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Wrestling With Jacob.

SERMON PREACHED RECENTLY IN KNOX CHURCH, ST. THOMAS,
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TEXT, Gen. xxxii., 22. "Jacob was left alone, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day." Few Old Testament stories are more penetrating, more spiritually suggestive, more instructive to modern readers, than the chequered story of the life of Jacob. The setting is old-world and Jewish, but the heart and meaning answer to no local interest or antiquated experience. With a truth wide as human nature, speaking of a struggle as real as earnest, as decisive to-day as was Jacob's wrestling on the banks of the Jabbok, this picture reflects the face of many a nineteenth century Christian, and appeals to an experience that is "yours, mine, every man's."

In Jacob's history the incident at Peniel, when "there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of day," marks the crisis. Into that incident all the good and bad in Jacob's character is crowded. At daybreak he will emerge Jacob still, the crafty, self-reliant supplanter, or Israel, the Prince with God, the inheritor of Canaan. The significance of the story is the same whether we regard it as entirely historical or as partly figurative and mythical.

I.—JACOB'S EXPERIENCE.

The leading facts of Jacob's previous life must be recalled if we would rightly interpret this midnight experience. We must remember the story of the birthright, it and the stolen blessing, and how that Jacob had to flee to escape the vengeful wrath of the supplanted Esau. For twenty years Jacob was in Haran. Here the bitter was bitten and the man who overreached Esau was himself outwitted and made to serve twice seven years to satisfy the greed of the grasping Laban. But in the end Jacob's cunning was more than a match for Laban's greed. The man who came an exile with nothing but a staff, at last goes out at the head of a caravan moving southward to Canaan.

It is all-important to remember that, although he had obtained the birthright and the blessing, although he had been at Bethel, heard the call of God in Haran and seen the hosts of God at Mahanaim, yet Jacob was the same self-reliant, resourceful, cunning, far-seeing supplanter as when he hoodwinked Esau and lied to Isaac. He acknowledged God, to be sure, but he depended far more on his own skill. Even in his prayers he manifests the same calculating spirit as though success depended not only on his clever managing of Esau, Rebecca, Isaac, Laban, and all the men and circumstances coming into his life, but also on his shuffling with God and snatching by lucky chance the blessing from the divine hand.

But that night at the Jabbok was one of unusual suspense and anxiety. The menacing figure of his wronged and wrathful brother leading four hundred armed men rises before him and Jacob is at a standstill. But his cunning does not forsake him. He counts out and arranges a series of gifts with which he hopes to make peace with the fickle Esau. Then he sends over the stream his entire possessions and he himself remained behind, alone.

"Jacob was left alone," but not depressed or afraid. He had the high spirits of one in whom hope was big, and the confidence of one to whom failure was unknown. That night he watched the struggling Jabbok at his feet beating its course against impeding obstacles. It seemed to speak to him of himself and how he must "least the blows of circumstance." Then he thought of Esau's anger and how he might be eluded or overcome or bribed. "Esau can be managed," he said to himself. "It was done before, it can be done again." And so, strong in his own self-strength, confident of success, and relying upon his own ingenuity and skill, with lips compressed and head erect, Jacob stepped firmly down the bank to cross the ford and take his chances against Esau. He listens to the murmur of the water and measures the distance in the dark. He gathers himself up for a splendid leap. Then a hand is laid on his shoulder and he is caught in the grip of an unseen wrestler whose sinewy strength is plainly a match for his own. His blood is up and his teeth are set. Instinctively he grapples and closes with his man, opposing muscle to muscle, strength to strength, skill to skill. "There wrestled a man with him." They wrestle in the darkness and Jacob holds his own. But he prevailed not. He uses all his arts. He tries all his tricks. But all in vain. The withers of the stranger are unwrung. The tightening grip and steady breathing of his unseen combatant told Jacob that he was in the hands of one against whom craft, cunning, and nature-strength combine in vain.

When the first streaks of dawn began to gild the highest peaks of Gilead, Jacob looked up to see his man. The face at his shoulder takes shape. Then the man touched the bulging sinew of Jacob's thigh and the corded muscle was shrivelled in a moment. As Jacob falls, a helpless thing, he recognized the Mighty One against whom he has been all his life long obstinately striving. Like his nerveless, throwless

thigh, self-confidence is stricken and the Jacob-nature overcome. He falls, but falling he clings to his Conqueror. Self-life dies and the stout-hearted wrestler becomes the pleading suppliant, with strength only to cling and to cry "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." He went down the supplanter, but he rose a prince with God.

II.—LESSONS FROM JACOB'S EXPERIENCE.

1. This is a wrestling not of man with God, but of God with man. The unseen is the aggressor. Man is on the defensive. "There wrestled a man with him." This gives us a clue to the meaning of the incident. It shows how mistaken the view is which makes this scene descriptive of prayer. Yet how almost universal is that view. In commentary and sermon and hymn we are exhorted to wrestle with God in prayer like Jacob at Peniel. But Jacob was in a far other mood. He did not remain behind to pray. So far from praying, he was all the while opposing God with the utmost energy of his obstinate nature. Besides the controversy was not his, but God's. God had an account to square, and He came out of the otherwhere and as a man wrestled with Jacob until the breaking of the day.

O, has that "Man" found you, laid his arresting hand on you and measured strength with you? Have you never been reminded of a guilty past you would gladly forget? When you, unchanged and unrepentant, try to regain the peace and power lost because of your sin, and are just on the verge of success. He who pleads the widow's cause and hears the weakling's cry, lays the heavy hand of retribution on your stubborn shoulder. Your victim may be silenced by bribery or death, but your sin struck against the throne of Love and righteousness, and you must make your peace with an offended God before you can inherit the promised blessing. You must learn what that means, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned." God grips you in the fingers of events and holds you in the clutch of confounding circumstances. You may think it luck or chance or fate, but when the day breaks you will know that it was God.

2. God sometimes interferes between us and a coveted promised blessing. It was so with Jacob. He was held back not because the promise had failed or the purpose changed, but because as Jacob he could not receive Canaan as a gift, nor could God bestow it. Israel would otherwise have held the land not by divine right and covenant, but by human artifice, policy and power. So is it with us. Our coveted Canaan may be earthly pleasure or advantage, social or intellectual attainment, spiritual good or opportunity for service. In the purpose of God it is ours, but we cannot enter on its possession until we recognize the hand that grants permission. It must be a gift or it will be a curse. Our self-life and pride of heart must be weakened.

3. If you are of the election of God the restraining hand will not be lifted until you yield in penitence and prayer. If you continue obstinate, learn this from Jacob that God will lay his hand on your stoutest sinew and touch to weakness the knotted muscle of your self-strength. It may be ease, or pleasure, or love, or business, or fame, or public service. It matters not. Before the morning of achievement dawns God must touch that sinew. It may not seem joyous but grievous, but Love must chastise when gentler persuasions are unheeded. Remember it is Love. Nothing else can touch Self with such shrivelling power. Only beneath that angel-hand will its sinew shrink.

Love took up the harp of Life,
Smote on all the chords with might,
Smote the chord of Self which trembling
Passed in music out of sight.

1. Note the mark of this experience. Jacob went halting upon his thigh. He lacked the old-time firmness, ease and grace of movement. Ah, is not that true to life! How many a man has been worsted in his wrestling with God, and in sadder face or furrowed brow or whitening hair or softened speech, bears to his grave the marks of the heavy stroke by which his heart was broken and his pride humbled. To the shallow crowd religion has cramped and narrowed his life. To the eye of sense he walks with a halt. But that limp is the mark of the touch of God—the touch that worsted the Jacob-nature and gave new life and power to the princely Israel. These are the lame who take the prey, the halt who win the race. Out of that experience men have come purified and powerful. In that darkness men catch a glimpse of God that transfixes and transforms the Soul. In that silence the Name is heard, the new unutterable name of Love. There we get the vision of God at the breaking of the day. O, this is our life—one long passionate wrestle against the royal Love of God until at day-break we see the face and yield to the touch of Love.

Contented now upon my thigh
I halt till life's short journey end;
All helplessness, all weakness, I
On Thee alone for strength depend;
Nor have I power from Thee to move,
Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

[For brief sketch of Mr. Macdonald's career, see page 82.]



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