

# Genesis Devotional Commentary 2

**James Rosscup** rates this as the **BEST devotional commentary on Genesis**. Rosscup writes "the notes by W. H. Griffith-Thomas, Through the Pentateuch Chapter By Chapter... will be a warm devotional help."

[Click for index to all of W H Griffith-Thomas' — devotional commentary on Genesis](#)

## Genesis 32:24-32

### Peniel: The Face of God

THE one absorbing thought with Jacob was his meeting with Esau. It never seems to have occurred to him that there was a far greater need—a meeting with God. Still less did he imagine that there could be any connection between the two meetings, that his meeting with God would prove the best preparation for meeting his brother. These two thoughts sum up the story before us: Jacob must meet God before he meets Esau, and the one meeting will be the only and sufficient way of preparing for the other. We are thus able to understand what a spiritual crisis this was to Jacob, and we can also perceive, what Jacob did not, how lovingly God provided for this by the embassy of the angels (Ge 32:1). More than this, we can see in the story an illustration of God's dealings with His children today. Are we faced with some difficult problem? Are we opposed by some apparently insuperable obstacle? Are we at our wit's end in view of some terrible need? Let us learn from the story of Jacob to put God first, and thereby to discover the secret of all real spiritual power and blessing. The story brings before us a striking contrast of the human and the Divine, and reveals the way in which the human is met, dealt with, overcome, and blessed by the Divine. Step by step as the narrative is unfolded we observe this contrast between nature and grace, between man and God, between self-effort and Divine power.

#### I. Human Solitude (Ge 32:24).

Jacob had sent all his family, household, and possessions over the ford Jabbok. But for some reason or other he remained that night on the opposite bank; he was "left alone." Why was this? He was clearly conscious that a great crisis had come in his life. Anything might happen on the next morning when Esau and his four hundred men arrived. He had planned and prayed, prayed and planned, and now there was nothing more for him to do. Inaction was the most difficult of all things for so resourceful and energetic a nature. For Jacob to wait, instead of to work, was the greatest of all efforts. And yet there he was, in the darkness of the night, alone, with all the events of the past day clear before him, with all the awful possibilities of the coming day well in view. Why, then, was he alone? Is there any spiritual meaning in it? Was there a spiritual need expressed by this sending over all his household and himself remaining outside the promised land? Was there any idea of the blessing of solitude as "the mother-country of the strong?" It is difficult to say, but the probability is that this solitude was merely for the purpose of taking every possible precaution. He had arranged his present to "appease" his brother, he had sent over the ford all that was nearest and most precious to him, and now he remains alone on guard, ready for any emergency, or any attack under cover of the night. Alert as ever, he will leave nothing to chance; he will not even sleep.

#### II. Divine Discipline (Ge 32:24).

Suddenly he is conscious of an assailant. A man wrestles with him. At once, the courageous, resourceful Jacob closes with this opponent. It would seem as though Jacob regarded him as an emissary of Esau who had come to bar his way to the promised land. As such he is to be resisted and opposed with all possible strength. The struggle went on until daybreak, and all the while it was not Esau or any of his men. Let us mark carefully the description: "There wrestled a man with him." It is sometimes read as though Jacob wrestled with the man, and from it is derived the lesson of prevailing- prayer. But this is to mistake altogether the point of the story. "There wrestled a man with him." The wrestling was an endeavor on God's part to break down Jacob's opposition, to bring him to an end of himself, to take from him all self-trust, all confidence in his own cleverness and resource, to make him know that Esau is to be overcome and Canaan obtained not by craft or flattery, but by Divine grace and power. There is no lesson at all on prevailing prayer. Far from it; quite the opposite. The self-life in Jacob is to be overcome, the old nature is to be conquered, the planning is to be rendered futile, and the resourcefulness made impotent. Instead of gaining Canaan by cleverness he must receive it as a gift from God. Instead of winning he must accept it from Divine grace.

Was this a literal physical struggle? Most assuredly it was. The outcome shows this very clearly (Ge 32:25, 31, 32). And yet the physical aspect is subservient to the spiritual, the bodily weakness was to be a symbol of the spiritual need of the man.

#### III. Human Opposition (Ge 32:25).

In the darkness of the night Jacob did not realize who and what his assailant was. And so he put forth all his resources of bodily vigor. Keyed up by the stirring events of the preceding day, and remembering that all his precious possessions were involved, to say

nothing of his own life, he resisted this powerful opponent, and the struggle remained in the balance hour after hour. His pertinacity was marvelous! Here was no coward, no poltroon, but a man of unbounded energy, ready to fight for his own to the last.

How like he is to many of us today! We do not realize that all these untoward circumstances, these perplexities, these sorrows, are part of the Divine discipline, and intended to bring us to the end of ourselves. And so we struggle, and strive, and fight, and resist, and all to no purpose. God had been trying to get Jacob to trust Him all these years. He met him at Bethel with vision and promises, and yet how poor was the response (Ge 28). He met him again during those years in Haran, using disappointment (Ge 29), trouble (Ge 30), and opposition (Ge 31.) to lead to trust, but to little or no effect. And then came the angelic host (Ge 32:1ff) ; but its effect was only transient, the self-effort was soon in the ascendant again. And now comes the crowning attempt to break down this man's self-confidence and lead him to lean, to trust, to wait on his covenant God. But he will not, he cannot; he must oppose, he must resist, he must act for himself. He might pray, and pray earnestly, but he must also act; and act he did, though the net result was only to thwart and delay the Divine purpose concerning him. So it is often with us; we refuse to trust God, to put Him first, in spite of all the assurance of His love and the revelation of His grace through many a long year. But God did not leave Jacob, and He does not leave us.

#### **IV. Divine Power (Ge 32:25).**

At last Jacob was made to realize the true state of affairs. So outstanding was the human opposition that nothing short of a special manifestation of Divine power would suffice to break it down. God could have done this earlier in the struggle, but He would not, for He wanted Jacob's willing surrender. Yet at length, as He could not obtain this, there was nothing else to be done but to deal with him in severity, and by an assertion of Divine power to bring this masterful man to an end of himself. God wished Jacob to realize that only by Divine grace he could meet Esau and enter Canaan; that he could not overcome by guile and enter by cleverness; that only by mercy, grace, and favor could his difficulties be met and his way prospered. And so "He touched the hollow of his thigh," took away the very power required for wrestling, brought him by one swift blow to the very end of his resources, and left him utterly powerless. Thus Divine love dealt with him in mercy and taught him, albeit in severity, the one lesson he needed most to learn.

Here again we see ourselves and God's dealing with us. God must bring us to Himself, and He can only do this by bringing us to an end of ourselves. And because of our senseless resistance and dull inability to see His fatherly hand in discipline, he has to touch our natural powers and resources, and reduce us to impotence before He can teach us the needed lesson and bestow the needed grace. And yet His "touch" is always one of love, of wisdom, of mercy, if only we would see it.

#### **V. Human Helplessness (Ge 32:26).**

As the dawn came on, Jacob recognized the mysterious assailant. No longer able to wrestle, he began to cling. Instead of opposition came tenacity, and Jacob proved himself to possess the latter as fully as the former. Disabled at the very point of strength for wrestling, Jacob could do nothing but cling. From cunning to clinging, from resisting to resting—this was the literal and symbolical experience of the crafty but now conquered Jacob. His words, 'I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me,' are clear evidence of the change in him. He is conscious at last of the futility of all his efforts to appease Esau and overcome his animosity, and now he clings to God and seeks for blessing. At last he is in the right position, but at what cost! If only he had learnt the lesson sooner, how much trouble and anxiety he would have been spared! No fears of Esau, no need of planning to appease him, no concern for his wives and children, nothing but rest of heart in the love of God. Ah! if only he had learnt the lesson of Bethel, and the lesson of Haran, and the lesson of Mahanaim! But now it is learnt, and God is better to him than all his fears. What he struggled for, he lost; what he trusted for, he gained. So it is always. It is always worth while to trust God and put Him first.

#### **VI. Divine Blessing (Ge 32: 27, 28, 29).**

"Except Thou bless me" was Jacob's desire (Ge 32:26). "And He blessed him there" was the Divine answer (Ge 32:29). But what was included in that Divine blessing? Very much that concerned Jacob's life and experience.

A new character was to be his. He is asked his name, and is compelled to call himself Jacob, "Supplanter." But this is to be changed to "Israel," "God's Prince" or "God's Perseverer" ([Driver - The Book of Genesis](#)) ; the one who is no longer the crafty one, but he who is worthy to prevail, to lead, to rule, to overcome.

A new power was also to be his. He had experienced power with God by clinging. He is now to have power with man by reason of having power with God. (Cf. Hos 12:3, 4.) When God is put first, power with man naturally and necessarily follows. The gloss of the Septuagint and the Vulgate seems to give the true idea of the verse: "Thou hast had power with God; much more shalt thou prevail with men." The one is the guarantee of the other.

A new experience was also to be his. The Divine Angel could ask Jacob's name (Ge 32:27), but Jacob was not allowed to know the Angel's (Ge 32:29; cf. Jdg. 13:17). There seems little doubt that this was a Divine manifestation, not the visit of a created angel. (Cf. Ge 18:1, 2, 16, 22.) But if Jacob might not know His name, he could experience His blessing, for "He blessed him there."

## **VII. Human Gratitude (Ge 32:30).**

As on previous occasions, Jacob again raised his "Ebenezer," and made a memorial of the experience which had been vouchsafed to him. He called the name of the place "Peniel," God's Face, in token of that wonderful bestowal of God's favor and of the preservation of his life (Ex 33:20; Dt 4:33; Jdg 6:22f. and Jdg 13:22). He realized, in some measure at least, what it meant. God had met him, taught him, blessed him; and now he could meet Esau without fear, and face any emergency, in the strength of that glorious vision.

## **VIII. Divine Glory (Ge 32:31, 32).**

"The sun rose upon him." There was sunshine within as well. The sun seemed brighter than ever that morning, and the very face of nature seemed changed by reason of that vision of the face of God. The sun of God's glory was reflected on Jacob's face too, and though he had to bear the marks of that contest (Ge 32:31), and though there was to be a perpetual record of it in the days to come (Ge 32:32), yet it had all been worth while, for the grace of God had overcome the self-effort of man, the fear of God had displaced the fear of man, the power of God had given assurances as to the power of man. Jacob was now a monument of Divine grace, and was intended henceforth to live to the Divine glory. Thus God justified and vindicated Himself in the life of His unworthy servant, "to the praise of the glory of His grace." Thus God's loving sympathy, marvelous patience, and perfect wisdom shone forth in His dealings with Jacob; grace was glorified, and God Himself magnified.

(For a summary of the true meaning of this episode, see the suggestive note in Driver's Genesis, p. 296 [The Book of Genesis with introduction and notes](#).)

Peniel was a noteworthy landmark in Jacob's spiritual history. It was the third occasion and culminating point of a special Divine revelation. The first was Bethel, where "the House of God" reminded and assured him of the Divine Presence. The second was Mahanaim, where the "Host of God" taught him the Divine Power. The third was Peniel, where he was led beyond the ideas of God's presence and power to that of Divine Favor and Fellowship. The "Face" of God is used constantly in Scripture as a symbol of favor, friendship, fellowship (Ex 33:11, 20; Dt. 34:10), and in the believer's life fellowship is the highest of our spiritual privileges (1Jn 1:3). God desired and purposed to bring Jacob into this position of blessedness and power; and all the Divine dealings, from Bethel onwards, were intended to lead up to this. So it is now; everything that God has for us is expressed in terms of union and communion of which the New Testament is so full. What, then, will this fellowship accomplish?

### **1. The "Face of God" is the place of transformation of character.**

Fellowship with God changes Jacobs to Israels. "Behold ... we are being changed." From this time onward there was a very distinct change in Jacob; and although the old nature was still there, Peniel had its effect and exercised transforming influence. There is nothing like fellowship with God to change and transfigure our nature.

### **2. The "Face of God" is the place of power for daily life.**

Like Jacob, we have to meet our Esaus and we are afraid. We strive, plan, struggle, and all to no purpose. But we see God's Face, and all is changed. Power with man comes from power with God. We have, it may be, a crisis today; but first of all we pray, and the victory is gained. We wonder who will roll away the stone, but find that it is already gone. Fellowship with God gives insight and foresight, peace and patience, calm and courage in every emergency, and enables us to become "more than conquerors" over every foe. Just as power with God came by surrender, so also will power with men come by willing self-sacrifice on their behalf. Self is the greatest foe to blessing from God or influence with men.

### **3. The "Face of God" is the place of spiritual blessing.**

In the presence of God it is impossible to use carnal weapons. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." When Jacob came to an end of struggling and commenced clinging, the blessing quickly came. Jacob hitherto had no idea of a blessing obtained by passive receptiveness. But in the life of a true believer God's best gifts come that way. Gain comes by loss, gathering by scattering. So it must be always. Fellowship with God dispenses with subterfuges, natural craft, and clever resourcefulness. The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. Blessing must be obtained in the right way or not at all. The supreme need of man is the grace of God, and this is not only independent of, but opposed to all that is merely earthly and human. Just as salvation is of God by grace, so is every spiritual blessing derived in the same way. Whether we think of the individual believer or the community of God's people, all grace comes through fellowship with God. Not by unworthy expedients, not by mere human effort, not by natural energy, but in union and communion with God all grace and blessing become ours. We must see the Face of God.

## **Genesis 33:1-20**

### **After Peniel**

WHEN the Angel at Peniel said, "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel," the obvious meaning was that from that time forward the man was to be known by the new name only. In similar cases of change of name, Abram to Abraham, Saul to Paul, Simon to Peter, the new name persisted and, at least with Abraham and Paul, the old one was never used again. But what do we find in the story of Jacob? This; that after Peniel the name "Jacob" occurs no less than forty-five times, while "Israel" appears only twenty-three times. And what is equally significant, the usage to which we are familiar is "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," not "Abraham, Isaac and Israel."

Why, then, did not the name "Jacob" disappear entirely and "Israel" take its place? Was it not because Jacob went back from the new position and privilege given him at Peniel? He did not continue true to that Divine revelation; he did not abide in the position and power of a "Prince of God." It is unutterably sad when a believer recedes from a high position of spiritual privilege. To be disobedient to the heavenly vision and revert to the old type of life is one of the most terrible of sorrows and one of the profoundest of mysteries. It is bad for a man to refuse God altogether; it is in some ways infinitely worse for a believer to lose position, peace, and power through unfaithfulness. Let us give heed to this story of Jacob's failure, and as we mark his steps backward let us ponder well the secret of his fall.

### **I. First Step Backward (Ge 33:1-11).**

The next morning after Peniel Jacob had yet to face his great problem of the meeting with Esau. The difficulty was still there, Esau and his 400 men, and not even the intercourse with God had removed it. But that intercourse provided him with the secret and means of victory over it if only he had used the opportunity. God does not always see fit to remove obstacles from our pathway, but He always gives power to triumph over them. Instead, however, of Jacob meeting Esau "in the strength of that meat" received by Peniel, we find him still actuated by fear. Leaving household and cattle as arranged the preceding day (Ge 32:7, 8), he makes a new disposition of his wives and children, placing them in such order that the best-loved are hindmost. Thus he prepares for the worst, still contemplating the possibility, not to say the probability, of Esau's vengeance. The fear of man still brings a snare.

Then, putting himself at the head of his family procession, he goes forward to meet his brother, bowing with very great deference — far in excess, so it would seem, even of the customary Oriental courtesy. He is intent on showing his brother all possible consideration, and apparently means to acknowledge Esau's superior prerogatives. This, after obtaining the birthright and blessing is strange, and perhaps is intended as a tacit acknowledgment of his old sin of craft and deceit. But be this as it may, the response of Esau is very striking. He runs to meet Jacob, and they greet each other amid tokens of genuine feeling. Esau's anger had gone in the rush of emotion on seeing his brother after all those years of separation. Rebekah was quite right in her knowledge of her elder son's feelings. He was impulsive, hasty, passionate, but his anger did not last; there was no brooding revenge, no malevolence. And thus, in an instant, Jacob's fears were proved to be groundless, and all his elaborate precautions for safety seen to be entirely unnecessary.

After making the acquaintance of Jacob's family, Esau naturally asked the meaning of "all this drove" that he had met. He was told that it was a present, "to find grace in the eyes of my lord." But all this obsequiousness also proved quite unnecessary, for Esau refused the present, saying that he already had enough. Jacob thereupon pressed him to take it, urging as his reason that he was grateful for his favorable reception. He felt that just as God had received him graciously, so Esau's favor was now equally evident, and in token of his gratitude he pressed the gift upon him.

It is, however, hardly possible to avoid seeing in this urgency a desire on the part of Jacob to purchase Esau's goodwill. He knew his brother's fickleness, and was therefore determined to take every possible precaution. We cannot but feel that Jacob does not come quite worthily out of this meeting. After Peniel it does not read well. In the face of that guarantee of power and grace we are disappointed to read of further precautions, manifest fear, obvious fawning, and continued planning. Jacob has still to learn the lesson of absolute trust in his God. It is worthy of note that all the recognition of God was on his side (Ge 33:5, 10, 11), not on Esau's; but in spite of it all we feel that he did not remain on the high level of Peniel, or derive all the spiritual power he might have obtained from that memorable occasion of fellowship with God.

### **II. Second Step Backward (Ge 33:12-17)**

Esau proposed that they should journey together, he and his men going forward as the escort. This suggestion was another mark of friendliness, and here we cannot help observing how splendidly Esau showed up on this occasion. Warmth, generosity, unselfishness, willingness to help, friendliness—all these features characterized him. Men of the world often put to shame the children of God in the manifestation of the practical virtues of life. Yet this ought not to be so.

Jacob met this generous proposal in a very characteristic way, and thereby gave another revelation of himself. He called attention to the little children and to the flocks and herds with their young, and pleaded quite naturally for a slow journey, as the children and cattle could bear it. But it was a polite though shrewd way of declining his brother's invitation. He was evidently still mindful of the diversity of their temperaments, and feared that if they were long together, some occasion of friction would arise and again sever

their friendly relations. There was, quite probably, real worldly wisdom in this attitude of Jacob. He had a keener insight into the facts of the case than his more superficial brother. Yet we would rather have seen a hearty response to the proposal and a more definite trust in God as to the consequences. And certainly we could have easily dispensed with the renewed obsequiousness that marked Jacob's language to Esau. It was surely unworthy of a brother to a brother, an equal to an equal—yea, rather a child of God to a man of the world. If a believer has to refuse a request to a non-Christian he should not be afraid to give the right reason for his refusal. Testimony to truth, if given in the right spirit and with a right motive, will never be allowed to do harm.

But, whatever may be said of all this, there is one point in the narrative in which Jacob clearly does definite wrong. In declining Esau's invitation to journey together on account of his own need of a slower progress Jacob distinctly promised to rejoin Esau in Seir. Whereupon Esau naturally offered to leave some of his men as a guide and escort. This again Jacob very politely declined (Ge 33:15), and at length Esau departed. What, then, was Jacob's next step? Actually this: instead of going after Esau to Seir, which was situated south-east of Peniel, he took his journey in an exactly opposite direction, and went to Succoth, north-west of Peniel. And thus he took the second step backward, deceiving his brother once again. It is surely impossible even to palliate this falsehood. As he had not the courage to give his brother the real reason of his declining the journey together, so also he told an untruth in order to put as much distance as he could between them. We wonder what Esau must have thought when he found Jacob did not arrive. We wonder whether he discounted Jacob's references to God which he had made on their meeting together. What is the use of our pious verbal acknowledgment of God if we deny Him by our actions and give cause to the men of the world to reflect on our profession of religion and even to blaspheme it? How long will it be before we learn that orthodoxy of profession with unreality of conduct is the most deplorable combination in this world?

### **III. Third Step Backward (Ge 33:17).**

Jacob did not content himself with a temporary stay at Succoth. He "built him a house and made booths for his cattle." Hitherto he had lived the pilgrim life, as his father and grandfather before him; but now he seeks for something more permanent, and builds a house. A tent was no longer sufficient for him. But it may be asked, Was this wrong?

Not per se, perhaps, and yet pretty certainly wrong for him. There are many things not essentially sinful which become sinful under particular circumstances. Jacob had forgotten his vow at Bethel (Ge 28:21), and by making Succoth so evidently his home he was showing himself to be on a very low spiritual level in his forgetfulness of the claim of God upon him. When God revealed Himself in Haran it was as "the God of Bethel" (Ge 31:13), and the reminder at that time of the vow made by Jacob was evidence of the prominent and even predominant place Bethel was intended to occupy in the subsequent life of the patriarch. He thus fails to rise to the full height of God's purpose. He had overlooked all this, and was settling down, at any rate for a time, in earthly ease and prosperity. There were no fine pastures at Bethel! How easily we forget our Bethels and all that we have promised God! How disappointing to God must be the failures and unfaithfulness of His servants! How sad to ignore in prosperity the vows we made when we were in danger! And yet, alas! how true this is to life today!

### **IV. Fourth Step Backward (Ge 33:18, 19, 20).**

After a time Succoth was left, and Jacob journeyed on. If we read the R. V., he "came in peace to the city of Shechem," which reminds us of his vow (Ge 28:21, "in peace"), although he did not go back to Bethel. In this case Shechem is the name of the owner of the place (Cf. Ge 34:2). If, however, we read the A. V., he "came to Shalem," a city in the country or neighborhood of what was afterwards Shechem or Sychar (John 4:5; Acts 7:16). In pitching his tent "before the city" we see another indication of his low spiritual condition. If he had been true to God he would have recognized his danger in the proximity to the inhabitants of the land. And, as we know, this nearness brought untold trouble upon him.

Then, again, he bought some property there, purchasing the land on which his tent was pitched. He was thus actually buying his own promised possessions, the land assured to him by God! Was this necessary? Surely not. Abraham's purchase was for a very different reason. Why could not Jacob trust God, as Abraham had done? It was because his faith could not rise to the occasion. Jacob's motto—was "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush," and even the intercourse with God had removed it. But that intercourse provided him with the secret and means of victory over it if only he had used the opportunity. God does not always see fit to remove obstacles from our pathway, but He always gives power to triumph over them. Instead, however, of Jacob meeting Esau "in the strength of that meat" received by Peniel, we find him still actuated by fear. Leaving household and cattle as arranged the preceding day (Ge 32:7, 8), he makes a new disposition of his wives and children, placing them in such order that the best-loved are hindermost. Thus he prepares for the worst, still contemplating the possibility, not to say the probability, of Esau's vengeance. The fear of man still brings a snare.

Then, putting himself at the head of his family procession, he goes forward to meet his brother, bowing with very great deference—far in excess, so it would seem, even of the customary Oriental courtesy. He is intent on showing his brother all possible consideration, and apparently means to acknowledge Esau's superior prerogatives. This, after obtaining the birthright and blessing is strange, and perhaps is intended as a tacit acknowledgment of his old sin of craft and deceit. But be this as it may, the response of

Esau is very striking. He runs to meet Jacob, and they greet each other amid tokens of genuine feeling. Esau's anger had gone in the rush of emotion on seeing his brother after all those years of separation. Rebekah was quite right in her knowledge of her elder son's feelings. He was impulsive, hasty, passionate, but his anger did not last; there was no brooding revenge, no malevolence. And thus, in an instant, Jacob's fears were proved to be groundless, and all his elaborate precautions for safety seen to be entirely unnecessary.

After making the acquaintance of Jacob's family, Esau naturally asked the meaning of "all this drove" that he had met. He was told that it was a present, "to find grace in the eyes of my lord." But all this obsequiousness also proved quite unnecessary, for Esau refused the present, saying that he already had enough. Jacob thereupon pressed him to take it, urging as his reason that he was grateful for his favorable reception. He felt that just as God had received him graciously, so Esau's favor was now equally evident, and in token of his gratitude he pressed the gift upon him.

It is, however, hardly possible to avoid seeing in this urgency a desire on the part of Jacob to purchase Esau's goodwill. He knew his brother's fickleness, and was therefore determined to take every possible precaution. We cannot but feel that Jacob does not come quite worthily out of this meeting. After Peniel it does not read well. In the face of that guarantee of power and grace we are disappointed to read of further precautions, manifest fear, obvious fawning, and continued planning. Jacob has still to learn the lesson of absolute trust in his God. It is worthy of note that all the recognition of God was on his side (vers. 5, 10, 11), not on Esau's; but in spite of it all we feel that he did not remain on the high level of Peniel, or derive all the spiritual power he might have obtained from that memorable occasion of fellowship with God.

### **1. The awful possibilities of spiritual degeneration.**

Jacob's experiences after Peniel are a solemn reminder that Conversion (Bethel) and Consecration (Peniel) are no guarantees of abiding faithfulness. They need to be followed by Concentration and Continuance. There are frequent hints throughout Holy Scripture of the ghastly possibilities of spiritual relapse after the most exalted fellowship with God. We think of David's sin after such a revelation as is recorded in 2Sa 7:1-29. We think of Simon Peter's denial after Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:1-28) and after the Transfiguration (Mt 17:1-27). And we remember the solemn warning of Heb 5:12, 14, with its revelation of the awful possibility of spiritual senility, of second childhood, (He 5:11, 12). It is possible for one who has had great spiritual insight, received great spiritual gifts, done great spiritual service, to lose all by unfaithfulness. Backsliding is a terrible and awful fact, and sometimes the higher the rise the lower the fall. Spiritual experience, however true and rich, does not exempt from danger; rather does it call for greater watchfulness. "So Daniel continued." The grace of continuance is the greatest need of all. Have we not, perhaps, heard of some servant of God who had been honored and blessed, and afterwards fell into sin and shame? Can we not, perchance, think of some who commenced their Christian life, and it may be their ministry, full of hope and promise, but who are now "unfulfilled prophecies," by reason of lack of faithfulness to the heavenly vision? They have virtually ceased to pray, practically ceased to meditate on the Bible, ceased to be unworldly; they have adopted unworthy methods in their ministry, pandered to worldliness and earthly ambitions, and the result is dullness, darkness, dryness, deadness in life and ministry, souls not being saved, believers not being quickened, everything stale and unprofitable in their service. They are "cast away," not in the sense of losing their salvation, but of having lost their usefulness. They are "disapproved," rejected, set aside. While the regenerate can never become unregenerate, he can, alas! become degenerate, and herein lies one of the gravest perils of the Christian life. Moody once said to Canon Hay Aitken that the one thing he feared most was the loss of his testimony for Christ. "I saw that there was a way to hell even from the gates of heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction."

### **2. The simple secret of spiritual stability.**

This lies in obedience to the heavenly vision, faithfulness to the heavenly voice. If only Jacob had kept God first, and refused to listen to the voice of self, how different would have been his record! With absolute trust in God would have come victory over temptation, courage in danger, and preservation from worldliness. We fail because we distrust God, and distrusting we disobey Him. God's grace is sufficient for every emergency, and the light granted at Peniel would have detected every danger and protected from every disaster. Every spiritual victory lifts us to a higher plane of power and blessing, and thus we go on from "strength to strength," from "glory to glory." There is no need for failure, for backsliding, for defeat, but every warrant for progress, power and preservation. We have only to obey the vision vouchsafed to us, to appropriate the grace provided for us, in order to experience stability, strength and ever-growing satisfaction, to the glory and praise of God.

## **Genesis 34:1-31**

### **Results of Unfaithfulness**

A CAREFUL comparison of passages shows that Jacob's stay at Succoth and Shechem must have extended over several years. Bethel and his vow (Ge 28:22) were evidently forgotten or ignored. The pastures at Succoth and Shechem were attractive, his



possessions had so largely increased that movement was difficult, circumstances were perhaps conceived of as having changed, making the realization of the vow almost impracticable. And so Jacob settled down to ordinary life, having either put off or else put aside the fulfilment of his promise. He was not prepared for the upheaval that a move to Bethel would involve. Full of resource whenever danger threatened, he seemed to be "settling on the lees," content with his favored position in Shechem and with his profession of religion as indicated by the altar (Ge 33:20).

"A spiritual experience that is separated from your present by twenty years of active life, by a foreign residence, by marriage, by the growing-up of a family around you, by other and fresher spiritual experiences, is apt to be very indistinctly remembered. The obligations you then felt and owned have been overlaid and buried in the lapse of years. And so it comes that a low tone is introduced into your life, and your homes cease to be model homes" ([Dods, Genesis, p. 313 The Expositor's Bible](#)).

And this is the man who has seen the Face of God! This is the man to whom the special Divine revelation of grace had been given! This is the man whom God's goodness and mercy had followed all the days of his life! He it is who is on this low ground of unfaithfulness, of spiritual declension, and who has to suffer for it bitterly. So it is always; spiritual leakage means spiritual loss, a lower tone, a cessation of power, a discontinuance of testimony, and, not least of all, an unrest of soul and untold trouble of heart and life. Let us now observe some of the sad effects of Jacob's unfaithfulness.

### **I. The Grave Danger (cf. Ge 33:18, 19, 20)**

It seems clear that the choice of Shechem was largely conditioned by its favorable position for his family and flocks. Jacob pitched his tent "before the city," in close proximity to the people and the place, in the neighborhood of which he could find society and protection, with pasturage for his flocks. The choice of a home or of a school today is not seldom regulated by the same considerations. A professing Christian man is retiring from business, and determines to reside in the country. Where shall he go? What are his requirements? Healthy surroundings, of course. But also a neighborhood where his young people will be able to enjoy the advantages of good society, where they can mix easily and freely on good terms with the "best people," where social intercourse and entertainment abound, and where the family will soon take its place as one of the recognized centers of social influence. All very attractive and delightful; but does it ever occur to the man who is thus choosing his home to inquire as to the spiritual opportunities of the place? What sort of church has it? Is the Gospel preached there? Is Christ lifted up? Or is it a fashionable church where either formalism or mere intellectualism rules? But, says the man, "You cannot have everything you want; you must do the best you can with your opportunities, and hope for the best." Be it so; and spiritual trouble will be the result. Unless a family is deliberately going into a spiritually destitute neighborhood to witness for Christ and to win people to Him (in which case they will not be allowed many social advantages by their neighbors!), the first and supreme factor of choice of a new home should be, "What will it do for our spiritual life?"

Or it may be that parents have to choose a school for their boys and girls. They are able to send them to the very best known of private schools, and they quite naturally desire for their children the best opportunities, educational and social. But there are well-grounded reports that these particular schools, though socially advantageous, are morally disadvantageous, and attended with risk. What will the father and mother do? Will they take the risk? Or will they definitely make themselves familiar with the religious life of the school before sending their boy? Or will they not rather send him to a less known school, where all is well religiously, and sacrifice the social advantages of the other school for the sake of moral and spiritual safety? On the answer to these questions much will turn. Jacob chose to live near Shechem, with all the risks involved thereby, and no one ever follows his example without suffering quite as definitely, in some way or other.

### **II. The Great Disaster (Ge 34:1, 2)**

The inevitable result of living near Shechem was soon seen. Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob (Ge 30:21), "went out to see the daughters of the land." It was a perfectly natural thing for a young, inexperienced girl to do. The thought of visiting "the daughters of the land," was at once novel and interesting. We wonder, however, what Jacob and Leah were doing to allow it. Why did they not warn Dinah of the danger, and prevent her going? Was this inaction due to their lowered moral tone? Did they argue that there was "no danger" and that "we must not be too particular or strait-laced"? In any case, she was allowed to go, with the result that is well known. The sin of Shechem was, of course, in every way inexcusable, for it was against the youth of the girl, as well as against all known laws of hospitality. And yet in view of the fact that he and his people were people of the land, and not followers of the one true God, it would not be regarded by him and his in the same light of heinousness as it was regarded from Jacob's side. It is very striking that the word rendered "defiled" (Ge 34:5, 13, 27) means "desecrated," and is used later to describe the defilement or desecration of the Temple (Ps 79:1-13). "The dishonor of womanhood and the desecration of the Holy of Holies are regarded with the same feelings and described by the same word" (Strahan, Hebrew Ideals in Genesis). Thus does the Book of God regard personal purity, and denote and denounce the sin that dishonors it. But while we fail not to point out the sin of Shechem, we may not forget the weakness and unfaithfulness of Jacob that made possible his daughter's shame.

### **III. The Unexpected Project (Ge 34:3-12)**

Shechem proceeded to make the only possible reparation. He had evidently become genuinely attached to Dinah and wished to make her his wife. He thereupon requested his father to take the necessary steps to this end according to the custom which made it the parents' business to obtain wives for their sons (Ge 24:4; Jdg 14:2).

Jacob soon heard the terrible news of his daughter's fall, and as his sons were not then at home he "held his peace." We wonder why? Was it because of sorrow and shame as he thought of his daughter and of the circumstances that gave opportunity for it? Was conscience stirring within him, reminding him of Bethel? Or was it a case of real indecision, not knowing what to do, and therefore leaving the matter to be settled by Dinah's brothers? It is true that brothers seem to have had a great deal to say concerning their sister's life (Ge 24:50f.), but at the same time Jacob's silence and inaction, as head of the household, are somewhat difficult to understand. The "silence" does not seem to have been in connection with the proposed marriage, but with reference to the sin and shame.

At length the brothers heard of it, and at the same time came Hamor's request on behalf of his son. The proposal for marriage was suggested as an opportunity for the beginning of a general amalgamation of the two families and peoples (ver. 9, 10). Shechem was also prepared to give whatever "dowry" they asked, the "dowry" being not a gift to the bride, in the modern sense, but a price paid to the parents for their daughter (Ex 22:16f.; 1Sa 18:25).

These proposals are significant on several grounds. They show clearly the value set by the Canaanites on union with Jacob's family. It was not the first, and it has not been the last occasion when people of the world have thought it advantageous to be united with the people of God. Godliness, even of the kind then shown by Jacob, has promise of attractiveness and value for men of the world. Then, too, we cannot help noticing the true nobility of character shown by Shechem. In spite of his sin, or at least after it, he stands out well by comparison with the rest of the actors here mentioned. And it is a striking testimony to the candour of the Book that it depicts both this Canaanitish prince and the sons of Jacob so faithfully. The frankness of the Bible is not the least proof of its truthfulness and authenticity.

### **IV. The Unworthy Pretext (Ge 34:13, 14, 15, 16, 17)**

The request and proposals of Hamor and Shechem were regarded by Dinah's brothers as impossible unless one particular condition were fulfilled. They took up the ground that it would be intolerable to allow an uncircumcised man to become the husband of one who was within the covenant of God, but they were quite ready to agree to the marriage if the Canaanites would agree to all their males receiving the sign of the covenant. Not only so, they would be prepared to enter into other marriages and to become "one people" with the Canaanites.

And this sounded quite fair and straightforward. It was taking up a perfectly intelligible attitude, and one that, if based on right motives, would have been not only necessary and justifiable, but would have brought about the best possible ending to the trouble concerning their sister. But it was the absence of the right motive that condemned their proposal. They had no idea of these men entering the covenant on religious grounds. They were proposing to use the sign of the religious covenant as the means of a purely human agreement. Circumcision without faith in the covenant God could not be anything but carnal and earthly. And, worse still, they were about to employ the solemn seal of the Divine covenant for the purpose of wreaking their vengeance on these unsuspecting men. Their suggestion was therefore nothing more than a pretext to cover treachery. There was the appearance of piety with the reality of intended murder. Could anything be more truly terrible? What a light it sheds on the state of Jacob's home life! And why was Jacob silent during all these proposals? True, he could not know the contemplated treachery, but his entire silence is remarkable. Had he no part or power in the matter of his daughter's life? Or was he weak and irresolute, conscious of his own unfaithfulness?

### **V. The Trustful Acceptance (Ge 34:18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24)**

The requirements of Dinah's brethren were at once welcomed by Hamor and Shechem. The latter was prepared for instant acquiescence, so genuine was his love for Dinah. The proposals were also set before the men of the city, and their acceptance urged by Hamor and Shechem. They pointed out the peaceable character of Jacob and his family, and the size of the land as sufficient for them all to live in and trade together. It was also shown that amalgamation would prove advantageous in the acquisition of fresh possessions, since all would be as one in the event of marriages between the two races. The proposals thus ably urged were accepted, and the men of Shechem submitted to the condition laid down by Jacob's sons. And apart from any consideration of personal advantage urged as one of the reasons for acquiescence, it is impossible not to see the peaceable and trustful attitude of the Canaanites in the face of Jacob and his sons. The "heathen" show up well by contrast with those who were professedly the people of God.

### **VI. The Treacherous Action (Ge 34:25, 26, 27, 28, 29)**



Very soon the true object of Dinah's brethren was revealed. Their apparently religious requirement was seen to be the cloak of vengeance, and at a convenient moment the trusting Canaanites were massacred, including Hamor and Shechem. Then, after taking their sister home, they returned to complete their fell task by sacking the city and capturing all the women, children, and flocks they could find. Thus they avenged sin by greater sin. It is sometimes said that this was all the result of "religious fanaticism," and that in it we have the first example of that Jewish fanaticism for religion which caused the Jews so much trouble ([Dods, p. 314 The Expositor's Bible](#)). It does not, however, appear clear that there was anything of religion in it, but only sheer cruelty and vindictiveness exercised under the guise of a religious rite. The men who could plot and wreak such vengeance did not possess one grain of religion, even of a fanatical kind. The story is one of unrelieved savagery. If only they had been actuated by true motives their sister's shame would have been covered, so far as it could be, by subsequent marriage; but as it was, she was robbed of that refuge, and had to live her life and end her days under the cloud of disgrace, due first to herself and then to her brothers' vengeance. And all this in the family of the chosen patriarch! Could anything be sadder or more disappointing? Could Divine grace overrule these awful troubles? Yes, it could and did, though they still stand recorded in all their hideousness, "written for our learning."

## **VII. The Surprising Rebuke (Ge 34:30)**

At last Jacob speaks, having "held his peace" far too long. He rebuked his sons for their action, but the character of the rebuke is very noticeable. Jacob-like, the patriarch looks at the matter solely from his own point of view.

"Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants...and I being few...they shall gather...against me and I shall be destroyed, I and my house."

Could anything be feebler or more unworthy? No blame for the sin committed, only for the danger involved. He was afraid for his life, his home, the land he paid for, the possessions he enjoyed. Trouble comes through unfaithfulness, and then circumstances are blamed. Children bring trouble on parents, and perhaps the fault is originally and largely the parents' own.

Weakness and timidity are here as plainly marked as ever, showing clearly the low tone of the man through long-continued unfaithfulness to God. His apprehensiveness of danger shows that there was no spiritual satisfaction or assurance of safety. He had quite forgotten the Divine promise of protection (Ge 28:14f). People who live on the borderland between Church and world are like those who lived in the old days on the borders between England and Scotland—they are never safe.

## **VIII. The Significant Rejoinder (Ge 34:31)**

The sons have the last word, and justify their action in words that partake of the nature of a *suppressio veri*, and therefore of a *suggestio falsi*. They omit all reference to the action of Shechem by which he would have done reparation and prevented Dinah from living all her days under the shadow of her sin. Their father allows them to have the last word, not that he admits the truth of their position, but perhaps because argument with such men would be useless, and possibly because he is conscious that his own choice of Shechem for a home was contributory in great measure to what had happened. When, however, the end of his life comes, the old man shows that he had not forgotten their action (Ge 49:6, 7), for he stamps it in its true colors as disreputable and wrong in the sight of God.

The one lesson that stands out from all the rest is that which is associated with the life and character of Jacob at this time. It is the fact and danger of worldliness.

### **1. Worldliness is a real spiritual peril.**

It is doubtless difficult to define "worldliness," and on this account it is easy to ridicule the idea and put it down to narrowness, straitlacedness, and censoriousness. But in all ages, under a variety of phases, the fact and force of "worldliness" have been felt and acknowledged by all spiritually-minded people. Does not Church history show a difference in the spiritual life of the Church in the second and third as compared with the fourth and fifth centuries? What was the explanation? Three words sum it up: Constantine, patronage, worldliness. We see it again and again in churches and congregations where sensational or other unworthy methods have been used to attract people, with the result that the ministry is robbed of power, prayer meetings and Bible classes yield to concerts, "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed," and souls are not saved. We see it also in the individual lives of those who once "ran well," but who have yielded to pressure and have lowered the standard of holiness for fear of being thought too "narrow" or "too particular." Yes, worldliness is hard to define, but it is very easy to feel, to detect, and to describe. It is an atmosphere, enervating, lowering, poisoning, deadening; and whenever individuals and churches are under its sway, the result, however long delayed, is as inevitable as it is disastrous to the soul and dishonoring to God.

### **2. Worldliness prevents spiritual blessing.**

Not only did Jacob's worldliness lead to danger and disaster to himself and his household, it necessarily hindered him at the same time from bearing witness to God. "The Canaanite was then in the land," and, like Lot before him, there was no real testimony,

because there was no real difference between him and them. What cared they for his altar, so long as he lived with them and did as they did? What good could the altar do in the face of his life day by day as one of themselves? So it is always. Worldliness lowers tone and prevents testimony. The banner is not displayed, because the life is not true. The standard is not maintained, and blessing is not obtained. There never has been a case where the adoption of worldly methods has justified itself by spiritual blessing. In the Middle Ages the Pope boasted to Thomas Aquinas, as he showed that great scholar the treasures of the Vatican, "The Church cannot now say, 'Silver and gold have I none.'" "True," said Thomas, "and neither can it say, 'In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.'"

### **3. Worldliness can only be prevented by separation.**

The Master in His High Priestly prayer (John 17) gives us the true (sevenfold) attitude of the believer and the Church to the world, and thereby reveals the safeguard against this insidious peril. We are given to Christ "out of the world" (Jn 17:6) ; we are "in the world" (Jn 17:11) ; we are "hated by the world" (Jn 17:14) ; we are "not of the world" (Jn 17:14) ; we are "not to be taken out of the world," but "kept from" its evil (Jn 17:15), and we are "sent into the world" (Jn 17:18) to witness to it as our Master did, "that the world may know" (Jn 17:23) who and what He is. All this can only be realized through true spiritual separation, and, however difficult it may be to define exactly the limits of separation, the fact and necessity of it are undoubted. The principles, ideals, and methods of Christianity cannot possibly be mixed with those of the world without contamination; and if only we abide in Christ and continue in His love we shall live in an atmosphere of purity and power which will be our constant safeguard and our sufficient warning. One thing is perfectly clear: no one can read and study the teaching of the New Testament as to "the world" without becoming conscious at once of the danger and of the safeguard, of the enemy and of the protection, of the warfare and of the secret of perpetual victory.

## **Genesis 35:1-15**

### **Bethel at Last**

A CRISIS had arrived in the life of Jacob. His stay at Shechem was a time of spiritual unfaithfulness and therefore of spiritual unfitness, but the time had come when through a variety of circumstances he was to be brought back to God. "The thirty-fourth chapter of Genesis is God-less; "the thirty-fifth is full of God. The former describes the Shechem life of the Hebrews; the latter their Bethel life. The contrast between a believer's and an unbeliever's life is scarcely more marked than the contrast between a half-hearted and a whole-hearted believer's life" (Strachan, Hebrew Ideals, in loc.). When a believer is out of spiritual condition and is not living in spiritual touch with God, God does not leave him alone. In one way or another he is stirred up, troubled, and dealt with in discipline until he returns to his true life of fellowship. This, as we shall now see, was Jacob's experience.

#### **I. The Urgent Call (Ge 35:1).**

"And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother." Bethel was only thirty miles away from Shechem, and yet it was quite ten years since Jacob's return into Canaan. And it was over thirty years since he had made his vow to return to Bethel and acknowledge God's hand if he were brought back in peace. The conditions had been exactly and completely fulfilled years ago, but the vow was yet unpaid. Now at length came the Divine call, for God could not let His servant rest in disobedience. He must bring him back to the point and place of faithful obedience. The only possible means of restoration after backsliding is the old familiar gateway of repentance and faith.

There was also a personal as well as a Divine reason for returning to Bethel. It was impossible for Jacob to detect the true state of affairs as long as he remained in Shechem. The atmosphere was impregnated with worldliness, and while he continued there he could not detect aright his unspiritual and sinful condition. We might have supposed that it was quite unnecessary for God to command him to go to Bethel "and make there an altar," for was there not already an altar in Shechem (Ge 33:20) ? But, as we have before seen, that altar had long lost all spiritual power for Jacob and his family, since their daily living was for the most part a direct contradiction of its testimony. If that altar had been of any real service we should not have had the awful story of the savagery of Jacob's sons (Ge 34). It is scarcely too much to say that children brought up in an atmosphere of worldliness are the very hardest to impress with the realities of spiritual religion, even though they may attend a place of worship week by week. The life of worldliness during six days is far too powerful for anything that happens on the seventh day to counteract it.

There was also yet another and social reason for Jacob's removal. He and his family were henceforward in constant dread of trouble and danger from their Canaanitish neighbors. Up to that time everything seemed to be going quietly, and, in their judgment, satisfactorily ; but now it was seen to be absolutely essential to make a move, for it would be no longer safe to abide near Shechem in view of the almost assured certainty of blood revenge on the part of the Shechemites.

These three reasons—the Divine, the spiritual, and the social—combined to lead Jacob out of Shechem. It was doubtless hard, and certainly it must have been costly and troublesome, but it had to be done.

## **II. The Special Preparation (Ge 35:2, 3, 4)**

At length Jacob was thoroughly roused, and promptly set about obeying the Divine and urgent command. The first thing to be done was to make due spiritual preparation, and he called upon his household to put away the strange gods that were among them, to purify themselves, and to change their garments. What a revelation this is! It shows at once the true state of affairs. There had been spiritual declension, and Jacob clearly knew of, and had evidently connived at, the presence of idols and idolatrous practices in his household. His love to Rachel had led him to tolerate what he knew perfectly well was contrary to the mind and will of God. It is sad to realize that all this was true of the man who had been brought face to face with God at Peniel. It shows again the awful possibility of spiritual declension, even after the most exalted fellowship with God.

It is very striking to read of Jacob's influence at this time. His appeal to his household at once elicited a whole-hearted response. They saw that he was in earnest, and they gave to him "all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all the earrings which were in their ears." The household gods and amulets were all freely surrendered, and Jacob did the very best possible thing with them; he "hid them under the oak which was at Shechem." Shechem had been the place of spiritual trouble, and these causes of spiritual trouble were appropriately left behind there. It would not have been safe to have allowed them to remain a moment longer in the household. Surrender is the supreme secret and condition of spiritual blessing. As long as there is any mental or moral reservation, there cannot be any real satisfaction in the soul, strength in the character, or service for God. It is noteworthy that there are certain things in connection with the spiritual life that must be entirely given up and destroyed, for it is impossible to sanctify or consecrate them. They must be buried and left behind, for they cannot possibly be devoted to the service of God. It is this that gives point to our Lord's well-known words, "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off." (Mt 5:30) There are things that have to be cut off and cannot be consecrated. Books have to be burned (Acts 19:19). Evil habits have to be broken. Sin must be put away. There are things that are beyond all reclamation.

**The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be;  
Help me to tear it from thy throne,  
And worship only Thee.**

It is impossible to avoid noticing the astonishing alacrity and remarkable power of Jacob at this juncture, especially in contrast with his weakness and powerlessness as recorded in the former chapter. He asserted his authority, and his position was accepted without any question even by his strong-willed and savage sons. Even they could not help being impressed with the fact that their father was now on the right ground before God, and was showing the truth of the wonderful revelation at Peniel that when a man has power with God he soon has power with man.

## **III. The Remarkable Journey (Ge 35:5)**

"And they journeyed: and the terror of God was upon the cities that were round about them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Jacob." This is a wonderful verse, and is another testimony to the astonishing power of a life that is right with God. "When a man's ways please the Lord He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." So deeply impressed were the Canaanites round about them that there was no attempt whatever to hinder or injure the departing family. The supernatural fear that came upon them prevented them from taking revenge on the sons of Jacob. We see again the absolute necessity of separation from evil if there is to be true testimony for God. As long as they were at Shechem, there was no real witness; but now that they were separating themselves from it the people were impressed with the supernatural character of the travelers, and "the terror of God" was manifestly experienced by the Canaanites. What confidence this must have put into the heart of Jacob as he received the assurance that he was now at length in the pathway of God's will! "If our hearts condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God."

## **IV. The Noteworthy Arrival (Ge 35:6)**

"So Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, that is, Bethel, he and all the people that were with him." Jacob's sincerity is very evident in the way in which he accomplished his journey. There was no halting, and no lagging behind, for everything that belonged to him arrived with him; "he and all the people that were with him." He had become thoroughly aroused to his true position and duty, and at last after thirty years' absence he was once more back at the place of the Divine vision (Ge 28). What memories the place must have called up as he reviewed the past with all his varied experiences! And how thankful he must have felt to be at length in the pathway of God's will, and assured of peace, rest, protection, and blessing!

## **V. The Prompt Obedience (Ge 35:7, 8)**

"And he built there an altar, and called the place El-bethel: because there God appeared unto him when he fled from the face of his brother." This was the way in which Jacob fulfilled his vow (Ge 28:22). The name of the altar is worthy of special note in comparison with that of the altar at Shechem (Ge 33:20). In Shechem the altar bore witness to God's relation to Jacob himself, "God the God of

Israel"; but at Bethel self is entirely lost and God alone is mentioned, "the God of Bethel," or "God of the House of God." This was a higher and nobler thought. Instead of thinking of God in relation to himself, Jacob thought of God alone. His spiritual condition being higher, his conception of God was higher also. The constant recurrence of this name of God, "El," in Jacob's history is very interesting. It will be remembered that Abraham built an altar near Shechem (Ge 12:7), though his altar was not built unto El, but unto Jehovah. In the case of Jacob there had been a special revelation of God under this name of El, both at Bethel and at Peniel, which was incorporated in the new name of Israel; and now once more at Bethel a new emphasis is placed on this name after all the years that had elapsed since Peniel.

The reason assigned for the erection of this altar is very striking: "Because there God appeared unto him when he had fled from the face of his brother." Jacob was conscious of that far-off day in the past, of which he speaks on another occasion as "the day of his distress." It is always well for us to go back to earlier experiences and refresh our memories by the recollection of some former blessing from God. This is probably one reason why thanksgiving is so strongly emphasized in the New Testament. "Lest we forget." The remembrance of past mercies in the times of trouble, distress, and danger is one of the greatest encouragements to renewed confidence in our ever-faithful, unchanging covenant God.

It was just at this time that a very precious link with the past was broken. Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died while Jacob was at Bethel, and was buried under an oak-tree there. She very appropriately united together the two visits to Bethel, the day when he started out from home and the day of his return.

## **VI. The New Revelation (Ge 35:9, 10, 11, 12, 13)**

"God appeared unto Jacob again ... and blessed him." How striking is this word "again"! Reconciliation had been accomplished. There was now no cloud between the patriarch and his God, and the Divine appearance which was not permitted him in Shechem comes with its blessed assurance of renewed favor and sunshine after rain. This was not only a Divine command (Ge 35:1), but a Divine appearance, a manifestation visible as well as audible (Ge 35:13). The revelation of Peniel was thereupon renewed and the name Israel once more given. Not only so, but a fresh revelation of God was also granted to Jacob: "I am God Almighty." The same name of **EL Shaddai - God Almighty** which had been revealed to his grandfather (Ge 28:1) was now confirmed to him as the assurance and guarantee of his fruitfulness and the marvelous increase of his family and household. It is surely not without point that from this time forward Jacob's household increased in a very remarkable way, until at length, as we know, the family became a nation in Egypt (Ex 1:1-22).

This Divine revelation not only renewed the experience of Peniel (Ge 28:10), and encouraged him with assurance of power (Ge 35:11) ; it also confirmed what had already been said by God at Bethel (Ge 28:13). It linked Jacob with his father and grandfather in the Divine promise of the land to him and to his seed. Truly the sun had burst forth in glorious splendor as the wandering patriarch was once more in full fellowship with God.

## **VII. The Grateful Memorial (Ge 35:14, 15)**

Once again Jacob sets his seal to the Divine revelation and raises his "Ebenezer." Not only did he set up a pillar of stone, but he poured a libation thereon—the first instance of drink offerings in Scripture—and then anointed it with oil. He, too, has his work of confirmation. as God had His, and once more he called the name of the place Bethel. Repentance and faith always rejoice to set up their memorials, to which they can recur in gratitude and thankfulness for all the marvelous mercies of God.

### **1. God's unutterable love**

All the time that Jacob was living away from true fellowship with God he was not forgotten. God seemed to have left him entirely alone, but in reality was working all the time in various ways to bring him back again. So is it always. While we are backsliding we are apparently left to ourselves, but it is not really so. God will not forsake His children. They may sin and wander, but He watches, waits, and endeavors to win them back. The old lessons have to be learned again and again in various forms until His purpose is accomplished. God bears with us in tender love and over-ruling mercy, and gives us no real rest until He brings us back to a right relation to Himself. Jacob may go to Succoth and stay at Shechem, but circumstances will arise to stir up his nest till at length he is impelled—nay, almost compelled—to go to Bethel. How marvelous is the long-suffering, tender love of our God! He knows what is the right and best thing for His children. "Who teacheth like Him?"

### **2. God's absolute justice**

In bringing Jacob back to Himself God made no allowance for His servant's sin. If it be possible, God is stricter with His own children than with others. Jacob had made a solemn vow and promise that if God would be with him and bring him back to his father's home in peace, God should be his God and Bethel a Divine memorial. All, and very much more besides, had been completely fulfilled by God, and yet Jacob's part had not been performed. It was necessary therefore first and foremost that the wrong should be righted. This is always God's method of recall after spiritual declension. "Repent and do the first works" (Rev 2:5).

When the children of Israel arrived in Canaan the very first things required of them were the renewal of the covenants of circumcision and of the Passover, in order that the people might be on the true footing of relationship and fellowship with God. And so it must ever be. Whatever can be put right must be put right, if our fellowship with God is to be renewed; and as long as we are unwilling to set right that which is wrong God will have a controversy with us, and there cannot be any spiritual rest or satisfaction of soul.

### 3. God's restoring grace

It is truly marvelous what the grace of God can do even for a repentant believer and a returned backslider. It is perfectly true that the failure and backsliding of His children prevent them from ever being exactly what they would have been apart from these faults. At the same time it is equally true that God's overruling grace can work wonders. We think of Manasseh after his idolatry, of David after his sin, of Peter after his fall; and while we dare not say, as some would teach, "We may be all we might have been, we can say with absolute certainty that "We may be something that we should never otherwise have been," because of the new elements that have entered into our life through the bitter experiences of backsliding. These things never excuse or even palliate our fall, and the repentant and restored believer will always be severe against himself by reason of his former backsliding; but we can say, and dare to say, that Divine grace takes up the threads even of our darkest experiences and weaves them into the pattern of our life from that time forward. Nature knows no forgiveness and no restoration, but grace is the mighty miracle of the universe; and if only we yield ourselves wholly and utterly to the hand of God, our lives, whatever the past may have been, shall be monuments, miracles, marvels of the grace of God.

He came to my desk with a quivering lip—  
The lesson was done.  
"Dear teacher, I want a new leaf," he said—  
"I have spoiled this one "  
In place of the leaf so stained and blotted  
I gave him a new one all unspotted.  
And unto his sad eyes smiled—  
"Do better now, my child."

I went to the Throne with a quivering soul—  
The old year was done.  
"Dear Father, hast thou a new leaf for me?  
I have spoiled this one."  
So took the old leaf, stained and blotted,  
And gave me a new one all unspotted,  
And into my sad heart smiled—  
"Do better now, my child."

## Genesis 35:8, 16-29

### The School of Sorrow

GOD has many ways of making permanent in our lives the lessons of His providence and grace, and one of these is the discipline of sorrow. "Sweet are the uses of adversity," as we are now to see in the unfolding of the story of Jacob. There is nothing in its way more striking than the fact that from the time Jacob fulfilled his vow in Bethel to the day that he learnt of Joseph's preservation in Egypt he was scarcely ever out of "the furnace of affliction." Some of the earliest of these experiences will now come before us.

#### I. The Death of an Old Servant (Ge 35:8)

No sooner had Jacob reached Bethel than Deborah, the aged nurse of his mother Rebekah, died. First referred to in connection with Rebekah's coming to be the wife of Isaac (Ge 24:59), she is here mentioned again very many years after. How, why, and when she became associated with Jacob's household we know not, for there is no record. It is probable that she joined him in Mesopotamia on the death of his mother. She was a very interesting link with the past, recalling his mother and his own earliest days in the old home. What many a man owes to a faithful servant! How fine are the obituary notices from time to time of "So-and-so, for many years the faithful servant and friend of \_\_\_\_\_"! Now the link is broken, and Jacob has one connection less with the days of his youth. As time goes on, and friend after friend passes upward, we find ourselves more and more severed from the past and more and more united with the future. It is in such ways that we are led to think of the future, and to fix our hope on things to come. "But Deborah died." That is, notwithstanding the fact that Jacob was now at Bethel and in fellowship with God. Faithfulness to God does not exempt us from sorrow.

## **II. The Death of a Beloved Wife (Ge 35:16, 17, 18, 19, 20)**

Residence at Bethel (Ge 35:1) was, it would seem, completed with the fulfilment of his vow, and Jacob was apparently free to move southward towards Mamre, the home of his father. He and his household had not gone very far when another great sorrow came upon him, the deepest of his life. He lost his beloved wife Rachel, who died in giving birth to her second son. In her pain and anguish she was cheered by the encouraging news of the birth of another son, but the end of her earthly life was at hand. Just as she was dying she called the newly-born child Benoni ("son of my pain"), in token of the gain of a son even through sorrow. But her husband, to cheer her and himself to the end, would not allow so ill-omened a name to remain, and changed it to Benjamin ("son of the right hand"), indicative of his faith in the blessing and prosperity that should accrue from his birth. Thus we have the first record of death at child-birth, and the entire narrative is full of simple pathos and exquisite beauty. Rachel's life had had its share of sorrow, and the end itself was in no way different. Robbed at the outset of the entire love of one whose wife she was expecting to be, she found herself the victim of jealousy in that unhappy home at Haran. Nor did she seem to have, at any rate until late in life, the full consolation of the worship of the true God, for she was given to superstition (Ge 30:14), and the worship of false gods (Ge 31:19). It is probable that these influences were not wholly extirpated until the removal to Bethel (Ge 35:2, 4). She had hoped for another son in addition to Joseph (Ge 30:24), but her unwise and passionate prayer of years ago (Ge 30:1) now received a very unexpected answer. She had indeed a son given to her, and died at the time of the gift.

Once again Jacob set up a pillar, this time in memory of his love and sorrow (Ge 35:20), just as he had at Bethel in memory of the Divine love and grace to him (Ge 35:14). His love for Rachel was remarkable in its depth and constancy. Even long years after her death the memory was keen and poignant (Ge 48:7). It is one of the most striking features of Jacob's character that he could love so devotedly and tenaciously. Such a strong nature as this was capable of great things, whatever sins and errors were on the surface.

## **III. The Sin of a Firstborn Son (Ge 35:21, 22)**

From the sad scene of his great bereavement Israel journeyed on towards Mamre. The word "Israel" is noteworthy here. It is the first occurrence of the new name as applied to Jacob after the confirmation of it at Bethel. Like the usage in Genesis of Jehovah and Elohim, which are invariably employed with discrimination, the terms Israel and Jacob are always to be carefully observed, for not seldom it is possible to see a real meaning in the particular one used. Here it seems to suggest that he journeyed in the strength of that power with God which was his heritage as the Prince of God, and by means of which he faced and bore his sorrow. He spread his tent between Bethlehem and Mamre, "beyond the tower of Edar," the tower being one of those frequently found as at once the center and safeguard of flocks and herds (2Ki 17:9).

Another and terrible sorrow now falls on the patriarch in the awful sin of his eldest son Reuben. By this fearful sin (Lev 18:8; 1Co 5:1) he lost the birthright (Gen. xlix. 4) and incurred endless shame and infamy. Thus by a curious coincidence, and perhaps with some inner meaning, the record of the birth of Jacob's youngest son is brought into close association with the sin of the eldest son. In the light of the subsequent history of the tribes of Benjamin and Reuben we can see here another illustration of the great principle that "the last shall be first and the first last." Rachel's sons come to the front in due course. At first she, the beloved and rightful wife, was without children (Ge 30:1), and every advantage seemed to be with Leah, who had been deceitfully pressed upon Jacob. But at length Rachel's turn came, and not only did she have two sons, but these sons came to their own in God's good time. Joseph in his two sons, and Benjamin also, had tribal territories allotted to them, and Ephraim was leader of Israel for centuries, while Reuben lost the birthright which would have been his as firstborn son. No one can seriously question the fact of a Divine Providence in human life, a Providence that sees justice done and wrongs righted, even though the progress may be slow and the time long.

We can easily imagine the anguish and shame that filled the patriarch's heart as he became aware of this sin of Reuben. Coming so soon after his great sorrow, it must have caused tenfold grief to a heart already wrung with pain. And yet the record simply but significantly states, "and Israel heard it." Mark the phraseology: "Israel," not "Jacob." That is to say, he heard the terrible news in the quiet strength of the new name and power implied and guaranteed by his recent revelation from God (Ge 35:10). This is the only real way to meet sorrow, pain and shame—"in the strength of the Lord God." Whatever the emergency, we may rest on the Divine assurance: "My grace is sufficient for thee."

How veracious is the record of Scripture! No mere human history would record the sins of notable men so fully and unflinchingly. The candor of the Bible is one of its chief claims to be Divine.

At this point we are given a full list of Jacob's children, though the names do not appear in order of birth, but according to motherhood. The children of Leah and Rachel come first, and then those of Bilhah and Zilpah. The reason for the insertion of this list here is probably because the long section of the "generations of Isaac" (Ge 25:19) closes with this chapter, and new sections are about to open with the generations of Esau and Jacob (Ge 36:1 and Ge 37:2). The house of Isaac is therefore regarded as complete, and the subordinate position of Jacob will henceforth be changed for that of the head of the patriarchal house and line. In this connection, as we see again and again in the history, it is worth while to observe the remarkable differences between the sons of Leah and those of Rachel. They appear to be absolutely opposed in temperament and habit. Two sisters, and yet such



astonishingly different children. Students of heredity will find here material worthy of their attention.

#### **IV. The Death of an Honored Father (Ge 35:27, 28, 29)**

Jacob arrives home again at last. "Jacob came unto Isaac his father unto Mamre... which is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac sojourned." What memories must have been called up by that return! How he must have missed his mother as he remembered the past and all their life together there! His children, too, would be keenly interested in meeting their grandfather and the head of the family. There are few places that stir the heart more deeply than the old home of our childhood, and all the dear memories of days long gone by. Isaac, too, must have recalled the day, over thirty years before, when he spoke of himself as old and uncertain of life (Ge 27:2), and then thought of all that had happened as the result of that unhappy suggestion to Esau. But all was swallowed up in the joy of reunion, and, as we cannot doubt, in the joy of the recital of the way in which God had led both father and son all those long years of separation.

In order that the record of Isaac's life may be rounded off mention is made at this point of his death, though as a matter of fact he lived until Joseph was quite thirty years old, or thirteen years after his sale in Egypt. The statement is put in here, after the analogy of earlier accounts (Ge 11:32 and Ge 15:8), to prepare the way for dealing solely with the record of Jacob as the head of the family. Isaac was spared for over forty years beyond the time when he expected to die (Ge 27:1, 2), and the years after Jacob's return must have been a very precious time of fellowship with God and his son as he waited the call of God. The description of his death is noteworthy: "he gave up the ghost," he yielded up the spirit to God Who gave it. The phrase used of Rachel (Ge 35:18) is worth comparing: "as her soul was in departing." The difference is suggestive of their different ages and the circumstances of their deaths, but the idea is essentially the same. To "depart" or to "give up the ghost" is not to be annihilated, but to enter upon a new state, a new life in the presence of God. The old fathers did indeed look for more than transitory promises. They had respect unto the living God, and to the city which He had prepared for them. Isaac was also "gathered to his people," which gives another beautiful suggestion of the life to come—that of reunion with those whom we have loved and lost awhile. And so, with the spirit at rest with God and at home with our loved ones, we learn something of what heaven is. "With Christ" and "with them," all must and will be well.

At the grave of their father the two brothers, Esau and Jacob, met again. With what thoughts they must have paid the last tribute of filial love and borne their father's body to its resting place! Already reconciled (Ge 33:1, 2, 3, 4), this sorrow must have confirmed their friendship and made their hearts increasingly tender to each other as they recalled the past with sins and errors on both sides. Death is a wonderful healer of breaches. Happy are they who find over the grave of a loved father or mother the opportunity of reuniting severed ties. Thrice happy are they who at the graveside of a loved one have not to reunite ties, but only to deepen and confirm them in the love and grace of God.

The life of Isaac, as we review it, is in striking contrast to those of his father and his sons. In their case we have lives full of incident; in his little but quietness and peace. Except for two occasions of sin (Ge 26 and Ge 27), there is nothing in the record to disturb the impression that Isaac's life was of the pastoral, quiet, restful, contemplative type which based itself on the promises of God (Ge 26:24) and lived peacefully, waiting the development and progress of the Divine purpose. One word, used twice by Jacob, seems to give the clue to Isaac's character. Jacob speaks of God as "the Fear of Isaac" (Ge 31:42, 53), a striking term, especially when contrasted with the customary usage, "the God of Abraham." Isaac's nature was contemplative, quiet, reverential, full of awe. God was his "Fear," not slavish dread, but filial awe. And it was this that impressed Jacob, whose nature at its root was so like that of his father. Jacob had a profound sense of reverence for God and divine things, and it is well that he had, for with him and with us all "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." "Holy and reverend is His Name."

The cloud of sorrow hangs heavily on these verses. There are three graves and one sin recorded, and it is in connection with the sorrow caused by these events that Jacob was taught some very precious lessons. Shall we not try to learn them for ourselves?

##### **1. Sorrow is not always sent as punishment.**

We often bring sorrow on ourselves through our sin, but this is not always and necessarily the case. The death of Deborah came when Jacob had put himself right with God. The death of Rachel and the sin of Reuben do not appear to be traceable to any wrongdoing of Jacob. So is it today. Sorrow is not necessarily punishment. It may be just the opposite. It all depends on the state of our spiritual life how we understand and take sorrow. If we are right with God, we shall meet sorrow as "Israel," not "Jacob," and find in it the message God intends for us. Every affliction may be viewed in two aspects; and what from one viewpoint may be thought a Benoni, may from another be seen as a Benjamin. It all depends on our faith; and if that be real and true, then "Faith can sing through days of sorrow." We shall certainly "faint" if we do not "believe to see the goodness of the Lord" in the time of sorrow and pain.

##### **2. Sorrow is often used for spiritual training.**

Chastening is very different from punishing, and "it is for chastening ye endure" (Heb 12:7) There is a very clear connection

spiritually, as well as etymologically, between discipleship and discipline. We only become real disciples through discipline. The word rendered "chastening" in Hebrew 12 is literally "son-making." God makes us truly His sons by subjecting us, or allowing us to be subjected, to training and discipline; and it is for this reason that we read "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth." When Archbishop Tait, as Dean of Carlisle, lost several children in quick succession, in the short space of a few weeks, his friend Francis Close, then at Cheltenham, wrote quoting this text to the bereaved and heartbroken father, adding, "He must love you much to chasten you so much."

### **3. Sorrow is intended to yield the peaceful fruits of righteousness**

Who shall say how much this discipline had to do with Tait's noteworthy episcopate in London and his splendid service as Archbishop of Canterbury? Many a Christian can say with David, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn" (Ps 119: 71). "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now...(Ps 119:67). In the description of the life of the believer in Rom. v. we must not overlook the place given to "tribulation." May it not mean that one of the ways which God takes to make our experiences real is the way of suffering? As the Son of God was made "perfect through suffering," so the sons of God are brought to glory in the same way. Just as the pattern on the china vase is made permanent by being put into the fire, so the impressions of God's truth and grace become part of our character by our being passed through the furnace of affliction.

**As gold must be tried in the fire,  
So the heart must be tried by pain.**

And so, though our outward man perishes, our inward man is renewed day by day. Let us therefore yield ourselves to the Divine Potter, to be made into "vessels unto honor" and conformed to His image and likeness in order to live to His glory.

## **Genesis 36:1-8**

### **"A Profane Person"**

THERE is perhaps no greater contrast in Scripture than that seen in the characters of Esau and Jacob. The one on the surface was interesting and attractive, the other on the surface was unattractive and often repellent, at least for a large part of his life. And yet as we include in our view of the two men the whole Bible testimony concerning them, and study with all possible care and completeness that which lies below the surface, we cannot help coming to the very opposite of our first conclusion. We obtain the deep impression that characters are not to be judged by superficial impressions but by a careful inquiry into the right principles of life. It will be convenient at this point to gather together the various references to Esau which we find in Genesis, and then attempt to obtain a true idea of his real character.

#### **I. Esau's History.**

The circumstances of his birth foreshadowed a remarkable history, and whenever he appears before us we cannot help being struck with the man as he reveals himself in the record.

The first event brought before us is the sale of his birthright to Jacob (Ge 25:29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34). It is unnecessary in the present connection to repeat the details of the story which have already come before us, nor is it to the point to dwell upon Jacob's share in this unhappy transaction. For our present purpose it will suffice to call attention to the simple but significant comment of the writer: "So Esau despised his birthright." Whatever fault we may attribute to Jacob, and however great our contempt may be for his underhand dealing, we must not overlook the fact that in parting with his birthright Esau revealed his true character. He had already come to the conclusion, long before the time that Jacob made the offer, that his birthright was of no value to him. We must look beneath the surface from the very outset of the story of Esau, and when we do this we discover that his horizon was bounded by earth and that he had no conception whatever of the glory of the promises to Abraham and to Isaac which were associated with the birthright.

Esau comes before us next in connection with his marriage to the two Canaanitish women (Ge 26:34, 35). This deliberate association with the people of the land was another significant revelation of his true nature. Not only did he introduce into his father's family the untoward and dangerous element of polygamy, but he went his way by himself without any consultation with his parents and married into the Canaanites, and thereby led to an intermixture which it had hitherto been the special endeavor of Abraham and of Isaac to avoid. No wonder that this action of their elder son caused great grief and bitterness of spirit to Isaac and Rebekah. Once again the real man showed himself in this deliberate setting at naught of some of the most cherished principles and hopes of his people.

The next time that Esau appears before us is in connection with the blessing. Having deliberately and of set purpose bartered away his birthright, it is clear that he had subsequently come to a different mind as to its importance. Consequently, when his father

wished to bestow upon him the patriarchal blessing, Esau was quite ready to enter into the plot and obtain back again by craft what he had lost by a deliberate act of his own. We do not overlook the sin of Isaac, or Rebekah, or Jacob, in calling attention to the simple fact that Esau must not be absolved from a share in this blame. We can see still further what he really was, for after he had lost the blessing, he in his rage and fury determined to kill his brother when a suitable opportunity occurred. He was a man of ungovernable impulse, without any fixed principle, never constant for long to any one thing.

Another event further revealed Esau's true character (Ge 28:8, 9). When he saw that Jacob had departed with his father's blessing to find a wife outside the land of Canaan, and from his own kith and kin, he endeavored once again to obtain an advantage at his brother's expense by taking to himself a third wife, this time a daughter of his kinsman Ishmael. Esau seems to have been fully awake at last to the importance and value of the position of the eldest son, and he sets to work to try to retrieve his position in the eyes of his parents. Even here we cannot help noticing his practical failure, for although Ishmael was the half-brother of his father, it had been made perfectly clear that there was to be no part or lot to Ishmael in the inheritance of promise and blessing to Isaac.

When Jacob returned after the years of separation in the house and country of Laban, Esau again appears as he comes with a retinue of men to meet his brother. It would seem clear that at the outset he had determined to take his revenge, but he little knew what was happening at the ford Jabbok, and how God in answer to prayer was already at work breaking down the barriers, and preparing for a full reconciliation between the brothers. Esau's hot impulses were quickly cooled at the sight of his brother, and the anger died down as they met and settled their differences in a loving reconciliation. Esau's warmheartedness shines out at this point and makes us all the more sorry that it played so small a part in the entire experiences of his life.

The brothers met again, and probably for the last time, at their father's death (Ge 25:29), but they met only to separate permanently one from the other. The land was not large enough to maintain the households of both of them, and Esau therefore took all that he possessed and went into a land far away from his brother in the country afterwards known as Edom (Ge 36:1-8). Thenceforward the two tribes and afterwards the two races were kept apart not only geographically but in almost every other respect, and, as we know, Edom showed hostility to the people of Israel as the latter made their way from Egypt to Canaan.

## **II. Esau's Character**

The startling mystery of human nature is remarkably illustrated in the case of Esau. There was an undoubted attractiveness in his temperament and character. He was evidently of a happy and bright disposition. Nothing appeared to worry or trouble him. He took life easily and never seemed concerned with its shadows and difficulties. He was also of an affectionate disposition. His devotion to his father is evident in the narrative, and the fact of his father's devotion to him must be put to his credit. Even his impulsiveness had the elements of good and promise in it, for he was manifestly capable of generous and warmhearted dispositions. Not least of all there was a forgiving spirit in the man. Jacob had undoubtedly done him serious and irreparable wrong, and we should not have been surprised from the purely human standpoint if he had remained permanently embittered against the supplanter; but the opposite happened, and when they met after that long separation there was no trace of anger or revenge on the part of Esau, but every indication of forgiveness and personal reconciliation.

This attractiveness, however, was almost entirely on the surface, and when we look below we are bound to confess that there was much that was objectionable and even repulsive. The passionateness of the man is clear as we read the narrative of his attitude to Jacob. He was also in the literal meaning of the word a "sensual" man, that is, a man whose life was lived within the region of his senses and purely physical desires and tastes. He lived for personal enjoyment at the present moment, and was evidently prepared to sacrifice everything else to gratify his own desires. Whether we think of his willingness to barter his birthright for food, or contemplate his ill-advised marriage with two Canaanitish women, we see how entirely earth-bound he was, and how fully he lived for himself alone and for his own enjoyment. But all this was only indicative of what was at the root and foundation of his life. He had no true conception of the value of things spiritual. When we are told that he "despised his birthright" we are not to understand any mere impulse, or that he was merely victimized by a craftier nature; he had been leading up to this despising of the birthright by the purely secular life that he had been living. The promises of God had made no impression on him. The spiritual ideas associated with the Covenant were as nothing to him. He was in every sense earthly and earthbound. This as we have seen is the meaning of the significant judgment in the Epistle to the Hebrews (He 12:16), he was "a profane person." His life was purely secular, there was no sacred enclosure in it. Everything in him was of the world and the flesh, and no part of his life was devoted to God. This was at the root of his trouble. God was not in all his thoughts.

The story of Esau and the revelation of his character, as indicated by the events, carry their own personal application, but it may be worthwhile laying special stress upon some of the outstanding messages of this sad and disappointing life.

### **1. Superficial attractiveness is not enough.**

There are many natures and temperaments which are interesting and even fascinating on the surface, full of real charm of manner and disposition, and yet all the while they hide an underlying indifference to God which easily leads to a definite hostility. The young

ruler who came to our Lord had the splendid advantages of age, position, wealth, opportunity, earnestness, and even moral integrity, and yet when he was put to the test he revealed his deliberate unwillingness to surrender to Christ and to allow the Lord Jesus to be the Master of his life. We must never be deceived by outward attractiveness in itself, though when such attractiveness springs from genuine spiritual relationship to God it is without question the most beautiful thing on the earth.

## **2. Divine grace is absolutely essential.**

There are some natures which by environment, culture, and refinement seem to tend towards the ideal. They make people wonder whether after all true religion is essential to real life. Experience however goes to show in an ever-increasing way that nothing but Divine grace can guarantee a permanent character. While it is doubtless true that "character is three-fourths of conduct," it is equally true that the other fourth represents the source, spring, and guarantee of conduct itself. "Without Me ye can do nothing" is a truth of absolutely universal application, and whatever education, circumstances, opportunity may do for us we can never dispense with Divine grace. Esau's life was lived entirely on an earthly plane. The purely natural elements were supreme, and when the test came he sacrificed the spiritual opportunity that might have been his and so brought about irrevocable disaster. Grace is as much needed for character as it is for salvation, for the simple reason that character must necessarily be based upon salvation, which in turn depends upon the new nature of the divine life which is ours by faith in Christ Jesus.

## **3. Opportunity comes to all.**

While it is perfectly true that God intended Jacob to inherit the spiritual blessings of the Covenant, it is equally certain that Esau had a sufficient opportunity of enjoying blessing at God's hands. His boyhood was spent at home under the influence of his father and mother, and it is evident from the sequel that he became aware when it was too late of the blessings that he had missed. This shows that he had been trained and taught to value those blessings, but had deliberately set them aside and despised them. No one will be able to say in the great day of account that he had no opportunity of being good. God is righteous, and will never allow any man to be at a disadvantage. Opportunity comes to all, but, alas! opportunity may easily be lost through unfaithfulness. When Esau afterward desired to inherit the blessing he was rejected, for he found no way of changing his father's mind, though he sought a blessing earnestly with tears (Heb 12:17). There is a solemn and loud warning in this word "afterward," for it tells of an awakened conscience and blighted hopes that were never realized. A man looking back upon his past life said that a great deal of his time had been spent in raising tombstones over the graves of lost opportunities. To every one of us comes the solemn word of the Master, "How often would I ... and ye would not."

## **4. The marvel and mercy of Divine Grace.**

While we may not and must not set aside and think lightly of life's great moral responsibilities, we are encouraged by the revelation of God in Christ to believe that Divine grace can nevertheless do much to enable us to retrieve our character. While it is true that we never can be what we otherwise might have been, yet grace can do much to overrule our mistakes and even our sins. Esau always had to be content with God's second best, but even for him there was a future not unmixed with mercy and blessing. It is perfectly true that what is done cannot be undone, but it is equally true that what is done can be mended by Divine grace. Let us therefore be encouraged, in spite of our past, to put ourselves afresh into God's merciful and loving hands, feeling sure that His discipline will deal with us faithfully and lovingly, and in spite of all our sins and shortcomings bring glory to His Name out of the remnant of our life. The "afterward" of Esau's experience (Heb 12:17) may be met by the "afterward" of Divine mercy and grace (Heb 12:11), and our lives yet be used of God as we walk humbly and go softly, remembering the past, trusting for the present, and hoping in Him for the future.

**[Click for index to all of W H Griffith-Thomas' — devotional commentary on Genesis](#)**