**VOLUME 7; CHAPTER 24 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE CRIPPLING THAT CROWNS by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*And He said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed.*

*Genesis 32:28*

TAKEN IN ALL ITS SIMPLICITY, IT WILL READILY BE GRANTED that this old and very familiar story is, nevertheless, most remarkable. To summarize with almost brutal bluntness, it is the story of God crippling a man, the story of God Himself taking the form of a man in order to lay His hand on a man, and that in order to cripple him.

This is not the story of Jacob's triumph over God, save in a secondary and yet a very spiritual sense. This is primarily the story of God's triumph over Jacob. Old as it is, familiar as it is, I propose to give a little careful attention to it, for it is one of those Bible stories which has made a most profound appeal to the heart of humanity. I venture to suggest to you that our very fondness for it has led us to accept interpretations which I cannot characterize in any way but as superficial. Gradually, by the transmission of these interpretations, slightly modified as they have been transmitted, we have been in danger of missing the deepest thing in the story.

Just a word in an aside; perhaps this word is a sort of open secret for my brethren in the ministry who may be here. I suppose that at some time or another all of us who have been preaching for any number of years, say a generation, have preached from the words, "I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me," in order to prove what wonderful power there is in prayer. I certainly have done so. Now, I do not think that idea is here at all. I have no doubt the sermon on prayer was true, but it did not properly belong to this text. That, I fear, is rather a common trouble with sermons. That confession, which is good for my soul, if not for yours, will help me to say that I have returned to this story, and after further consideration, I want to utter, so far as God shall help me, the things it has been saying to my own soul.

Let us first remind ourselves of the story of this man up to this point. I will omit all the things of his earlier years, and simply take the happenings of the twenty years prior to this event. At seventy years of age Jacob left home, a keen, hard man, intellectually convinced of God, but self-reliant, and at that moment defeated and disgraced. After twenty years, the story sees him returning wealthy, embittered, hardened; still intellectually convinced of God, still self-reliant, but afraid, haunted with a strange sense of fear. This particular day, to which we are brought in this chapter, and the happenings of which are so closely related to our text, was a day of hosts. Behind Jacob was Laban's host departing, returning after a bitter interview between the men. Then, somehow, to Jacob, in that very day, there came a vision of angels; he saw hosts of angels passing before him. It does not at all matter for the moment whether we say that this was simply a reminiscence of the days when he started away, and had a dream of angels and a ladder; or whether we believe that God in that moment gave him an actual vision of some great company of angels. The fact that abides is that to this man, hard, astute, by no means emotional, there came the sense of the angels' presence. He saw a vision of angels, and said, This is Mahanaim, or, to translate, The place of two hosts. And, moreover, there was another host. His servants returning to him, brought him this news, "We came to thy brother Esau, and moreover he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him." Thus it was a day of hosts, the hosts of Laban returning from him, the hosts of Esau approaching, and God's host of angels round about him.

Jacob set himself with characteristic carefulness to arrange for the coming of Esau. He was still the self-reliant man, arranging for the presence of Esau by sending him presents. We see the man if we read the story fully and carefully. See how he arranged. He divided his present into parts, and gave his servants strict instructions, When you come to Esau, if he receive you, well; if not, give him the first installment of the present, but do not give him more than you can help; if that does not help matters, bring up the next installment, and so on.

That is the revelation of the man, a wonderfully clever man. I am perfectly sure he would have been a most successful business man in London or New York!

But there was more in the man than all that cleverness. There was haunting fear, a fear which would not have been there if he had not been a man of faith. Contradictory as that may appear, it is certainly true. There was a feeling in his heart that everything was not done, although he had done everything. There was a consciousness that something was left unattended to, something which he could not do alone. Therefore, as in that Eastern land the sun suddenly sank to its rest, he sent across the Jabbok the vast companies of his household, and he was left alone. That which happened in the hour of that loneliness is the theme of our meditation; that which led up to the word spoken to him as the next day broke, "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed." No more Jacob, heel-catcher, but Israel, governed by God. What led to that word spoken to the man?

We shall notice three things. First, Jacob's need as he himself felt it and his need as God saw it. Second, the struggle of the night, that strange happening, which always fascinates us, however often we may return to the story. Finally, the blessing as it is crystallized into speech in the words, "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel.

The need: first of all as Jacob saw it. We have tried to pass over the ground and to watch him up to that moment of loneliness. We have spoken of a haunting fear, a mystic sense that everything was not done, that took possession of him. Let us look a little more carefully at the man, and attempt to enter into his consciousness at that moment. I think we may do so by saying that he was looking back, and looking on, and looking round about, at the immediate. As he looked back, what did he see? Those twenty years. There can be no question but that as he looked back over those twenty years he had a sense of great satisfaction. They had been years of wonderful success. I am warranted in saying all this by the prayer which he had offered earlier in the day, when in the presence of the God of his father Isaac and of Abraham, he had recognized how wonderfully successful he had been. To our Western ears the words "With my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two companies" have very little of meaning; yet we know, if we take time to think, that in these words we have the expression of great and wonderful success, of a fortune twice amassed in those twenty years. As he looked back Jacob was conscious of victory, of success. I cannot help saying - for I am trying to understand the man on the human level, on the level of my own humanity - that he was conscious of a pardonable sense of satisfaction in that he had proved himself too strong for all the cunning of Laban. Read at your leisure the story of the conversation with Laban. Jacob reminded Laban that during those years he had ten times changed his wages, yet, nevertheless, in spite of all Laban's trickery, this man had moved through to a great and assured success, and such a success - do not forget this - that when talking to Laban about it he could say that Laban could bring no charge of dishonesty against him; he had never robbed Laban; he had only outwitted him. He had the knowledge of twenty years of success wrung out of adverse circumstances. A man is always permitted some amount of satisfaction as he looks back over twenty years of that kind. That was the backward look.

Ah, but that is not quite far enough back! Why those twenty years in Laban's country? The answer would remind him of that business of the blessing, and that business of the birthright! Over all the twenty years of success was the haunting shadow of meanness and baseness and wrong. Jacob knew those years. There in the loneliness of that night, with the Eastern sunset and darkness round about him, or only the light of the stars overhead, while the little Jabbok murmured on its way down to the Jordan, he was thankful and pleased about the success; but there was Esau! Phantoms of the past were floating in front of him. He shook them off and looked on!

What was ahead? The land, the land promised, and therein faith was operating. That land was not fairer than the land he had been dwelling in. Why did he desire it? Because God had sworn to give it to Abraham and to Isaac and his seed, because the possession of that land was within the Divine economy, because Jacob knew, however much through base deceit and meanness he had interfered, hindered, postponed the Divine purpose rather than helped it, Jacob knew that in the purpose of God he was a link in the chain of the Divine economy, moving ever on toward high purpose. He returned to the land because God had called him, because it was in God's purpose to create a continuity: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; but the phantoms of the past were the terrors of the future. Esau was in possession in that land, and was traveling toward him with four hundred men.

After the backward look and the forward look, the look around at circumstances followed. Everything was done that could be done; presents were sent to Esau which were in themselves confessions of a sense of wrong done in the long ago and evidence of Jacob's desire to placate his brother. The mother and the children were guarded, so far as he could guard them. What now? One thing he needed, he thought, and what was it? That God should help him. Is not that perfect? Is it not exactly what a man ought to feel at such a point? Let us leave our inquiry and find our answer in the sequel.

Now, with all reverence I approach what seems to me to be, in the way of exposition, the more difficult part of the subject, that which must be approached with reverence. As I read the story itself, up to this point I see Jacob's sense of need. How did God see that hour? What was God's vision of that man? How did God understand his need? How near together, or how far apart, were Jacob's sense of need and God's knowledge of it? I affirm that God saw a man whom He knew to be a believer in Himself. It is impossible carefully to study this story of Jacob without seeing that. Criticize him as we may, and we surely shall do so, as we find out how much he is like ourselves; nevertheless, through the story from beginning to end we are conscious of the fact that deep down in the profoundest things of his life this man in God and never wavered in that belief. God saw him as a man profoundly believing in Himself. He saw him, moreover, as a man who believed in the Divine purpose, and who desired to come into line with the Divine purpose, to co-operate with the Divine purpose. He saw him as a man who, in a wonderful degree, had entered into the appreciation of the master principle of faith in the spiritual, which had made his grandfather Abraham a man of strong initiative, and his own father Isaac a man strong in the quietness of passive faith. He had entered into this great inheritance; he believed in God and His purpose, and he passionately desired to be in line with it, to co-operate with it, and so to fulfil his destiny.

God saw this man not only as a believer in Himself, not only as a believer in His purpose, and not only desiring to co-operate therein; He saw him self-reliant. He saw this man as one who felt himself able to help God, who felt that it was necessary in certain conditions for him to manipulate events in order to bring about the Divine consummation. That had been the story of all the past, the story of every blunder he had made. There is no single tale of infidelity in the life of Jacob. There is no story of hours of deflection from the pathway of desire to co-operate with God. His failure lay in the fact that he had said, in effect, It is God's desire that I should have the birthright; I will help God by taking advantage of Esau's hunger to obtain it; it is God's purpose that I should have the patriarchal blessing; I will clothe myself in these skins and go and help God by cheating my father. Every blunder had as its motive the desire to help God. This self-reliance made him imagine that it was necessary for him to hurry God, to manipulate events so that they should minister to the speedy realization of the Divine consummation.

God saw that what Jacob supremely needed was first to discover his own weakness, and that in order that he might discover, as he never had done before, the power of the God in Whom he believed. On the threshold of possession of the land he must be brought to that attitude of soul in which he would be willing to receive the possession as the gift of God rather than imagine that he had gained it by his own cleverness and his own wisdom.

I believe there are those who are listening to me, brethren and sisters in comradeship of faith, who are really in revolt against this presentation of this story, those who are saying, Is it not the right thing for a man to work out his own destiny on the basis of his own belief in God? There is a sense in which that is true; but there is a deeper truth, and in order to discover it we need to ponder this story most carefully in the light of the whole movement of this man's history. In order that we may be preserved from the crippling, it is good that we should do so in the days before we come to the sense of weakness that will drive us back to it. Let it not be forgotten, Abraham was never crippled. With all reverence, if I may say it of One Who was more than man and yet was very man, Jesus never passed through such an hour as this in order to perfect His faith. However much we may be in revolt against this way of stating the story, let us consider it before we dismiss it. This is the lesson that God would teach Jacob, this is the need as God saw it: that Jacob should understand that a man can enter into possession of God's inheritance and destiny only as he receives it as a gift from God. He never can enter on the Divine destiny merely on the basis of intellectual assent to the fact of God and by means of his own cleverness.

That will be further illuminated if we take a step forward and glance, in the second place, at the story of the struggle. "There wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day." That is so easily read, and yet it is so impossible of interpretation by a preacher in the pulpit; but I know that there are men and women in this house who in their own experience understand it. Through the long, long night there wrestled a man with him. God was limiting His own strength in order to create a consciousness of it to Jacob. God incarnate, that is the story. God - to use Charles Wesley's daring phrase - was contracted to a span, limiting Himself to the level of humanity, a man facing a man, yet infinitely more than man! God stooped to the level of man and put on the man Jacob the hand of man in the night. What for? To bring into play all Jacob's force, that it might express itself to the uttermost, and so learn its limit and its weakness.

As I watch the long struggle of that night I am more than ever amazed at Jacob; how wonderful a man he was. He knew, of this there can be no doubt, that the touch was supernatural, even though it was the touch of another man. As I watch him through the night I see the old character manifesting itself, the determination to make the most of an opportunity. It is not said that Jacob wrestled with the man, but that the man wrestled with Jacob. There is no question that Jacob wrestled too; but the beginning of the struggle was on the side of God: it was the man who wrestled with Jacob.

When the first sudden flush of the new day shot up the Eastern sky the man who had wrestled said to Jacob, "Let me go, for the day breaketh." This was said after that strange, and wonderful, and appalling touch which crippled Jacob. I cannot explain it any further. The man might have crippled Jacob at the beginning of the night; but he did not. He might have done it at any point; but not until Jacob had wrought out all his own strength in answering the strength of God did God touch him and cripple him. It was when Jacob discovered that his strength was ebbing away, and that he could no longer resist the power that was laid upon him that the strange, wonderful thing happened. Jacob replied to the voice of his Master, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." We could not know what the man said unless we heard him say it, and caught the tone and accent. The spirit of a man is never in the words he utters, but in the tone in which he speaks. How did he say it? I am always so thankful that what seems to me to be the Divine interpretation of the story was given long centuries afterwards. I turn to the prophecy of Hosea and listen to the great prophet as he was denouncing Ephraim for his sins, and from that denunciation I am going to read only a few words:

Ephraim feedeth on wind, and followeth after the east wind: he continually multiplieth lies and desolation; and they make a covenant with Assyria, and oil is carried into Egypt. The Lord hath also a controversy with Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways; according to his doings will He recompense him.

So far, the prophet was dealing with the people about him; then in a flash he went back to the actual Jacob of long ago: "In the womb he took his brother by the heel; and in his manhood he had power with God: yea, he had power over the angels, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him." It was not by tremendous courage that he won the victory, but by the sob and sigh, by the agony and the utter sense of defeat. It was an appeal out of helplessness. He said it with tears, with a sob, in a moment when all the resoluteness of the years was breaking down. He came to a sense of weakness and inability, and out of that hour of defeat he rose into higher strength and greater majesty than he had ever achieved: "I will not let thee go," - he hardly had strength to finish it; I think his voice was choked with tears - "except thou bless me"! It was the last sob of a defeated man. The last sob of the defeated man, the man defeated by God, is the first note in the triumph song of the selfsame man: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." "What is thy name?" My name is Heel-catcher. That is not so poetic as Jacob; but it is well to be truthful. Every Jew will read that every time he reads Jacob. "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel, for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed," so reads the text. We discover that there is difficulty in this text; the translations of the Revised and Authorized versions are different, I venture to suggest to you that the words may have meant, as I certainly believe they did mean, not that Jacob had struggled with God and had prevailed over God - there is a secondary sense in which that is true - but rather that Jacob had striven with God and God had prevailed, and therefore that God had striven with man and God had prevailed. I do not believe that the reference was to past victories over men; but rather that it was a prophecy of the new type of victory over man in that hour when, paradox of the faith-life, he had won his victory over God through defeat by God. If a man will prevail with God he will do so in the hour in which he is mastered by God.

What was the blessing? We have already touched on it; let us but return to it for a moment. "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince hast thou power," said the old version, and that has been the reason of the persistent declaration that Israel means prince. It means nothing of the kind; neither does it mean one who has power with God, save as that may be a deduction from what it really does mean. These Hebrew words occur all through the Bible, made up in some way with the name of God ending them. Isra-el means God-governed, a God-mastered man.

The sun had risen now, and Jacob was going back to join his company. I cannot help it if you charge me with imagination. I never go back with him. I prefer to be with the company that met him. On the other side of the Jabbok I am waiting in imagination with his friends, wondering what has happened, why he does not come. At last, there he is, he is coming. See him? But can that be the man who went down last night? He has had an accident; he is limping; he is a cripple! I hasten to meet him, and I ask, What has happened? Why are you limping? I think he would have said, Do not call me Jacob, I have a new name; and there is no need for anyone to draw any special attention to this limp in the way of commiseration or pity; this limp, this halt as I walk, which will go with me to the end of my days, is a patent of nobility.

Presently he entered the land. And how did he enter the land? what of Esau? Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him. "Thou hast striven with God; and with men hast prevailed." Because in the strife with God thou hast been mastered, Jacob, therefore hast thou risen into co-operation with the forces of God that can disarm your brother and bring him to you with kisses and tears. That is the lesson of all lessons. Do not misunderstand me. This man had a great deal to do and a great deal to learn, as subsequent history teaches; but he had learned the central lesson, and all its values and experiences would now be wrought out into his own experience, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.

You say that this is a very old story, and that times and customs and conditions are all changed. Why bring this story to men in these modern times? Why go back there? For the simple reason that if it be true that times and customs and conditions have changed, God has not changed, and man has not changed. If for a moment you were inclined, in a kindly way, to criticize me for leading you back to Genesis, you have surely discovered that there is wonderful comradeship between you and Jacob. God has not changed, man has not changed; therefore the values are permanent. What are they?

Let me attempt to gather them up. Granted the principle of faith - and I am speaking only to believing men and women - then God will perfect it by teaching us our dependence on Himself. Happy indeed are we if we yield to the truth at the beginning, as did Abraham; or as did Joseph even more perfectly; but so many of us are like Jacob, we struggle independently of the God in Whom we believe. We do believe in Him. We do desire to be conformed to His will, and to co-operate with His purpose; and then we struggle and make our plans and we succeed wonderfully; but inevitably, sooner or later, there comes a crisis, not necessarily in circumstances, though sometimes in circumstances; but some crisis, in which by the direct act of God He lays His hand on us and we are brought to the appalling sense of our own incompetence and weakness. That is a great hour, an hour of overwhelming disappointment merging to despair; to some, let it be carefully said at once, an hour of actual, personal affliction as the result of which we shall never again be what we were, but shall go softly all our days, shall always halt by the way, and in certain senses be cripples.

Let us look carefully at such hours. I may be speaking to some man or woman in the midst of such an hour. Consider it carefully, and try to find out what God means. Is He not saying to thee this morning, clever, astute, capable man: Always hast thou believed in God, yet always hast thou manipulated thine own life, made thine own arrangements with wonderful success; suddenly thou art crippled, broken? God is saying to you, What is thy name? Is there not the strange, new light on the eastern sky that foretells a day of triumph? You may go softly all your days, you may never walk quite as you walked before. Shall I ever forget that hour when I heard a friend of mine, whose name I will not mention here, preach as I had never heard him preach before; when, going into the ante-room afterwards, I took him by the hand and said, Man, what has happened to you? Quite literally he walked his vestry with a limp, and as I looked at him I saw that this magnificent man was crippled for life, and he said, By that limp I live! In that hour of his unmaking he was made.

To gather up everything as I see it and feel it, let this story say this one thing; When God cripples, it is in order to crown. May we learn the secret and rise to the place of power by yielding ourselves to Him.