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JACOB AT PENIEL.[1]

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WE are accustomed to consider Jacob one of the most commonplace of the saints of former times. Abraham is greater than ourselves, but Jacob is like ourselves; and hardly like the nobler, but almost like the meaner of us, with a coarse, ignoble nature, not pursuing its ends by open, avowed, and direct means, but by underhand expedients, and crafty, crooked wiles.

This judgment on Jacob may be too severe. The features of his character were certainly strongly marked, and they were not such as seem very lofty. And when we consider this, we are surprised to find the wonderfullest revelations given by God in all Old Testament times bestowed upon him. To him, the lowest nature, the highest things were shown. If it were so, it would be but what we see in the world daily. The narrowest natures are often most broadly blessed by fortune. Wealth, and social rank, and family felicity are given, not only where they are not deserved, but where they are not understood. But perhaps we should wrong Jacob if we called his nature shallow. Coarse it may have been, but it was intense and abundant. There were materials enough in it: passion, affection, business capacity, even a vein of the ideal—resource enough of all kinds it contained. And though a little harsh in youth, and perhaps somewhat soured by opposition in mid-life, yet under the sunshine of prosperity, and beside his favourite child, it mellowed to a rich and exquisite sweetness in old age.

Some may think the revelation given to Jacob at Bethel, on his way to Padan-aram, the most interesting event in

[1] The above will be read with deep interest as a specimen of Dr. Davidson's pulpit expositions.—ED. EXPOSITOR.

his history. And to those beginning life it may be. There is an ideal brilliancy in it attractive and fascinating. But that sombre, stern conflict, beyond the Jordan, in the gray, unromantic days of mid-life, is a profounder study, and there will always be found gathering round it those who know the imperfections of life, and the bright hues of whose early expectations have been toned down by the pale cast of experience.

The time when this revelation was made to Jacob was when he was returning from the east, in very different circumstances from those in which he had gone to it. He went out with his staff in his hand; he came back increased to two bands. He went out alone, with life before him, somewhat hopeful perhaps of happiness, and full of anticipations, fresh and eager to run the race of life; he came back an altered man, with life behind him, with what was to enjoy of it mainly enjoyed, and perhaps the cup did not now seem so sweet and intoxicating to him as he believed it would be before he put it to his lips. At any rate he had drunk it fully. He had lived a many-sided life. Of sensual enjoyments he might seem to have had his full,—and he was not averse to using the petty passions of others as the means of gratifying his own larger ones. In business he was always fortunate. And in those higher things which men's hearts crave, though like to be foiled at first, he was at last victorious. And thus he had lived a busy, clever, various life—a keen, competitive, successful life; and with the fruits of it now reaped and gathered he would return to rest in the home of his fathers—to live and then to die amid the scenes and traditions of his early years. It is sweet to dream in a foreign land of the place of one's childhood. Imagination gilds the sordid hovel of our birth. The meanness and the squalor, and the upbraidings and the bickerings, which we remember, are elevated into the struggles and the not unnatural discontent of honest but

pressing poverty. We remember but the good; we forget the evil, or change it into good. And Jacob too was using the necromancer's art. The sunshine and shower of his early days he now remembered but as sunshine. All the good stood out bright before him, and all the evil had disappeared. His own evil too was forgotten; or if remembered, was excused and peremptorily forbidden to intrude itself. About to set foot on the old country once more, what was to be looked for but happiness, the happiness of twenty years before, now secured against break or vicissitude!

We almost fancy, when reading the narrative after this point, that it is unreal. It is so true to nature that it cannot be fact. One with keen psychological insight and great dramatic power has invented it. He wishes to teach us a profound lesson—that youthful treachery, that advantages gained by questionable ways, cannot profit or allow of a happy old age: and he has permitted himself to dramatize events—to bring Jacob's youth and age together—to put Esau, the defrauded brother, again upon the stage—to bring this wayward, wilful man, who will always attain his ends by his own, and not by God's ways, into a last decisive conflict with his Maker, that he may show him utterly worsted. It is a stroke of the highest art to bring Jacob to Jordan surrounded by wives and sons, and laden with the earnings of his lifetime, and even there to bring down upon him the wrath of Esau and the opposition of heaven. Or rather, it is above human art. The narrative is no piece of skilful composition. It is somehow real. It must be a dream—a moral dream—a dream of the conscience—but a dream confounding old and new together. In life there is not old and new, we carry all our past always with us; it needs but the occasion to awaken it and make it as much real as what transpired an hour ago. Jacob was now again on the border of his native land, after twenty years of exile.

The thought of it called up other thoughts—his youthful treachery, his terrified flight, the angry form of his injured brother,—bitter, regretful, self-upbraiding thoughts; for years bring softening, and the harsh, antagonistic acts of youth, are grieved over and mournful. And to this was added the thought of what he had vowed at Bethel, and how ill his vow had been kept. And when the darkness came down upon him these memories of the past mingled in his heart with the relations of the present; and there rose before his conscience that wonderful dream in which the gigantic height of his wild brother again seemed menacing him and all that he had; and that Form that once stood above the ladder, in divine light, had become a dark shadow with which he must wrestle for his life.

We have suggested that the events had no outer reality, but were a dream, a projection of the conscience; not of course seriously, but as the best way of expressing our view of their profound meaning, and particularly of the truth which they teach, which is the *moral unity* of life. Perhaps life has many unities. It may be an intellectual unity: much more may it be a unity of feeling; for perhaps a man's life is greatly shorter than it seems. Rarely any of us lives more than twenty or five-and-twenty years. By that time we have become all we shall ever be, and have felt all we shall ever feel. It is the moral unity that Scripture teaches. And this is a unity both all through, from end to end of life, and one all round, embracing both the external and the inward life.

Jacob had not calculated on finding the beginnings of his life so vividly unaltered. Twenty years had passed since he did the evil; surely the evil must have worked itself out of things long ere now. But it had not. It stood now before him just as it stood when he fled from it twenty years before; only more formidable, grown in bulk and terror, with greater power to do him hurt, in proportion as he was

now more susceptible of hurt. Then it was Esau seeking Jacob's life; now it is Esau with four hundred men, seeking not Jacob's life merely, but all those lives into which his own had been partitioned, and every one of which he feels to be his own, and would give his own many times for it. The time and space get pressed out of life, and the great turning-points come close together. It seems, after all, even with its bewildering complexity, almost a simple thing life; one or two large acts, hardly more than a single great decision, go to make it up. In boyhood, perhaps, the sketch is drawn in simple lines, though all the after years be employed in filling up and minutely colouring. But the character of the picture is in the primary sketch. Not only were the outward circumstances of his early days repeated again to Jacob, but the very feelings were renewed. It is said that he was "greatly afraid and *distressed*." It was the same feeling under which he had fled twenty years before, and which he remembers his life long as the day of his *distress*. Our evil finds us out. Hindered by opposing circumstances, counter-worked by happy influences, retarded by distance, delayed by time, it is an influence that works its way towards a man, moving on after him unseen through a lifetime, till it finds him. In some way or other it meets him, and he recognizes it. He and it parted company in boyhood, in youth, a lifetime ago, and he thought it neutralized, buried and forgotten; but it yet lives, and will rise like a spectre beside him. It may not interfere with affection, with trade, with prosperity, with fortune; it will stand beside all these neutral, but its time will come. It will find him out either actually, in the usual recognized penalty, or in the fear that it is going to find him out; or else in bitter compunction and sorrow for the wrong he has done. The law is constitutional, deeper down than all remedial schemes. Christianity does not obviate this law; rather in some ways it aggravates its action. The conscience that is tender will

suffer most acutely from this law. What sorrow was like to Paul's, when he remembered how he had persecuted the Church? God had mercy on him, because he did it ignorantly; but God's mercy could not hinder the persecutor's sin finding him. Mercy itself is unable to deal with this fundamental law. It cannot administer relief to the evils it produces immediately; it but *reduces* them gradually. If sin only carried fear with it, and not sorrow also, mercy could cure it at once. And sometimes, when the sinner, hunted like a wild beast by men, hears these words from the lips of Christ, "Neither do I condemn thee,"—he may, in his thankfulness, feel that all pain is now for ever over, and only joy before him. But is it so? Does not the pain return—the pain of having sinned against One who thus forgives—the self-upbraidings, the over-mastering, breaking sorrow for the sin? Rather, sometimes, would we choose to face the penalty of the offence than this bitter compunction for it when forgiven. Against a judge we could steel our heart, and nerve ourselves to bear whatever he might inflict; but against the miseries of self-reproach we have no resource.

If the oneness of life all through be illustrated by the part of this story that speaks of Esau, it is even better illustrated by that part of it which narrates Jacob's wrestling with the Angel; and both its oneness all round is illustrated by the connexion of these two things with one another. Jacob would have had no wrestling in the darkness with the Angel, had he not beforehand wrestled in the broad day with Esau. His mind passed from outward evils down to the feeling of deeper evils. From being excited with terror for his children, there fell on him a great personal agitation. We do not lead two lives, one external and another inward. We cannot draw lines in our life, and call that of it on one side of the line secular, and that on the other side holy. God's shaping and leading of our life embraces it all; outward troubles lead to inwardness; profound human emotion

is nearly allied to profound religious emotion. Go down in your nature anywhere deep enough, sink a shaft in it at any point, you come to God. Formerly Jacob reached God through his loneliness, now he reaches him through the multiplicity of his connexions; and it is something to see how, in this way, he reached God so much more firmly and permanently than he had been able to do through the narrower passage of himself. Men engrossed in the business of life, in the uncertainties of speculation, with many risks, with exposed places all about them on which misfortune may plant her arrows, whose all may many times be staked on a single hazard, seem more in the way to reach true and great thoughts of God than the contemplative recluse; because the sluggish stillness of their nature is broken up, and the heart out of its very necessities leaps forth to grasp the truth.

Like a wary gamester, who, though playing a desperate game, does not lose his presence of mind, Jacob made the needful dispositions for his safety. He was like a speculator who suddenly finds that all his accumulations of twenty years hang upon the turn of fortune or the wind, and makes all the dispositions that reason or even acuteness can suggest. This is remarkable in the mind, that it is steadied by extreme danger, while it is thrown into confusion by a little trouble. The physician's hand which trembles when an insignificant sore has to be lanced, is steady and firm when an operation that may be fatal has to be performed. A petty encounter worries and excites the great military genius who is serene and master of himself in the thick of the conflict on which the fate of empires hangs. In this greatest trouble of his life, Jacob's mind comes forth with a grandeur and decisive clearness that is scarcely credible in one habitually crooked, and timid almost to cowardice. He so arranges, that if the stroke fall, it will not fall on all at once; if it smite some, it will spare some, perhaps,

and these the dearest. And these dispositions made—made for those for whom he never thought to need to make any such dispositions at all, and while they were ignorant of the menace hanging over them, and though he knows how unavailing all may be—he leaves all in higher hands. But unwittingly this care about others, this more earnestness for them than ever he had felt for himself, and this entrusting of them more sincerely into God's hands than ever he had yet committed himself, has brought him nearer to God than ever he has yet been, or, perhaps, than he cared to be. And now he must wait in God's very presence for the issue, like one beside the sick who waits for the turning of the disease. He lies under a forced inactivity. Thankfully would he act; it would help him to escape thought. But all is done, and the issue is with God; and deeper thoughts crowd in upon him, and an indescribable terror seizes him—there wrestles a man with him till morning.

What premonitory approaches his adversary made, if any, we know not. Suddenly Jacob felt himself carrying on a great struggle—wrestling in the darkness with an unknown adversary. His whole nature was stirred. The struggle is the main thing for a time, not the adversary. That he should know his adversary at first was not meant; it was the Unknown that he must wrestle with. It was meant that he should be troubled, opposed, wrestled with, shaken to the very deeps of his nature; flung into a vague, dim, dark conflict with a power but indistinctly known. His adversary did not seek to oppose his advance, his passage forward; there was no such definiteness in his purpose, nor any such definiteness in Jacob's resistance. It was a wrestling match pure and simple; not for advantage, but for victory; not willingly entered upon by Jacob, but of necessity: for men do not invite such encounters as these, but when they feel them coming would gladly flee from them. Yet they cannot put them

off; they must separate themselves and fling off from them wives and sons, and go alone into the darkness, to meet that mysterious Form and behold that face.

We discuss this wonderful event, and take sides as to whether it was a real, outward thing, or only a transaction in Jacob's soul. Some think it important to hold it literal and outward, and unsafe to regard it as mental. It is characteristic of very many of the views for which men fight, that they are excellent things to fight about, because there is no means of deciding them. It is also occasionally a characteristic of them that no interest whatever attaches to their decision, one way of them being quite as good as another. If God presented a real, outward form to Jacob, so that he entered into a physical wrestling with it, it was very wonderful and divine. If God's Spirit of revelation and holiness so touched the conscience and the memories of Jacob's heart that the agitated spirit deemed itself wrestling through the body, and did indeed in its own awful agony agitate and dislocate the bodily frame, was it less wonderful or less divine? The balance of probability perhaps lies on the side of the external reality of Jacob's adversary. Many a time in dreams the whole frame is agitated and wrestles. Men do rise weary after nights of conflict. They rise awestruck and terror-laden. Perhaps it cannot be shown that they have risen with bodily ailments, with sinews wrenched and joints displaced. Rather is the event to be held literal. An Angel entered Abraham's tent. He let his feet be washed;—the same who in after days washed his disciples' feet. He allowed meat to be set before him;—as in after times he asked, "Children, have ye any meat?" And a *man* he wrestled with Jacob; as now man for ever he wrestles with us all in love, though we oppose him in earnest.

Gradually, from being vague and dim and in the darkness, the encounter passed on to greater clearness. Jacob,

who had apparently sustained the combat with dogged, speechless tenacity, as was natural to him, came to know something of his adversary. From the first he knew that it was a man that wrestled with him. It was a person,—it was with a personal will that he was grappling. But after a time both adversaries stand out more clearly. The morning began to break, and with the light the spell of the Unseen over the patriarch will break too. The conflict must cease, lest its advantages be lost. The heavenly wrestler seeks to depart. He said, "Let me go, for the day breaketh." And Jacob said, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." Ere now there had begun to break upon Jacob's mind some consciousness of the rank of his adversary; and perhaps to complete it he touched the nerve of his thigh and paralyzed it. And then the conflict quite changed its nature, from using force, to mere supplication. And here the details supplied by Hosea come in: "He had power over the Angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication to him" (xii. 4). God had put out His hand upon him at last, having allowed him to wrestle with him for a night,—a symbol of that obstinate struggle which, in his confident, unsubdued strength of nature, he had been waging against him all his lifetime. His Spirit cannot always strive with him: some decisive stroke must be put forth upon him, to break him once for all, to touch him in the vital part, that, utterly disabled, he may know whom he has been opposing, and how vain such a conflict is. And, altogether helpless, he can but throw his arms about his adversary and hang on to him—"I will not let thee go." And then, that he might bless him, the Angel asked him his name. "What is thy name? And he said, Jacob." God first broke his power, and then brought well home to him what he was. As if the locality, and the circumstances, and the terror of his brother had not enough brought him

before his own self, he asked him his name. He worked him back through his whole past life to its starting-point; drove him down to its old beginnings, and to the confession that it was even now much as of old. God does not name him Jacob. He takes it out of his own mouth. He merely put it to him: "What is thy name?" Jacob was in no mood, and would hardly venture to evade the question. However unwilling his tongue was to utter it the divine demand drew it forth; it cannot be withheld. Before the new name be conferred the old must be fully confessed—the old name and the old nature,—the old opprobrious, shameful title, and the old cunning, crooked, scheming, unmanly nature, that always gives to force, and seeks again to retrieve itself by fraud.

A common history surely this of Jacob's, repeated in the life of many a man returning from a foreign land. Long ago going abroad, like Jacob, he had experiences on which he was founding much. God seemed to offer Himself to him as to Jacob at Bethel, saying, "I am the God of thy father; I will be with thee in all places whither thou goest." And he vowed that the Lord should be his God. It is true the youthful vision of romantic purity and nobleness has hardly been lived up to; the high resolutions of an enthusiastic young mind have often been forgotten, and the mind itself has not been left altogether undebased by passion and craft and the competitions of life; and after so many years the outlines of that vision can hardly be recalled, and the fair ideal of life then set before him is scarcely now to be hoped for;—yet what took place then cannot be forgotten, and he thinks it cannot have been altogether in vain. It may not have been quite in vain. And it is needless raising subtle questions over it, whether it was but a preparatory influence of grace, deep it might be, restraining sin all life through, but yet not effectual; or whether it was the sowing of the true divine seed in the

heart, which the cares of life grew up rankly over and blanched and wellnigh choked. Whichever of the two it was, it was not enough. It needs to be renewed. And now, after twenty years, he knows it is not enough; and when, amid the old scenes, and with the old feelings again in his heart, God puts to him the question, "What is thy name?" who art thou? he falters out his old birth-name; he must confess he is but little, if any, altered from what he ever was. But this confession made, he is blessed, and receives a new name.

And now the struggle is over, and Jacob passes on; but it is said that "as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he *halted.*" These struggles leave their mark upon a man. God's touch abides. You cannot go through conflicts with Him and show no scars from them. You go through life *halt* from them. Men see the difference, and remark on it, and speculate on its cause. Those are not what they were who have passed through such a wrestling as Jacob did. There is a brokenness of the old elasticity. The self-confidence is gone, and reserve takes its place. Forwardness, or even promptness, is away, and patience is in its stead. There is often a mysterious weakness to men's eyes, that comes from such struggles, though it may be inward strength; a want of positiveness, sometimes even a halfwayness and irresoluteness, an inwardness and self-inspection that begets uncertainty, and a drawing back even after moving forward. Men *halt* after such wrestlings with God. Jacob was weak somehow after this in outward things; more subdued and feeble before difficult undertakings than formerly—in guiding men's passions, governing his turbulent and mutinous children—weak before misfortune, with no resolution to meet an emergency, with no promptitude to resent an indignity—he *halted* his life long through. And when that great calamity befell him through his daughter, it is said of him that he was *silent*;

and when an almost sorer grief came to him through the misconduct of his eldest son, it is said merely, that Israel *heard* it; and when his beloved child was sold, so ready was he to look for evil, that the falsehood invented by his sons seemed probable to him: "An evil beast hath devoured him. Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. And he refused to be comforted, for he said, I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning"—a man with a broken, irresolute, unhopeful spirit henceforth. This great struggle had been too much for him. To subdue him, it had been needful to break him. No doubt he had an inward strength. All his own passion was burned out. He was himself nobler and more straightforward and patient, having learned the secret of strength with God. And his life, though feeble outwardly, had a calm, mellow, evening light around it.