**VOLUME 9; CHAPTER 08 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE HEALING OF LIFE by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*In his strength he strove with God; yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed; he wept, and made supplication unto him.*

*Hosea 12:3,4*

THE STORY FROM WHICH OUR TEXT IS TAKEN IS A VERY OLD ONE; it has often been the subject of meditation and that in many applications. Yet it is wonderfully fresh and suggestive, and that because it brings us face to face with some of the elemental things of the soul. I expect I shall be perfectly accurate when I say that the youngest person in this house who heard me read the story had heard it many times before and had read it many times before; yet I do not hesitate also to say that they heard it again tonight with interest. The reason for this is that it makes direct appeal to the deepest things in human life. I repeat that this story of a distant age and of other climes brings us face to face with the elemental things of the soul.

It is the story of a man alone with God in the night, facing the inward, and hidden things, keenly conscious of their presence and power. It is the story of a man who desired to be alone with God in the night and had deliberately arranged for such an experience. After having dispatched the droves of cattle in the day to meet his brother Esau, he took his wife and children back again over the Jabbok on to the other side to be away from the danger zone. He had stood there watching them, until they had disappeared into the quietness of the night, and then he had deliberately sought to be alone with God.

On the Divine side, it is the story of how God responded to the intention of this man, of how He stooped down to meet him on his own level, appearing to him and touching him as a Man. That is the story. That is the whole story. That is the marvel of it. A man away from his fellows and alone with his God.

Jacob desired to meet with God that night as we have said; but he did not quite know what that meant, he did not understand what it involved; and he never could have known perfectly what that meant, could not have understood what it involved, had it not been that God respected that desire and responded to the intention; and moreover that He did so by taking the form and fashion of a man and so drawing near to the seeking man.

This story, so old and so familiar then, is arresting and wonderful, among other reasons, because it gives us the account of one of the earliest theophanies, or appearances of God to men in human form. To my own mind there can be no question at all that the Man who drew near to Jacob that night, was none other than the Angel Jehovah, the very Son of God, taking that form at that time in order to draw near to that man, because there was no other way by which he could effectually be reached and mastered.

The story is full of interest also because the transactions between Jacob and Jehovah that night were definite and decisive. They came into touch, nay, into grips with each other. God and the man were set upon a purpose, apparently in conflict, but in reality one. The issue was victory for God and therefore for the man.

This, then, is the story. A man alone with God in the night, desiring to be alone with God, finding himself alone with God, though for a while not knowing that it was God Who had drawn near to him. Presently, when the crimson flush of morning was upon the sky, knowing that he had really been with God as he had desired, this man departed, and limping back to his loved ones, said as he went, "… I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." That is the wonderful story.

Let us then give ourselves once more to meditation of this familiar, strange, and revealing story. I do not now use that word "meditation" carelessly. I use it quite carefully, remembering the definition of it which I once heard from the lips of Dr. Griffith-Thomas. He said: "Meditation is attention with intention." Let that be the nature of our meditation. We will take time to study the story, not merely because it is an interesting one but in order that we may give attention to some of the things it reveals, intending to submit our lives to a like process and to discover from our meditation some of the true, deep secrets of life, that we may come to a fuller realization of them. I pray that for a little while there may be given to us that grace of detachment which shall enable us to separate from each other and from all lower interests, that so we may be as surely alone with God as Jacob was by the running Jabbok. I know it is difficult, but I know it is possible. It is made more difficult in that I as His messenger stand in some senses between you and Him. Yet may God grant that the shadow of my personality may be entirely blotted out by the light of His conscious presence, and that I may not in any way hinder your coming into close fellowship with Him while we consider the old story once again.

I suggest that we observe: first, this man's sense of need; second, this man's sense of opportunity as it came to him that night; third, the business of the night between this man and God; finally, this man's sense of realization when the morning broke.

First, then, let us consider his sense of need. Here I am greatly helped by all that to which I have been making reference, our familiarity with the whole story. Jacob that night was face to face with his past. That past was marching back upon him in the form of Esau to confront him. It was twenty years since he had passed by that way. Twenty years before he had left home, then a man of seventy years of age. He had been compelled to hurry away under the shadow and cloud of a great deception. Now he was coming back, and he was realizing the troublesome fact that a man's past is not always behind him. Again and again a man's past swings round before him and marches directly upon him. That is what was happening to Jacob that night. All our language concerning him in this regard is merely the attempted expression of our conceptions of infinite things. These statements are the paradoxes of the spiritual life.

Jacob that night was facing his past. The meanness by which he had taken advantage of his brother's hunger to obtain his birthright; the perchance greater meanness by which he had deceived his father and obtained the blessing of the first-born.

These are the hours that we all know, hours when the past that we cannot undo, though we would like to do so, comes back confronting us again.

In that hour of the night the need of Jacob was not only that occasioned by the fact of that marching upon him of his past; his need was occasioned by the fact that that marching upon him of his past was menacing his future. This man was a hard, astute, bargain-driving, clever man with that material cleverness that succeeds anywhere with material things. Yet on this night, face to face with his past and his future, the underlying deeps of his nature powerfully and persistently asserted themselves. Let us listen to him: "… with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands." That is, translated into modern speech, I started out twenty years ago with no capital, and now I am coming back a wealthy man. Nevertheless, he was troubled, disturbed, afraid. His trouble that night was not occasioned by the thought of his cattle and his property; not principally with the thought that the mother with the children may suffer, though that did trouble him. He was principally troubled by the fear that he might be excluded from the land of his fathers, from the very land which he knew was his in the economy and purpose of God. All the future within the Covenant made with Abraham and Isaac seemed menaced by the past; and, therefore, the man was distraught, troubled, perplexed.

Yet, I am bound to say that I personally do not think that this reveals the deepest need of the man as he himself felt it. The more carefully I ponder the story the more I believe that on this night Jacob was conscious of need more profound than any of these things can possibly measure; that he was conscious that his own life was somehow wrong in itself; that he was hot and restless in the deeper consciousness of the soul. He had been disappointed, he had become embittered. His experiences with Laban had been unsatisfactory in every way. The two bands which he possessed did not give him rest of soul. You may ask me what right I have to imagine that he had any such feeling as he took his way to the place of loneliness with God. I reply that my conviction is based upon what he said in the morning: "… I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." That is the language of a man who knew there was disease in his life, that there was something wrong with the central fact of his own being. It was the exclamation of a man who knew fever and restlessness, who knew that ache at the center of his being which no bands could satisfy and to which no material success could minister.

This is the picture of Jacob as I see him at the close of that day. Laban had marched away from him in the morning. Esau was coming to meet him. He had manipulated his possessions so as to appease his brother, for the past of his wrong-doing was confronting him. There was anxiety in his heart about Rachael and the children. But these were not the principal reasons of his trouble. His deepest agony had no relation to Laban, to Esau, or to the wife and children. It was an agony concerning his own soul. Therefore, he did what men constantly do under stress of circumstances; he said, I will stay here a little, alone with God. God is ever the last resort of the soul, self-troubled, restless, consciously diseased. How good a thing it is that even under such conditions He is willing to receive us.

Let us now observe what the story reveals of the sense of opportunity that came to him. There can be no question that to Jacob it was a wonderful day, a strange day, a mystic day. Things happened to him that day that were most strange. He had heard of such things before perhaps in the experience of his father Isaac or of his grandfather Abraham. Indeed, he had also known something of the kind in a dream twenty years before on the very day that he had left his home.

At the beginning of the chapter, two verses tell the strange thing that had happened in the early morning. Laban had left him. The parting had been by no means a pleasant one. Much bargaining had gone on between them. There had been fierce recriminations. Jacob had spoken out at last all the bitter things he had been thinking about Laban. Then there had been the building of the heap of stones and the naming of the place Mizpah; and the covenant of suspicion, the Lord watch between me and thee, the idea being not that of the watching of a shepherd but that of a policeman. Each had practically said to the other, "that heap of stones is a sign that you are not to rob me any more, and that I will not cheat you any more!" So at last Laban had marched away.

Then Jacob saw angels in the early morning. Where they were I cannot tell; what form they took I do not know, but to this man there was given a vision of angels perhaps sweeping across the sky before his astonished eyes. Then he said: "This is God's host!" The sight of them, as we have said, reminded him of the dream of twenty years before. He called the name of that place "Mahanaim," the place of two hosts; Laban's host had gone, but God's host was near. He was conscious of the two hosts. Then the business of the day went forward, but the impression of that morning vision would remain with him until eventide.

Look at him again in the midst of the business of the day, in the midst of the technicalities - while he was arranging the presents for Esau with that cunning which characterized him, sending one drove at a time in the hope that one drove would appease Esau and if one drove would appease Esau, and if one drove would suffice, Jacob was not the man to give two - in the midst of all the astute arrangements, he suddenly broke out into prayer, and this was the way the prayer he prayed commenced: "… O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac. …" God was all about him that day, breaking in upon his consciousness in different ways; in the morning by the vision of the host of angels when Laban had left him; in the middle of the day by the remembrance of the religion of his father and his grandfather and of God's relationship to them, a remembrance constraining him to prayer. So, at the end of the day he said, "Now let me stay here and be alone with this God. Let me set past, and future, and this troubled self in right relation with Him."

Then came the surprise. It is only as we read this story quite simply that we catch the true and full force of this. We are not to imagine that Jacob knew immediately that it was the hand of God which was laid upon him. The statement of the story is undoubtedly the statement of Jacob's consciousness; "… there wrestled a man with him …" Let us be as realistic about this story as though we were reading it to a little child. This man had stayed behind for the express purpose of being alone with God; and he was surprised and startled because some man suddenly, mysteriously, was with him, coming from no one knew where, and no one knew how; and this stranger put his hand upon him in the night, and there Jacob found himself in the strong grip of a man. "…there wrestled a man with him …" It is never said that he wrestled with the man. There is a sense, of course, in which he did, but his wrestling was the wrestling of defence against the attack of the stranger. A man had put his hand upon him. Jacob did not know what he meant, what he was going to do, or who he was.

In the presence of this strange experience, Jacob exerted all the force of his strength against the wrestler in the night. Mark the marvel of it, he was successful, so that the man wrestling against him did not overcome him, did not prevail against him. That was the business of the night.

The first matter which impresses me and which we should observe carefully, for its spiritual value is supreme, is that of the tremendous resisting power of Jacob. As a whole man he was invincible and invincible against the hand of God. God could not break in upon this strong will, so long as the man remained a whole man. The whole man was wrong, had been so for years; his central principle of action had been a wrong principle. He had faith in God and had never lost that faith in God. It was the central fact of his mental life. But side by side with it there had been such confidence in himself that his faith had never waited for God. He had ever been trying to help God and so had hindered Him. It was that inner strength of the man which was making for his ultimate ruin and which must be broken down if he was ever to find the real fulfilment of his own life. Yet Jacob in his own strength was that night invincible. There was no way to capture and realize his life save through the overcoming of that strength.

Does this story sound unlikely, contradictory? Let us think once again in the light of our own experience and in the profoundest mystery of our own lives. God ever stands outside human will as is necessary to the perfecting of human life. His one aim is to bring that will to surrender to its own election to His will. There are thousands of men who are resisting God as successfully as Jacob did that night. At last, as the first flush of the dawn appeared, seeing that He prevailed not against him in conflict with his strength, He adopted another method, that of weakening his strength physically. God's power was limited in the struggle through that night, self-limited, held in restraint, in the first process of the conflict. Now He proceeded along another line, He crippled him.

That method does not always conquer a man, but it does give him a new opportunity. There are men, alas, whom God has crippled with the intention of crowning them, but they have never let Him crown them. That is the alarming, terrific fact that we have to face most solemnly. The last peril is that we may not only resist God while He is attempting to bring us by wrestling into subjection but also when He attempts to break in upon our lives in pain and sorrow and crippling. But Jacob did not fail here. He responded to disabling though he had held out in tremendous and invincible strength against the wrestling of the night. It was when he was crippled, I think as I read the story, that there broke upon him the consciousness that he was having dealings with One Who was not man, He then began to discover that the very thing for which he had remained behind had happened to him, even though he did not know until that moment that it had happened. The hand of the man upon him was the hand of God.

Many a man, when desiring to meet with God, has got into grips with Him, and yet has not recognized the hand upon him as that of God. In the commonplaces of everyday life, oftentimes the very things that batter and bruise, until we halt by the way, are the result of God's hand upon us, and yet we do not recognize it. So it was with Jacob.

When the Man, the Wrestler, at last said, "… Let me go, for the day breaketh," Jacob said: "… I will not let thee go except thou bless me." That was not said in any strident voice! Hosea tells us the story of that cry. With his strength he strove against God, and God did not win over him in that struggle, neither did he master God therein. Then God crippled him, and at once he prevailed over the Wrestler, not by his strength but by his weakness. He prevailed in the moment when submitting with strong crying and tears, he said: "… I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."

Now with close attention let us follow the events. Said the Man to him,"… What is thy name? And he said, Jacob." It is more than interesting, it is vital to the story that we remind ourselves of the meaning of this name. We read it and to us it is just a name, but it was a Hebrew word with a very clear meaning: Heel-catcher, supplanter, trickster! That is what Jacob means. Then said the Wrestler to him, "… Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel"; no more trickster but one under the mastery of God. It is of equal importance that we should remember that Israel does not mean prince; the word "prince" has really no connection with the word at all, Thou shalt be called Isra El, one ruled by God. That is what the Wrestler said to him.

Once more let us look at this matter closely. In the moment when Jacob found his strength gone, he became conscious that the touch upon him was not merely the touch of a man but the touch of God; and that he was in the very presence of God. Then he said: "… I will not let thee go,. except thou bless me." In that "I will not" of weakness, there was almightiness of strength; in that submission to God, he found his way into the place of power. When weakened, he flung himself upon God, claiming His blessing, he was crowned.

Finally, what was the sense of realization that came to him? What did that night really mean to him? We have the answer from his own lips and then from the pen of the chronicler. From his own lips this is the story: "… I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." Then from the pen of the recorder, this is the answer: "And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh."

I do not think that very many words in the nature of application are necessary. The story powerfully conveys its own teaching. As we said at the beginning, we have given ourselves to a reconsideration of this, supremely desiring in the process to have direct and personal dealings with God. The reasons for this desire have brought us into closest sympathy with the theme. For us, also, there is a past that we want to be dealt with; there is a future which is menaced by the past; and deeper than all others, there is the sense within our own souls that we need some healing touch, some infinite and eternal medicine for the soul that will make fever end and bring us new strength and peace. We need healing of life. Is not that the truth concerning ourselves? I will not commit others to that statement if they object, but that exactly represents my own sense of need.

Then be it ours to remember that all this need in the case of Jacob was met in the experience which he described on the declaration he made: "… my life is preserved."

Let us begin at the first point, our need as to the past. God puts Himself between a man and his past. We are familiar with the sequel. When the morning broke and Jacob went forward to meet Esau, he found that no present was needed to appease him. God had dealt with Esau. Esau met him with love, and tenderness, and brotherly affection. That sequel is illuminated for us by a quotation from another part of the Bible:

When a man's way please Jehovah,

He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.

In the moment when we really submit ourselves to Him, He puts Himself between us and all in the past that haunts the soul. It may be, and indeed assuredly must be, that while He puts Himself between us and the past, we shall yet undergo chastisement resulting from the past; but it will be His hand, and it will be only such as is necessary for the making of our lives. All that is possible for us here and now. What in the past is haunting thy soul, O brother mine? I pray that you in this moment let God come between you and your past! He can do it, and He can do it in such a way as to give your conscience perfect peace. God does not deal with the past in the life of a man by some kind of good-natured beneficence which says, "We will say no more about that past!" That is not God's method. It is impossible to him, Who is as surely Light as He is Love. But by atonement, by the mystery of the Cross, by the wonder of the passion; by that which can only have illustration in human history by the Cross of Calvary. God in His pain stands between man and his past gathering into His own being all the sin and its issues and annihilating all in the compassion and passion of His love. That is the only place of rest for a troubled conscience. Nothing less than that can give true peace to the sinful soul. I dare not say that it does not satisfy me for it does. In that sense also, with regard to my past, I am prepared to say, "Thou, O Christ, art all I want."

It is equally true that God stands between us and the future. There are some of us, it may be, who are not especially concerned about the past; we know its failure and short-coming, but we have trusted His grace, and there is no haunting phantom out of the bygone years that comes to haunt the soul. But the days ahead are threatening us. We see things in the future which are not the result of love and peace but which are threatening our hope, our confidence, and our very life. We are almost afraid to take one step forward, so great is our foreboding of ill. Then let us resolutely dare to put God between ourselves and our future, knowing of a surety that He Who met the man Jacob by the Jabbok that night so long ago and by the correction of his past made his future possible, is the God Who will undertake for all of us who put our trust in Him.

Yet finally and supremely, this personal dealing with God means, if we yield to Him and allow Him the mastery and possession of our lives, that He will deal with the deepest malady of the soul, with that inner heart trouble, that disease, *dis-ease*, that fever that spoils the life. It is by dealing with that central trouble that He strengthens us for all the future has in store for us.

I thank God that I am able to make that announcement knowing that all about me are those who know the thing is true, for they have found God's healing and so have entered into His peace.

If someone imagines himself or herself to be lonely, let such an one remember that his or her need has already been met in the experience of thousands of trusting souls. There is no temperament that He has not met and satisfied, no peculiar form or fashion of human heart-trouble, soul-malady, spirit-agony, that He has not already healed.

If, then, we will but yield ourselves to Him as He stands confronting us in Christ with the break of the first day that follows the night of our struggle and submission, the sun will rise upon us, and we shall know that having seen Him face to face, our life is healed; and we also shall be able to call the place of our yielding Penuel, the face of God, because it shall be the place where strength weakened becomes strength realized, the place where the old supplanting nature is changed into the victorious life of those who reign in life, because they are ruled by God.