**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GENESIS-037. THE TWOFOLD WRESTLE -- GOD'S WITH JACOB AND JACOB'S WITH GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands. Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children. And Thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude."*

*Genesis 32:9-12*

Jacob's subtlety and craft were, as is often the case, the weapons of a timid as well as selfish nature. No wonder, then, that the prospect of meeting his wronged and strong brother threw him into a panic, notwithstanding the vision of the camp of angels by the side of his defenceless caravan of women and children. Esau had received his abject message of propitiation in grim silence, sent no welcome back, but with ominous haste and ambiguous purpose began his march towards him with a strong force. A few hours will decide whether he means revenge. Jacob's fright does not rob him of his ready wit; he goes to work at once to divide his party, so as to ensure safety for half of it. He schemes first, and prays second. The order might have been inverted with advantage, but is like the man--in the lowest phase of his character. His prayer shows that he is beginning to profit by the long years of schooling. Though its burden is only deliverance from Esau, it pleads with God on the grounds of His own command and promise, of Jacob's unworthiness of God's past mercies, and of His firm covenant. A breath of a higher life is stirring in the shifty schemer who has all his life been living by his wits. Now he has come to a point where he knows that his own power can do nothing. With Laban, a man of craft like himself, it was diamond cut diamond; and Jacob was equal to the position. But the wild Bedouin brother, with his four hundred men, is not to be managed so; and Jacob is driven to God by his conscious helplessness. It is the germ, but only the germ, and needs much tending and growth before it matures. The process by which this faint dawning of a better life is broadened into day is begun in the mysterious struggle which forms the main part of this lesson, and is God's answer to his prayer.

**I.** We have, first, the twofold wrestling. The silent night-long wrestle with the traveller unknown is generally regarded as meaning essentially the same thing as the wonderful colloquy which follows. But I venture to take a somewhat different point of view, and to suggest that there are here two well-marked stages. In the first, which is represented as transacted in unbroken silence, a man wrestles with Jacob, and does not prevail; in the second, which is represented as an interchange of speech, Jacob strives with the man, and does prevail. Taken together, the two are a complete mirror, not only of the manner of the transformation of Jacob into Israel, but of universal eternal truths as to God's dealings with us, and our power with Him.

As to the former stage, the language of the narrative is to be noted, There wrestled a man with him. The attack, so to speak, begins with his mysterious antagonist, not with the patriarch. The man seeks to overcome Jacob, not Jacob the man. There, beneath the deep heavens, in the solemn silence of night, which hides earth and reveals heaven, that strange struggle with an unknown Presence is carried on. We have no material for pronouncing on the manner of it, whether ecstasy, vision, or an objective and bodily fact. The body was implicated in the consequences, at all events, and the impression which the story leaves is of an outward struggle. But the purpose of the incident is the same, however the question as to its form be answered. Nor can we pronounce, as some have done, on the other question, of the personality of the silent wrestler. Angel, or the angel of the covenant, who is a transient, and possibly only apparent, manifestation in human form of Him who afterwards became flesh and dwelt among us, or some other supernatural embodiment, for that one purpose, of the divine presence,--any of these hypotheses is consistent with the intentionally reticent text. What it leaves unspoken, we shall wisely leave undetermined. God acts and speaks through the man. That is all we can know or need.

What, then, was the meaning of this struggle? Was it not a revelation to Jacob of what God had been doing with him all his life, and was still doing? Was not that merciful striving of God with him the inmost meaning of all that had befallen him since the far-off day when he had left his father's tents, and had seen the opened heavens, and the ladder, which he had so often forgotten? Were not his disappointments, his successes, and all the swift changes of life, God's attempts to lead him to yield himself up, and bow his will? And was not God striving with him now, in the anxieties which gnawed at his heart, and in his dread of the morrow? Was He not trying to teach him how crime always comes home to roost, with a brood of pains running behind it? Was not the weird duel in the brooding stillness a disclosure, which would more and more possess his soul as the night passed on, of a Presence which in silence strove with him, and only desired to overcome that He might bless? The conception of a Divine manifestation wrestling all night long with a man has been declared crude, puerile, and I know not how many other disparaging adjectives have been applied to it. But is it more unworthy of Him, or derogatory to His nature, than the lifelong pleading and striving with each of us, which He undoubtedly carries on? The idea of a man contending with God has been similarly stigmatised; but is it more mysterious than that awful power which the human will does possess of setting at naught His counsels and resisting His merciful strivings?

The close of the first stage of the twofold wrestle is marked by the laming of Jacob. The paradox that He, who could not overcome, could yet lame by a touch, is part of the lesson. If His finger could do that, what would the grip of His hand do, if He chose to put out His power? It is not for want of strength that He has not crushed the antagonist, as Jacob would feel, with deepening wonder and awe. What a new light would be thus thrown on all the previous struggle! It was the striving of a power which cared not for a mere outward victory, nor put forth its whole force, lest it should crush him whom it desired to conquer only by his own yielding. As Job says, Will He plead against me with His great power? No; God mercifully restrains His hand, in His merciful striving with men. Desiring to overcome them, He desires not to do so by mere superior power, but by their willing yielding to Him.

That laming of Jacob's thigh represents the weakening of all the life of nature and self which had hitherto been his. He had trusted to his own cunning and quick-wittedness; he had been shrewd, not over-scrupulous, and successful. But he had to learn that by strength shall no man prevail, and to forsake his former weapons. Wrestling with his hands and limbs is not the way to prevail either with God or man. Fighting with God in his own strength, he is only able to thwart God's merciful purpose towards him, but is powerless as a reed in a giant's grasp if God chooses to summon His destructive powers into exercise. So this failure of natural power is the turning-point in the twofold wrestle, and marks as well as symbolises the transition in Jacob's life and character from reliance upon self and craft to reliance upon his divine Antagonist become his Friend. It is the path by which we must all travel if we are to become princes with God. The life of nature and of dependence on self must be broken and lamed in order that, in the very moment of discovered impotence, we may grasp the hand that smites, and find immortal power flowing into our weakness from it.

**II.** So we come to the second stage, in which Jacob strives with God and does prevail. Let me go, for the day breaketh. Then did the stranger wish to go; and if he did, why could not he, who had lamed his antagonist, loose himself from his grasp? The same explanation applies here which is required in reference to Christ's action to the two disciples at Emmaus: He made as though He would have gone further. In like manner, when He came to them on the water, He appeared as though He would have passed by. In all three cases the principle is the same. God desires to go, if we do not desire Him to stay. He will go, unless we keep Him. Then, at last, Jacob betakes himself to his true weapons. Then, at last, he strangely wishes to keep his apparent foe. He has learned, in some dim fashion, whom he has been resisting, and the blessedness of having Him for friend and companion. So here comes in the account of the whole scene which Hosea gives (Hos. xii. 4): He wept, and made supplication unto Him. That does not describe the earlier portion, but is the true rendering of the later stage, of which our narrative gives a more summary account. The desire to retain God binds Him to us. All His struggling with us has been aimed at evoking it, and all His fulness responds to it when evoked. Prayer is power. It conquers God. We overcome Him when we yield. When we are vanquished, we are victors. When the life of nature is broken within us, then from conscious weakness springs the longing which God cannot but satisfy. When I am weak, then am I strong. As Charles Wesley puts it, in his grand hymn on this incident:--

Yield to me now, for I am weak,

But confident in self-despair.

And God prevails when we prevail. His aim in all the process of His mercy has been but to overcome our heavy earthliness and selfishness, which resists His pleading love. His victory is our yielding, and, in that yielding, obtaining power with Him. He delights to be held by the hand of faith, and ever gladly yields to the heart's cry, Abide with me. I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me, is music to His ear; and our saying so, in earnest, persistent clinging to Him, is His victory as well as ours.

**III.** We have, next, the new name, which is the prize of Jacob's victory, and the sign of a transformation in his character. Before this time he had been Jacob, the worker with wiles, who supplanted his brother, and met his foes with duplicity and astuteness like their own. He had been mainly of the earth, earthy. But that solemn hour had led him into the presence-chamber, the old craft had been mortally wounded, he had seen some glimpse of God as his friend, whose presence was not awful, as he had thought it long ago, nor enigmatical and threatening, as he had at first deemed it that night, but the fountain of blessing and the one thing needful. A man who has once learned that lesson, though imperfectly, has passed into a purer region, and left behind him his old crookedness. He has learned to pray, not as before, prayers for mere deliverance from Esau and the like, but his whole being has gone out in yearning for the continual nearness of his mysterious antagonist-friend. So, though still the old nature remains, its power is broken, and he is a new creature. Therefore he needs a new name, and gets it from Him who can name men, because He sees the heart's depths, and because He has the right over them. To impose a name is the sign of authority, possession, insight into character. The change of name indicates a new epoch in a life, or a transformation of the inner man. The meaning of Israel is He (who) strives with God; and the reason for its being conferred is more accurately given by the Revised Version, which translates, For thou hast striven with God and with men, than in the Authorised rendering. His victory with God involved the certainty of his power with men. All his life he had been trying to get the advantage of them, and to conquer them, not by spear and sword, but by his brains. But now the true way to true sway among men is opened to him. All men are the servants of the servant and the friend of God. He who has the ear of the emperor is master of many men.

Jacob is not always called Israel in his subsequent history. His new name was a name of character and of spiritual standing, and that might fluctuate, and the old self resume its power; so he is still called by the former appellation, just as, at certain points in his life, the apostle forfeits the right to be Peter, and has to hear from Christ's lips the old name, the use of which is more poignant than many reproachful words; Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you. But in the last death-bed scene, when the patriarch lifted himself in his bed, and with prophetic dignity pronounced his parting benediction on Joseph's sons, the new name reappears with solemn pathos.

That name was transmitted to his descendants, and has passed over to the company of believing men, who have been overcome by God, and have prevailed with God. It is a charter and a promise. It is a stringent reminder of duty and a lofty ideal. A true Christian is an Israel. His office is to wrestle with God. Nor can we forget how this mysterious scene was repeated in yet more solemn fashion, beneath the gnarled olives of Gethsemane, glistening in the light of the paschal full moon, when the true Israel prayed with such sore crying and tears that His body partook of the struggle, and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. The word which describes Christ's agony is that which is often rendered wrestling, and perhaps is selected with intentional allusion to this incident. At all events, when we think of Jacob by the brook Jabbok, and of a greater than our father Jacob by the brook Kedron, we may well learn what persistence, what earnestness and effort of the whole nature, go to make up the ideal of prayer, and may well blush for the miserable indifference and torpor of what we venture to call our prayers. These are our patterns, as many as walk according to this rule, and are thereby shown to be the Israel of God,--upon them shall be peace.

**IV.** We have, as the end of all, a deepened desire after closer knowledge of God, and the answer to it. Some expositors (as, for instance, Robertson of Brighton, in his impressive sermon on this section) take the closing petition, Tell me, I pray thee, Thy name, as if it were the centre point of the whole incident. But this is obviously a partial view. The desire to know that name does not come to Jacob, as we might have expected, when he was struggling with his unknown foe in the dark there. It is the end, and, in some sense, the issue, of all that has gone before. Not that he was in any doubt as to the person to whom he spoke; it is just because he knows that he is speaking with God, who alone can bless, that he longs to have some deeper, clearer knowledge still of Him. He is not asking for a word by which he may call Him; the name is the expression of the nature, and his parting request is for something far more intimate and deep than syllables which could be spoken by any lips. The certain sequel of the discovery of God as striving in mercy with a man, and of yielding to him, is the thirst for deeper acquaintance with Him, and for a fuller, more satisfying knowledge of His inmost heart. If the season of mysterious intercourse must cease, and day hide more than it discloses, and Jacob go to face Esau, and we come down from the mount to sordid cares and mean tasks, at least we long to bear with us as a love-token some whisper in our inmost hearts that may cheer us with the peaceful truth about Him and be a hidden sweetness. The presence of such a desire is a sure consequence, and therefore a good test, of real prayer.

The Divine answer, which sounds at first like refusal, is anything but that. Why dost thou ask after My name? surely I need not to give thee more revelation of My character. Thou hast enough of light; what thou needest is insight into what thou hast already. We have in what God has made known of Himself already to us--both in His outward revelation, which is so much larger and sweeter to us than it was to Jacob, but also in His providences, and in the inward communion which we have with Him if we have let Him overcome us, and have gained power to prevail with Him--sources of certain knowledge of Him so abundant and precious that we need nothing but the loving eye which shall take in all their beauty and completeness, to have our most eager desires after His name more than satisfied. We need not ask for more sunshine, but take care to spread ourselves out in the full sunshine which we have, and let it drench our eyes and fire our hearts. And He blessed him there. Not till now was he capable of receiving the full blessing. He needed to have self beaten out of him; he needed to recognise God as lovingly striving with Him; he needed to yield himself up to Him; he needed to have his heart thus cleansed and softened, and then opened wide by panting desire for the presence and benediction of God; he needed to be made conscious of his new standing, and of the higher life budding within him; he needed to experience the yearning for a closer vision of the face, a deeper knowledge of the name,--and then it was possible to pour into his heart a tenderness and fulness of blessing which before there had been no room to receive, and which now answered in sweetest fashion the else unanswered desire, Tell me, I pray thee, Thy name.

In like manner we may each be blessed with the presence and benediction of Him whose merciful strivings, when we knew Him not, came to us in the darkness; and to whom, if we yield, there will be peace and power in our hearts, and upon us, too, the sun will rise as we pass from the place where our foe became our friend, and by faith we saw Him face to face, and drank in life by the gaze.