheep. Then comes a point exceedingly characteristic of Jacob. He suggests to the shepherds that, as it is not yet time to gather together the cattle and fold them for the night, they should at least go and give the flocks of sheep food and water. What was the meaning of this suggestion of Jacob? There does not seem much doubt that it was made for the purpose of getting an opportunity to be alone with Rachel. Already he seems to realize that his way has been guided aright, and with characteristic forethought and promptitude he desires to make the most of the opportunity. The shepherds decline to accede to his request, urging that it would cause unnecessary trouble to give water to some of the sheep while the others had not yet gathered around the well.

Then comes the meeting with Rachel, and we are doubtless right in regarding Jacob's feelings as those of "love at first sight." With courtesy he went near and rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well, and then revealed himself to his cousin, telling her who he was and whence he had come. Rachel thereupon goes and tells the news to her father. The picture is one of idyllic beauty. Faith had come into his life through his meeting with God at Bethel, and now had entered that second best of God's gifts, a woman's love.

Laban at once comes out to meet him, and gives him the heartiest possible welcome. In spite of all that we have to see and note about Laban, it is evident that he was a man of warm-hearted and generous impulses, and was genuinely delighted to welcome his kinsman into his house.

III. The Faithful Service (Ge 29:15-20).

Laban again stands out well in the story at this point. He does not wish to presume his relationship to Jacob by expecting him to do service for nothing, so he asks him to say what wages he desires. Jacob thereupon proposes to serve seven years for Rachel, Laban's younger daughter; and to this Laban agrees, saying that he would much prefer giving Rachel to him than to a stranger.

"And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her." There are few verses more familiar in the story of Jacob than this beautiful description of his love; and whatever else may be said about him, his sharp practices, cleverness, and craft, it is impossible not to give adhesion to Coleridge's well-known words that "No man could be a bad man who loved as Jacob loved Rachel." For seven long years he toiled hard and faithfully in the service of Laban, and yet because of his great love the time passed rapidly and seemed but a days. Love such as this takes little account of time; buoyed up and urged on by its joyous hope, it lives and labors and grows stronger and stronger.

V. The Bitter Disappointment (Ge 29:21-30).

The seven years are now over, and Jacob asks Laban for the fulfilment of his promise. Laban thereupon prepares for the usual wedding-feast, which, in the East, lasts seven days, and then, under cover of the darkness, and according to Eastern custom, he brings his daughter closely veiled to the tent of Jacob. Jacob is soon made aware of the treachery of Laban, to which Leah was a party, though probably with no real power to resist her father's will. Nor indeed was she likely in any case to resist it, since it is evident that a deep love for Jacob had sprung up in her heart. Laban's answer to Jacob's reproach is another indication of the true character of the man. He told Jacob that it was not customary in their country that the younger daughter should be married before the first-born; and yet surely Jacob ought to have been told this at the beginning, not at the end of the seven years. To add to the difficulty and confusion Laban proposes that at the end of the week of the marriage-feast for Leah Jacob should take Rachel also as his wife. Jacob agrees to this; and so, at the close of the marriage festivities in connection with his marriage with Leah, Jacob accomplishes his heart's desire and marries Rachel.

It is clear, from a careful consideration of the story, that he married Rachel at the beginning, not at the end of his second seven years of service. His love for Rachel had never varied, and he was quite prepared to serve with Laban "yet another seven years."

Jacob is already in the training school of discipline. God is dealing with him in deed and in truth, and as we study the story we find several messages that ought to come home to our own hearts.

1. Doing the will of God.

After Bethel came the long journey to Haran, and Bethel was intended to fit Jacob for the journey and all that lay before him. Quiet times with God are intended to be the means of doing our ordinary work in "the daily round, the common task." Conversion is intended to be expressed in consecration. Mountain-top experiences are to be followed by service in the valley, and the real test of our life lies not in our profession, but in our character and conduct. One of the most practical, pointed, and pressing questions that we should ask ourselves day by day is this: What are our Bethels doing for us? "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." All our professions of fellowship with God will count for nothing unless those experiences are reproduced in our ordinary everyday life. "How call ye Me Lord, and do not the things which I say?"

2. Experiencing the providence of God.

The story before us is a very ordinary one. A journey, a meeting with shepherds near a well, a young woman coming up, an act of courtesy; and yet these small events led to great and far-reaching results. How very much depends upon very little! There is nothing really small in human life. We start out in the morning, and what we may call a chance meeting, or the receipt of an ordinary letter, or some very slight circumstance may affect the whole of the subsequent life of quite a number of people. We call this the "providence" of God, and we do well; and the true Christian heart will always love to trace the hand of God in the ordinary everyday experiences of life. For, after all, "ordinary" means "ordered," and it is the joy of the believer to realize that everything is ordered and that "all things work together for good to them that love God." The harmonious and beneficent combination of circumstances guided and overruled by the wisdom and will of God constitutes for the Christian soul the joy and cheer of everyday living.

3. Discovering the justice of God

Laban's deception came to Jacob as a great surprise, and yet he ought not to have been astonished in view of his past. He was now commencing to reap as he had sown. He was now being treated as he had treated his father and brother, and the deceiver is at length deceived. He had come to the school whence all his own powers of deceit had originally come. Laban is seen to be the equal of his clever sister Rebekah, and Jacob is being paid back with the family coin. God has no favorites, and if His own children wander from the pathway they have to suffer. And yet the sufferings are not punitive, but disciplinary. We are chastened and trained and it is the highest wisdom of every believer to accept and to learn all that God has to teach him. Old tendencies need to be corrected, old weaknesses made strong, old faults removed; and if only we yield ourselves into the hands of the great Potter He will fashion the clay, in spite of all our natural disadvantages, into vessels unto honor.

Yet take Thy way—for, sure,
Thy way is best; Stretch or contract me,
Thy poor debtor; 'Tis but the tuning of my breast
To make the music better.

Genesis 29:31-30:43 In the Shadows

JACOB'S life at Haran was one long prolonged discipline in various ways. He was almost continually in the crucible, whether through the faults and sins of others or through his own unworthy and sinful expedients. The entire story is full of sad and sordid incidents, but as we read it we shall do well to bear in mind that the long-suffering patience of God was all the while at work with his unworthy servant.

I. At Home (Ge 29:31-Ge 30:24).

The results of Laban's deception were soon evident in Jacob's home life. The possession of two wives brought its inevitable results. Polygamy was only tolerated, never accepted, by the Hebrews in after-days. The experience of their progenitor doubtless weighed with them in the attitude they assumed towards it (Lev 18:8). Yet even in this unhappy experience we can see the overruling hand of God, for when He saw Jacob's partiality for Rachel He taught him some needed lessons in connection with the birth of his first children. The way in which Leah's thoughts turned to God on the occasion of the birth of her first four sons is very striking. She realized that the Divine hand was being put forth on her behalf, and she trusted that through the birth of the sons her husband's feelings would be changed towards her.

The story then proceeds along familiar lines, in the envy and jealousy of the two sisters. First Rachel and then Leah manifests this spirit, with what results we know only too well. It is not too much to say that all this household friction had its dire influence upon the temperaments of the children, and we can hardly be surprised at what we read of them in after-days. There could not be righteousness, holiness, and peace amid such untoward surroundings. When there is trouble between parents, the children must

necessarily suffer. It is impossible also to avoid noticing what seems to be a declension in Leah's spiritual life from the time of the birth of her fifth son (Ge 30:17, 18, 19, 20, 21). In connection with the first four the Lord's hand was very definitely perceived, but now there is no longer any reference to the Covenant Name Jehovah, and the expressions indicate what is almost only purely personal and even selfish as two sons and a daughter are born to her.

At length God heard the prayers of Rachel and granted her her heart's desire in the birth of a son. It was now her turn to recognize the hand of the Lord and to acknowledge His mercy and goodness in dealing with her. As we review the whole story we are impressed more and more with the sadness of it all. It started with Laban's deception combined with Leah's co-operation; and although perhaps it would have been impossible for Jacob to have sustained any protest against this action, we can see the result of it in the years of sorrow and chastening that came to him and all the actors in this unhappy domestic tragedy. Where the home life is not full of love and peace, there can be no true witness for God or genuine helpfulness to one another.

II. At Work (Ge 30:25-43)

The birth of Rachel's son seems to have been a turning-point in Jacob's life, and to have prompted a desire to return to his own country. He had now been with Laban the best part of twenty years (Ge 31:38, 41), and the longing for the old country and the old home pressed heavily upon him. Laban, however, was altogether unwilling to lose so valued a servant, for far too much blessing had come into his life through Jacob to allow him willingly to depart. He therefore suggested to Jacob that he should stay and fix his own terms; but Jacob was not ready to do this. He had had experience already of the way in which Laban had not kept his engagements about wages (Ge 31:7, 41), and he therefore preferred to take matters into his own hands. The real Jacob comes out in his distrust of others and his determination to manage things for himself. He therefore proposes to leave with Laban all the animals of one color, and to keep for himself those that were spotted and speckled among the sheep and the goats. If we read Laban's words aright (Ge 31:34) it would seem as though he agreed to this proposal with reluctance; but his caution and greed are at once seen (Ge 30:34, 35), for he proceeds to remove the very animals that would be likely to fall to Jacob's lot, hands them over to the care of his sons and then puts the distance of three days' journey between them and Jacob. This again shows the character of the man with whom Jacob had to deal. Truly the deceiver is having a full payment in his own coin.

It is now Jacob's turn to plot and plan, and his retaliation is sharp and complete (Ge 31:37-43). He is quite the equal of his uncle, and his plan succeeds beyond his imagination, for he increased exceedingly and had large flocks as well as a great retinue of servants. He was not likely to be far behind in any effort for his own advantage, and we can see in this method of revenge the depth of his resentment against Laban. It was a case of equal meeting equal, for there is nothing to choose between them in the character and extent of their cleverness and craft.

The entire story is full of searching lessons as we contemplate the extent to which human nature will go in furthering its own ends and accomplishing its own will. At the same time it is not without a background of teaching concerning the overruling mercy of God.

1. A Severe Discipline.

The fact that God permitted the deception about Leah to be practised on Jacob seems to suggest that it was necessary for him somehow or other to be emptied of self and self-seeking. Circumstances were therefore used to break him down and bring him to the end of himself. It is certainly very remarkable that, notwithstanding his intense love for Rachel, it was through Leah that the most permanent—that is, the Messianic—blessings were to come to and through him. It is a striking fact of experience that when he was about to enter upon the enjoyment of his seven years of toil God allowed something else, instead of that which he desired, to come into his life; something entirely unexpected; something that seemed the very opposite of what he wished. When such disappointments come—if, as in this particular case, they are not the result of our own sin—it is well for us by the Spirit of God to be able to transmute **our disappointment** into **"His appointment,"** for very often by such discipline our life becomes more fruitful. What we want may be good, but what we need may be better; and God deals with our needs, not with our wants.

2. A significant testimony.

How very striking it is to read Laban's words in appealing to Jacob not to depart! "I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake" (Ge 30:27). Laban had wit enough to see the value of having Jacob associated with him, and so he seeks to profit by the association, and use Jacob for his own ends. There does not seem to have been any real religion in Laban, but he was able to appreciate the value of it in Jacob. There are many Labans today who are not personally pious, but who are quite able to appreciate the good effects of piety in others. They do not become Church members and workers, but they attend church because of the social and other advantages that accrue to a profession of Christianity. It is a fine testimony to the value of religion when a man of the world is able to realize that there is something in it after all, and that, however indirectly, it "pays" to be associated with God's people. So far as the man's personal life is concerned we may rightly speak of it as mean and contemptible, but we must not overlook the fact that it is a genuine testimony to the value of religion.

3. A sad down fall.

When we read of Jacob's plot against Laban our hearts sink within us as we remember that this was done by a man who had been to Bethel, had seen angels, and heard the voice of God. We may not be surprised at Laban's deception; but for one who had met with God to descend to the level of the worldling, was indeed a deplorable revelation. Here are two men trying to outwit each other, and one of these two men is a professed believer in God. It is absolutely impossible to excuse and to exculpate Jacob. On no account was he warranted in following Laban's example. Just as it had been almost from the first, he was afraid to trust God with his affairs. He must take them into his own hands, and use all kinds of unworthy means to bring about ends that were in themselves perfectly right and justifiable. It was right and true that he should be paid his wages for those long years of service, but it was utterly wrong that he should be paid as the result of such unworthy means. The corruption of the best is the worst; and when a Christian falls, great and awful is the descent.

4. A striking manifestation.

The human side of things is so prominent in this story that we almost fail to see and realize the Divine hand behind it all. How marvelous was God's patience with His unworthy servant! How much God must have seen in Jacob to have waited all these years, disciplining him, leading him, overruling his mistakes and sins! Is there anything comparable with the patience and mercy of God? As we read the narrative we find ourselves irritated and disappointed with Jacob's failures and falls after Bethel; and yet God was waiting His own time and way to bring about His purposes, to lead Jacob in the right path, to bring him to the end of himself and his self-seeking, and to manifest in that strong character the power and glory of His grace. Shall we not pray that we may have grace to exercise similar long-suffering patience with others, in spite of all disappointments and shattered hopes? If God be so long-suffering with us, surely we ought to be long-suffering one with another.

Genesis 31:1-55 Turning Homewards

It was impossible that the relations just described between Laban and Jacob could last long. Everything was hurrying towards climax of a necessary separation. Jacob's heart was also set returning home (Ge 30:25). As we study the various actors and movements we seem to see at first nothing but jealousy, craftiness, plotting, and hypocrisy. Yet, in spite of all these, we can hardly fail to notice how marvelously God overruled the confusions and made them subserve His purpose of grace for Jacob.

I. The Crisis (Ge 31:1, 2, 3)

Jacob's remarkable prosperity could not remain long unnoticed, and it was perhaps inevitable that Laban's sons should attribute it to craft and theft. And yet, in fairness to Jacob, we must observe that the charge was certainly exaggerated. They made no allowance for their father's craftiness (Ge 30:35) which was the occasion, if not the cause, of Jacob's counter-move. Laban was evidently actuated by similar feelings of envy (Ge 31:2). He hardly expected to find his match in his apparently yielding and submissive nephew.

In the midst of this trying situation God interposed, and made known His will to Jacob, so that what had hitherto been an intense desire became also a plain duty (Ge 31:3). He is commanded to return, and with the command comes the promise of the Divine presence.

II. The Consultation (Ge 31:4-16).

Jacob acts with his accustomed promptitude, and the first step is to take counsel with his wives. To have them in accord with him would be a very great advantage. The journey home would be long, and the destination unknown and strange to them. Much therefore depended on his obtaining their acquiescence. He thereupon placed before them all the facts (Ge 31:4-13), speaking plainly of their father's injustice to him. Deception, change of wages no less than ten times, and all this in spite of faithful, strenuous, long-continued service, had been Jacob's experience of Laban. But God had not left him, and now had come the Divine message to return to his own land. In this recital Jacob claims for himself Divine protection and approval (Ge 31:5, 9, 11), and reveals no consciousness of any wrong-doing of his own. To him it was a deep-seated conviction, which marked his life from the outset, that the end justified the means, and it seems clear that he considered he was doing right in taking steps to increase his possessions by reason of Laban's actions in not paying the proper wages. Jacob had a long way to go yet before he came to the end of himself.

The true character of Laban is clearly seen from the fact that his daughters entirely sided with Jacob against their own father. Even though it was husband against father, they were very evidently and heartily one with Jacob. They too had experienced their father's selfishness and greed, and were ready to approve of their husband's project and to go with him. While not laying undue stress on this acquiescence and approval, it is impossible not to regard it as a testimony to Jacob's general faithfulness, so far as the wives

had the spiritual discernment to judge of it.

III. The Flight (Ge 31:17, 18, 19, 20, 21).

Again Jacob acted with characteristic promptitude and initiative, that very striking feature which marked all his life. Collecting all that he had, he set out on his long journey. What his feelings were as he turned his face homewards we can well understand. Whether he had heard of his mother's death we know not; but if the news had not reached him, we can imagine the joyful anticipation of meeting her who had sacrificed much for him. There was, however, one crook in the lot, through happily Jacob was unaware of it. Rachel, his favorite and greatly beloved wife, still retained some of her Syrian superstitions and had stolen the [teraphim](#), or small household gods, belonging to her father. These idols seem to have been used as charms, whose presence was thought to bring good to the possessor. It is curious that Rachel, and not Leah, should have almost always turned out to be Jacob's greatest hindrance in life.

IV. The Pursuit (Ge 31:22, 23, 24).

Jacob had only been gone three days when Laban was told of what had happened. At once he started off in pursuit, evidently intending to bring back the fugitives by superior force, and compel Jacob once more to return to a service that in spite of everything, was decidedly profitable to Laban. But Laban has to reckon with Someone Who was stronger than Jacob. God interposes on Jacob's behalf and warns Laban to do the fugitives no harm. This Divine warning is a clear proof of what Laban had intended to do. It is also a testimony that, in spite of all we with our clear light can now see objectionable in Jacob, right and truth were on the whole with Jacob, and not with Laban. "Laban's treatment of Jacob has naturally a bearing on the estimate we form of Jacob's behavior towards Laban. Laban is not only the first to break faith with Jacob, but is throughout the chief offender: and had Laban treated Jacob honestly and generously, there is no reason to suppose that he would have sought to overreach him" ([Driver, p. 290 The Book of Genesis with introduction and notes](#))

V. The Expostulation (Ge 31:25-35).

Laban's attitude of injured innocence is very suggestive in the light of the whole story. It is a mixture of hypocrisy and exaggeration. His expressions of love for his daughters and grandchildren are either utterly unreal, or else so impulsively emotional as to be practically worthless. He had had many years of opportunity to show love to them, but the very reverse had been their experience, as they had told Jacob. Love expressed so late as this cannot be worth much. It is what we are prepared to do for our loved ones while they are with us, not the kind of things we say of them after they are gone, that is the real test and genuine measure of our affection.

Laban tells Jacob what he had power to do and what doubtless he would have done but for the warning from God the previous night. And so he contents himself by charging Jacob with the theft of his household gods. It is difficult to appraise at anything like a real spiritual value the religion of Laban. It seems to have been mainly of an indirect and second-hand character, a mixture of truth and error, a blending of a consciousness of the Divine presence with a belief in images. This superstitious use of household gods seems to have been a breach of the law of the second rather than of the first Commandment.

Jacob was of course entirely ignorant of Rachel's theft, and is therefore able to assert his innocence and allow Laban to search through the tents for the lost teraphim. Rachel was a true daughter of her father and a match for him in cunning. But she little knew the trouble she was bringing on Jacob and herself by this deceit.

VI. The Vindication (Ge 31:36-42)

The failure to discover the gods gave Jacob his opportunity to vindicate himself, and right bravely he does it. He recounts with telling force what he had done for Laban, and how he had been requited. And it should be carefully observed that the statements are allowed to "pass unchallenged" ([Driver, p. 290 The Book of Genesis with introduction and notes](#)), a proof of their essential truth, for Laban was loth to allow all this to be said if it had not been true. One thing at least cannot be laid to the charge of Jacob; he was not faithful in his long-continued service to Laban. These verses are for reading and pondering. Jacob clearly sees the true meaning of the Divine vision to Laban. It was nothing else than a rebuke of conduct that was in every way uncalled for and despicable. God may have much against His own servants which He will not allow pass, but He will in any case defend their cause against the wrong-doer and champion them in the face of flagrant injustice. (Cf. Jer. 15:19, 20, 21.)

VII. The Covenant (Ge 31:43-55) (Related Resource: [Covenant: Summary Table](#))

Laban at length realizes the true position of affairs, and proposes to end the feud by a covenant. A pillar is first of all raised, and then a heap of stones. The heap is called by Laban, in Syriac, "Jegarsahadutha" ("the heap of witness"), and by Jacob, in Hebrew, "Galeed," which has exactly the same meaning. The pillar is called "Mizpah" ("watch tower"), and is regarded as the symbol of the Lord watching between the two parties to the covenant and keeping guard over the agreement, lest either should break it. Then comes the solemn oath in the Name of God, followed by the usual sacrifice and sacrificial feast. These two were now "blood-

brothers" (see Trumbull's Blood-Covenant), pledged to eternal unity and fealty. The next morning Laban and his followers returned, and Jacob and his household went on their journey.

It is impossible to avoid noticing the curious misconception of the term "Mizpah" which characterizes its use today. As used for a motto on rings, Christmas cards, and even as the title of an organization, it is interpreted to mean union, trust, and fellowship; while its original meaning was that of separation, distrust, and warning. Two men, neither of whom trusted the other, said in effect: "I cannot trust you out of my sight. The Lord must be the watchman between us if we and our goods are to be kept safe from each other." Thus curiously does primary interpretation differ from spiritual application, and conveys a necessary admonition against the misuse of Scripture even by spiritual people.

1. The will of God in daily life.

Mark carefully the steps by which Jacob was led to return home. They afford a striking lesson on the Divine methods of guidance. First of all a desire to go home sprang up in Jacob's heart. Then circumstances between him and Laban began to make it impossible for him to remain. The nest was being stirred up, and his position rendered intolerable by envy, jealousy, and injustice. And, lastly, came the Divine message of command. Thus inward desire, outward circumstances and the Divine word combined to make the pathway clear. This is ever the way of God's guidance; the conviction of the spirit within, the Word agreeing with it in principle, and then outward circumstances making action possible. When these three agree, we may be sure of right guidance. When the first two alone are clear, the way may be right, but the time is not yet come. When the third only is clear and the two former are not, we may be certain that the way is not right. Only let us be spiritually alert, and then "the meek will He guide in judgment, the meek will He teach His way." (Ps 25:9-[note](#))

2. The acknowledgment of God in daily life.

We cannot fail to see the way in which Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and Laban, all in their turn and way, speak of God as either interposing on their behalf or else taking action to prevent them from accomplishing their purpose. Above all we observe the way in which Laban and Jacob make and complete the covenant, by invoking God's presence and power. It may not be possible always to discern God's hand aright, or to attribute to Him precisely the things that really come from Him, but it is surely one of the prime secrets of true life to be able to acknowledge God's presence and power, and to realize that there is "a Divinity that shapes our ends." The words of the wise man are as true today as ever, and true moreover, in spite of any mistakes we may make about God's hand: "In all thy ways acknowledge Him." (Pr 3:6) To do this is to live as He desires us to live.

3. The Providence of God in daily life.

Amid much that is sad and even sordid in this story; amid "envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness"; amid craft, deceit, and lying on almost every side, we cannot fail to see the hand of God overruling, and making even the wrath of man to praise Him. We are often perplexed by the problems of sin and freewill, and we are baffled as we try to think out how God's will can possibly be done amid all the perverseness of human nature. But we can learn much from a story like this, as we observe each actor a perfectly free agent and yet see everything taken up into the Divine purpose and made to serve far-reaching ends. We may well speak of God's providence, His "seeing beforehand" and making provision accordingly. It is this that gives quietness amidst perplexities, and enables the soul to rest in faith until all is made clear. God's providence is indeed the saints' inheritance.

Genesis 32:1-23 **God's Host for Man's Help**

God's discipline for man sometimes takes the form of a lengthened process, like the years of Jacob with Laban. At other times it is experienced in the form of a short and perhaps sharp crisis, as at Bethel. We are now to consider another of these crises in the life of Jacob, a turning-point, a pivot in his career. Freed from the trammels endured at Haran, he soon becomes aware once again of the hand of God upon him and the Divine purpose concerning him. The grace of God which had never left him, is now to work upon him as never before. Let us mark closely the various stages of the process. Now and henceforward we shall see very clearly the conflict of nature and grace, and the way in which grace overcomes nature. There is scarcely any character in Scripture which is more full of profound yet practical lessons for the spiritual life.

I. Messengers of God (Ge 32:1, 2)

Delivered from the thralldom of Laban's service Jacob goes on his way towards the old home, only to realize before long that another difficulty confronts him in his brother Esau. But between the two difficulties comes this timely revelation from God; "the angels of God met him." How and by what way this manifestation was vouchsafed, whether by waking vision or midnight dream, we know not.

Suffice it to say that it was one more proof of the Divine assurance that Jacob should not be left until the purpose of God had been accomplished in him (Ge 28:15). The angels of God had come to him at Bethel (Ge 28:12) and in Haran (Ge 31:11), and now met him again.

The ministry of angels to the children of God is one of the most interesting and precious elements of the Divine revelations in Scripture. No details are given to satisfy curiosity, but the fact is certain and the blessedness is real (Ps 34:7-note; Da 6:22-note; Heb 1:14-note). And it is worth while remembering that angels, as they are brought before us in Holy Writ, are invariably depicted as the servants of the saints—their inferiors, not superiors. It is probably a mistake to think of angels as occupying an intermediate place between men and God, as something more than the one and less than the other. It may have been this error that has led to the worshipping of angels and the thought of them as mediators between an impure humanity and a holy God. Scripture, on the contrary, reveals them as always ministers, servants, of those who are higher than themselves in spiritual place and privilege, of those who are "heirs of salvation." (Cf. Heb 1:14-note; 1Pe 1:12-note)

This manifestation from God Jacob was quick to see. He recognized the Divine hand, and said, "This is God's host." Whatever may have happened during those years in Haran, Jacob still retained sufficient spiritual discernment to apprehend God's action in this meeting. And he at once raises a memorial of the occasion by calling it "Mahanaim"—"Two Hosts" or "Two Camps"—God's heavenly host and his own earthly host of possessions granted to him by God (Ge 31:9) and now to be protected by God. "Whether visible to the eye of sense or, as would appear, only the eye of faith, they are visible to this troubled man; and, in a glow of confident joy, he calls the name of that place "Mahanaim," Two Camps. One camp was the little one of his own down here, with the helpless women and children and his own frightened and defenceless self; and the other was the great one up there, or rather in shadowy but most real spiritual presence around about him, as a bodyguard making an impregnable wall between him and every foe" (Maclaren).

On the first great occasion of his life he had raised his memorial and called it "God's House" (Ge 28:17). On this, the second great occasion, he is conscious of "God's Host." He has still a deeper experience to pass through before he can raise his third and crowning memorial to "God's Face."

II. Messengers of Man (Ge 32:3,4,5, 6).

It is impossible to avoid seeing the connection and contrast between God's messengers to Jacob and Jacob's messengers to Esau. The pity of it is that Jacob did not fully learn the simple yet profound lesson of the connection. As he nears the borders of the old country, memory begins to move and conscience to work. He knows that there can be no peace and quiet until his relations with Esau are assured and put on a proper footing. Not until that matter was settled could Jacob feel certain of his future. Is not this a great principle of the spiritual life? We must put right what we know to be wrong before we can enjoy settled peace. Unconfessed sin, unforgiven wrong, must be dealt with and put right. Righteousness must precede peace (Isa 32:17; Ps 85:10-note and Ps 72:3-note).

Jacob's despatch of an embassy to his brother was obviously to feel his way, to learn Esau's mind towards him. But the obsequiousness of the message, with its repeated emphasis on "my lord Esau" and "thy servant Jacob," does not sound well from one who had met the angels of God. The words indicate a servile fear that seems strange and surprising in one who had already been assured of the birthright and blessing, and whose personal position as the owner of great possessions surely warranted a higher tone. There is a world of difference between genuine repentance and grovelling humiliation. Jacob could have shown the one without the accompaniment of the other. The message is throughout marked by a spirit of fear of Esau which is unworthy of one who had received such assurances from God. But Jacob was probably not the first, as he certainly was not the last, to fail to realize the direct and causative influence of his intercourse with God on his intercourse with man. While he is in God's presence he seems to be learning aright his spiritual lessons; but when he is face to face with a crisis he forgets the assurances derived from God and proceeds to act for himself as though his own initiative and natural powers were everything.

The messengers return and bring news of the coming of Esau to meet his brother, accompanied by 400 evidently armed men. Not a word of friendly greeting in response to the fawning message, not a single indication of reconciliation in spite of all the intervening years. Not even Jacob's reminder of his long sojourn with Laban "until now," with its implication of having left Esau free all this time, had sufficed to put matters right. The old hostility which had died down by lapse of time seems to have been roused up, and the impulsive, easily-stirred Esau sets out to meet Jacob with a retinue which appears to bode nothing but ill. It may have been done merely to frighten Jacob, or it may have been prompted by a genuine determination to take revenge, but it had the immediate effect of driving Jacob into an exhibition of his old natural self, and thereby afforded a fresh proof of the small extent to which God's assurances of grace had as yet laid hold of his inner life.

III. Fear of Man (Ge 32:7, 8).

Jacob's intense fear and distress were evidently due to his conviction that Esau's coming meant hostility, that the past had not been forgotten or overlooked. But he soon recovers his balance, though, instead of at once casting himself on God, he begins his

characteristic work of planning. Esau's host had for the time driven out of his mind the host of God, and now again he proceeds to display that natural resourcefulness which characterized him all his days from the beginning to the very end. He divided his possessions into two parts, so that in case Esau fell on one of them the other might escape and at least something be left. The employment of this stratagem clearly shows that with all his possessions armed resistance was quite impossible, and, still more, it shows that once again Jacob was not using for his own peace and assurance the real meaning of the revelation that God had vouchsafed to him. At that moment the "angels of God" were not in his mind, or he might easily have remembered that they who were with him were more than all Esau's host (2Kings 6:16).

IV. Fear of God (Ge 32:9, 10, 11, 12)

And yet, in spite of all his clever planning, he cannot help turning to God, even though, like many others since, he arranges matters before he begins to pray (Acts 1:23, 24). He called God to help him in the due execution of his own projects, instead of reversing the order and asking, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" Let us now look at his prayer. It is worthy of careful consideration on several grounds; both for what it contains and also for what it lacks.

It is a prayer of real and yet partial faith (Ge 32:9).

He calls on God, and so far well; yet is it not strange, after Bethel and Haran and Mahanaim, that he does not rise to the height of calling God his own God, but contents himself with the thought of God as the God of his fathers? Then, again, his faith is clear and true in his reminder to God of His commands and promises about the return from Haran, but is it not curious that he does not see that after these promises God would surely take care of him? By all means let us put God in remembrance and plead His promises, but let us also expect that God can and will fulfil His own word (Acts 27:25). His faith, then, was real, but partial; true, but inadequate; and yet, though it is easy for us as we read the narrative to see where he failed, let us not forget that we are often doing the very same ourselves, with far greater light than Jacob had, and therefore with infinitely less reason. We must take care lest we miss the lesson for ourselves in all this, "lest we forget."

The prayer was also marked by true humility (Ge 32:10).

He acknowledged his own unworthiness of all that God had done to and for him, and with heartfelt gratitude he testifies to the way in which blessings had been showered on him. There is perhaps nothing wanting here unless, as some think, it be a consciousness of sin. Certainly we find no indication that he realized any connection between his present fear of Esau and the events associated with the surreptitious possession of the blessing. But in any case the spirit of this humility is a marked advance on anything we have hitherto seen in Jacob. God was indeed at work in his soul.

The prayer was also one of intensely earnest entreaty (Ge 32:11).

He cries out for fear of Esau, and craves deliverance. He assigns as his reason for protection the fear lest he, his wives, and children should be destroyed by his passionate and ruthless brother. The reference to the "mother with the children" is very touching and beautiful, revealing the tenderness of Jacob's nature. And yet it is impossible to overlook the characteristic lack of faith whereby, after expressing this fear of losing his children, he quotes God's promise about those very children being "as the sand of the sea." How like Jacob was this failure to draw the true conclusion of faith from the premises of the Divine promise! And if we call attention to it we are not desirous of blaming him, so much as of using his failure to point the moral for ourselves. "Hath He said, and shall He not do it?"

As we review this prayer we seem to see in it a revelation of a genuine work of grace after years of apparent fruitlessness. Like a stream that emerges into day after running for a long distance underground, Jacob's spiritual life comes out now after those years at Haran; and, though there is still much to seek, we can see the clear marks of the work of God directing, deepening, and purifying his soul. God had never left him (Ge 28:15), as these spiritual experiences abundantly indicate.

V. Dread of Man (Ge 32:17, 18, 19)

Once again we seem to be brought face to face with the other and less worthy side of Jacob. After prayer he is planning again. What is the connection between his praying and his planning? Was the latter the due use of precautions? Was it the proper way of answering his own prayer? It would hardly seem so. It appears rather to be an expression of his intense fear. He proceeds to arrange his possessions into droves of cattle, with distances separating them. He is intent on appeasing Esau with a present, and with remarkable skill he brings train after train to lay siege to his brother. He piles present upon present to break down opposition. When he first sent messengers to Esau (Ge 32:3) there was no indication of any present, for he thought perhaps none would be needed; but now his great fear compels him to take these steps. He is still concerned to manage Esau, instead of letting God do it for him; and the message to the servants breathes the same spirit of obsequious cringing to his brother. Truly "the fear of man bringeth a snare," (Pr 29:25) and it is only "he who trusteth in the Lord" that is set on high above all such dread.

VI. Distrust of God (Ge 32:20,21, 22, 23) .

It seems clear that all this careful preparation was unwarrantably made. We can see it now in the sequel (Ge 28:9), but it was equally unwarranted before Esau appeared. The man who prayed that prayer (Ge 32:9, 10, 11, 12) surely ought not to have spoken as he afterwards did (Ge 32:20). Had he not already forgotten his prayer? He was so filled with his own fears and prospects that he quite failed to rest his heart on God and trust Him to plan and protect. If we express our needs in prayer, it is obviously unfitting to go on arranging and scheming as though we had never prayed. It is one thing to seek wisdom from God and trust Him for it; quite another to ask God's blessing on our own wisdom. And it was this that Jacob had to learn before he met Esau. Only when God had brought him to an utter end of himself could the true position be taken and the full blessing granted. Meanwhile we pause here to gather up some of the most obvious lessons for ourselves.

1. God's provision comes just when it is needed.

The angelic host appeared just after Jacob had left Laban and before he encountered Esau. God is never too soon and never too late. "Thou preventest him with the blessings of goodness." The old theological phraseology of "prevenient grace" embodies one of the profoundest and most precious truths of the spiritual life. God anticipates our need, and provides His grace just when we require it. He sees beforehand, what we cannot see, the needs of the soul, and comes in love to meet them. Whatever the circumstance or emergency, God will be there; for wit only has He said, "I will not forsake thee" (that is, when once He has come), but also "I will not fail thee" (that is, when the need first arises). As we go on our way we may rest assured that God's host will meet us.

2. God's provision comes just as it is needed.

Not only when, but as; not only timely, but appropriate. What was Jacob's one great need at that moment? Surely it was protection. And so God sent His host to assure him of it. God always suits His grace to His people's needs. When Israel was in Egypt they needed deliverance, and obtained it. When they reached Sinai they required instruction, and received the Law. When hostility from surrounding nations was at hand, then, and then only, came the entirely new title "the Lord of hosts" (1 Sam. i. 3). So it is always. "As ... so" is God's great principle for His people. Whatever the need, that will be the nature and measure of the supply.

3. God's provision should remove the fear of man.

The Divine revelation to Jacob was intended to do for him exactly what he needed most, and yet he never really lost the fear of his brother. He could not fully trust God. He "committed his way to the Lord," but did not "trust also in Him." He still carried his burden himself, even after God's angels came, and after his own prayer to God. And yet God's grace is intended to be a reality in our lives. We miss very much when we do not trust Him fully. If only the swimmer yields to the water, the water bears him up; but if he continues to struggle, the result is disastrous. Let us learn to trust, just as we learn to float.

4. God's provision renders clever scheming unnecessary and even sinful.

There is a very true sense in which everyone who prays must also use means. "Trust in God and keep your powder dry." But there is an equally true sense in which anxiety about means and methods is the very reverse of the right attitude for the believer. Jacob's heart was more set on planning than on praying. He plans before and after his prayer. He asks God, it is true, but almost at the same time he seems to feel that he must depend entirely on his own resources. He leans on his plan more than on his prayer; indeed, as we read of the plans, we forget that he ever prayed, and he apparently forgot it also. To the true believer, the man of real faith in God, there will be no real difficulty as to the relation of prayer and work. His work, as well as his prayer, will be manifestly permeated by trust in God. There is a very real sense in which *orare est laborare*; for the man who prays trustfully, restfully, hopefully, will find heart and mind so taken up with God that instinctively he will be led to adopt such methods as will reveal his trust and answer his own prayer. The soul that is truly and fully occupied with God will never be at a loss to know the true relation between prayer and work, work and prayer; for in answer to prayer comes the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of a sound mind, the spirit of courage and fearlessness, the spirit of calm restfulness and equally calm progress. It will know when to "stand still" and when to "go forward," because God is its all in all.

NOTE.—The word rendered "appease" in Ge 32:20 is *kipper*, the word afterwards used for "covering" or "atonement." This is its first occurrence in the Bible (Ge 20:16 is different, but allied in thought), and, according to the principle of first occurrences in Scripture (see on Ge 16:1, 2, 3, 4), the usage here helps to interpret the true meaning of atonement.

NEXT DEVOTIONAL COMMENTS ON — Genesis 32:24-32

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