

and

SPIRITUAL SELF-DEVELOPMENT.
A Study of Genesis 32:22-32

It has been said that the worthiest ambition of the human soul is the desire to increase in capacity for God, to grow, and in growing to become more like God. How such an ambition may be realized is the subject before us. The scripture setting is a part of the life story of Jacob. In Jacob we see a picture of ourselves; his ambitions are ours; his faults are ours, and his struggles are our struggles. May our growth in grace be as marked as his. May his triumphs of faith be our peculiar possession.

Jacob with all his faults and weaknesses was spiritually sensitive. He was a child of the covenant, he had been called according to the eternal purpose of God. At the same time, Jacob's plan for his own development, his method of reaching the goal of his spiritual ambitions, directly opposed God's plans. Up to the time that Jacob with his family and his possessions had reached the border of the promised land, en route from the land of Laban, he had been given all the necessary assurance that God's covenant blessings would pass through him. Before his birth Jehovah had said to his mother, "The elder shall serve the younger." At Bethel God had assured him of His presence and blessing.

Yet Jacob's plan for attaining his spiritual goal included his own selfish schemings. In a word he followed that dangerous principle that the end justifies the means. His methods were reaching a climax as he drew near his old enemy, Esau. He was near the border of the promised land. Word comes that Esau is marching towards him with four hundred men. In his panic and distress Jacob at once calls an ad interim meeting and does some clever planning, that of sending gifts to his brother in rehays. Then he offers a prayer asking God to deliver him from Esau. Following the prayer he says, "I will appease him with a present." Apparently well-satisfied with his program, he sends his family across the stream, while he tarries behind and is left alone in the night. Up to this time God had permitted self in Jacob to reach a climax. Something had to happen.

Over against Jacob's plan let us consider the divine plan for spiritual growth. I trust we shall see from Jacob's Jabbok experience that the God of Jacob is our refuge, or as the Psalmist puts it in another place, "Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in Jehovah, his God." "And Jacob was left alone, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day." At first Jacob did not seem to realize with whom he was wrestling, that he was opposing "the merciful strivings of God." But sometime during that mysterious scene, perhaps about the breaking of the day, he realized that it was God. He found himself face to face with God. Such a profound and lasting impressions this made that he called the name of the place Peniel, "The face of God." Here then is the first necessary condition of spiritual growth-

A Vision of God.

The supreme and essential factor if we are to develop spiritually is a clear vision of the God of Jacob. Dr. Turnbull suggests that perhaps the finest picture of the God of Jacob found in the Bible is Psalm 103:8-14: "Jehovah is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness---- For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust." Patient and long-suffering towards His wayward child is the God of Jacob. Wonderful as is this picture, this same God is revealed even more clearly in the New Testament, in the person of His Son. It has been well suggested that the New Testament counterpart of the God of Jacob is the Christ of Simon Peter. Think of the many resemblances in the characters of Jacob and Peter. These two men are fairly representative of our common weaknesses. The vision of the divine which transformed their lives is what we must have if we grow in grace and become prepared to receive the blessing of Jacob.

"We would see Jesus, this is all we're needing,
Strength, joy and willingness come with the sight.
We would see Jesus, dying, risen, pleading,
Then welcome day, and farewell mortal night."

The Touch of God.

The face of God had made its indelible impression. Hardly less great and as a consequence was the finger of God. "And when He saw that He prevailed not against him, He touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained as he wrestled with Him." This laming of Jacob's thigh meant "the weakening of all the life of nature and self which had hitherto been so prominent in his life." The divine purpose apparently was to show him what a poor, feeble, worthless creature he was. With all his clever plans in his own strength he was nothing. This thorough humbling was absolutely necessary for Jacob's spiritual growth.

A parallel to this experience is given us in Isaiah's life-story. After he had seen the Lord, high and lifted up, he realized his own worthlessness and was let to exclaim, "Woe is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips---- for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts."

Some find in the life history of Job another illustration of how a man was brought low by the finger of God--the laming of the thigh: "First, Job maintains his point against all the arguments of his friends. Then through Elihu God begins to wrestle with him. Then God comes sown directly with all the majesty of His power, overwhelms him by the display of His greatness and glory, and elicits from him the well-known words, 'I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear. But now mine eye seeth Thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.'"

Self must be destroyed in us if we are to be prepared to enter our promised land. The Jacob plan of supplanting, sceming, must be set aside, and God's plan adopted. Jacob had to go limping through life, and Paul had the thorn in the flesh, yet through these humbling processes they grew spiritually. "We must be weak here we can be strong. The power of Christ can only rest upon us in the knowledge of our infirmities." Paul's vision of God and the consequent humbling of self were a part of God's plan for his spiritual development--the face of God and the finger of God. It was when he beheld most clearly the God of Jacob in all His holiness, that he realized that he was the chief of sinners. Standing upon a mountain top of his Christian experience and beholding with clear vision Mount Calvary, with its wondrous stream of amazing grace flowing from it he was led to exclaim, "God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Not only a vision of God and the touch of God are a part of God's plan for spiritual growth, but also

A Clinging to God.

"And He said, 'Let me go, for the day breaketh!' And he said, 'I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me!'" What a transformation from "Jacob the Schemer" to "Israel the Clinger." Here is a turning point in this two-fold wrestle. In the first part the angel had taken the initiative. Now it is Jacob. He had not been "Callous to the touch of God." He had learned his lesson. He now realized that the way to attain his goal was through "Helpless but clinging importunity of faith." He had prevailed with God not by scheming and wrestling but by yielding to His touch and clinging on to Him.

A simple faith that holds on to God wins the victory, and this is the only method by which we are to conquer. Over against the panicky fear because of the approach of Esau's four hundred men, and over against the best laid plans of Jacob, the Supplanter, I would simply point you to the clinging faith of Israel, the prince of God, as he says, "I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me."

In Israel, the Clinger, we see something of a repetition of that heroic faith which characterized his grandfather, who in hope believed against hope, and as the human conditions grew more and more impossible, his faith became all the stronger. Abraham did not shut his eyes to the impossibilities of the case. He faced the conditions as they actually were. "Yet, looking unto the promise of God, he wavered not through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform." The cause of Christ today is waiting for a faith like this. Oh, that the face of God and the finger of God might so overwhelm and conquer us as to bring each of us to the point of saying, "I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me."

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"Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee."

Along with Jacob's clinging to God and inseparably connected with it is his
Supplication to God.

The prophet, Hosea, here supplements the Genesis account by saying of Jacob that "in his manhood he had power with God, yea, he had power over the angel and prevailed; he wept and made supplication unto Him." In other words the clinging faith was attended by agonizing prayer. I wonder how many of us from our own experience know very much about weeping and making supplication unto God like this real agonizing prayer. I wonder if the finger of God is not upon us, laming us, and in mercy forcing us to a more real wrestling in prayer.

While we are so busy about many things are we not neglecting this all-important factor in our spiritual development? It is through the supplication of faith that we, like Jacob, are to prevail with God and with man. What a difference it would make in our own spiritual development, and in the success of the great world-wide task of the church, if we were real wrestlers with God in earnest, fervent supplication.

It is very significant that the word used to describe Christ's agony in the garden is often rendered "wrestling". In the days of His flesh he "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death." It is this Jesus who said to His disciples, "As the Father hath sent Me, even so I send I you."

Now just a further word as to the effect of God's plan for spiritual development. We have seen that the Jacob plan of scheming and supplanting was a colossal failure. On the other hand, God's plan which included a vision of God, the touch of God, a clinging to God and supplication to God, a plan worked absolutely by God's sovereign grace did effect a glorious transformation. Jacob received

A New Name.

"Thy name shall be no more Jacob, but Israel; for thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed." Maclaren says that this name is a stringent reminder of duty and a lofty ideal. A true Christian is an Israel. His office is to wrestle with God. He also received

A New Power.

The old schemer had by the sovereign grace of God become a new soldier, ready to face the trials of the future and the glories of the future. He received not only a new name, and a new power, but also

A New Blessing.

"And He blessed him there." And what a blessing it was; growth in grace, a preparedness to enter the promised land. He received the covenant blessings by faith alone, a faith which grew more and more as the man ripened in years, until he reached what Dr. Turnbull calls "the lofty heights of triumphant faith." It was a faith which made such an impression upon his sons of the reality of God's covenant.

Then look at the final picture of the old patriarch. "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff." There he is, still limping, but still clinging, and best of all, he had not lost his vision of God. By faith he pointed forward to the Messiah. He saw a King from the tribe of Judah sitting upon the Throne. "And unto Him shall the obedience of the peoples be." "Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that if He shall be manifested, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him even as He is."