

A.B. Simpson:

More than any of the ancient patriarchs, Jacob speaks to us. He comes nearer to our life in human infirmity, in human imperfection, in human worthlessness, in human suffering, trial and discipline, and in the grace of God, which was magnified by all these things.

God calls him a "worm," as a true figure of his grovelling, crooked, naturally selfish, and supplanting nature. But God gave to the worm the mightiest of names, the name of a "Prince with God," showing that grace can take us in our lost estate, and seat us with Christ in heavenly places, making us partakers even of the Divine nature.

SECTION I -- Jacob's Birth.

The first symbol that comes up in the life of Jacob is his birth. We see here a figure of his future. It would seem as if in him there was, even in his mother's womb, some of that inborn spirit -- the beginning of that faith which afterwards developed so mightily. So Hosea says, "He took his brother by the heel in his mother's womb," as if in some way he had that in him which pressed him afterward to claim the mightiest promises of God.

SECTION II -- His Birthright.

The birthright to the ancient patriarchs seems to have involved not only the headship of the tribe, but the spiritual privileges of the Divine covenant. They seem to have understood in some measure -- Jacob did, and Isaac at a later period -- that there was more involved in the birthright than the mere headship of his house. Undoubtedly his mother had taught him the hopes involved in his birth and the promises which heralded it, and, looking down the ages to come, he may have seen afar the coming of the Savior and linked with it the hope of his eternal future. This it was what made the act of his claiming the birthright, notwithstanding all that was mean and selfish in the way he got it, an act worthy of the highest commendation. Had he claimed it by the rights that belonged to him according to the promises given before he was born, it would have been an act of the highest faith. It is the same act which we perform when we prize and claim the offer of our salvation and sonship in the family of God, and let everything go to secure it. This had been promised to him before his birth, as his mother had, no doubt, taught him, and he should have put in his claim and let God work it out. Jacob, however, mingled his own infirmity with the faith that would otherwise have been right.

He claimed the prize with the tenacity of faith, and then marred his faith by adding his own works. God counted the faith, dropped out the works, and burned out the sin with the discipline of suffering. And yet we cannot forget that he saw its value, and Esau despised it. Esau said, "I am at the point to die, what use is it?" Esau had no sense of the eternal future, or he would have prized the birthright above all earthly treasures even in the dying hour. Jacob saw the treasure, and eagerly claimed it, and made it his own. So you stand with Jacob when you claim your birthright; when you lay hold on your gospel rights; when you take with a firm faith, not only the covenant of mercy promised before you were born, but when you press on to take your whole inheritance in God -- not only to be saved, but to be sanctified; not only to believe, but to become an heir of God, a prince with Israel, and a partner of the glory of your Savior. This is the meaning of the birthright, and the faith that claims it.

But while we imitate his faith, let us avoid his unbelief. He that believes enters into rest. He that works, works because he does not believe. When you are sure God has given you the blessing, you rest. But when you are afraid God will fail or Esau outwit, then you try to help and only succeed in hindering. Jacob's falls were caused by the crookedness of his own nature which God had to burn out of him. God help us to learn the lesson, and so believe that "in quietness and confidence shall be our strength," and we shall not only hope, but "quietly wait for the salvation of God."

SECTION III -- Jacob's Vision.

We pass on to the third emblem of his life, that is, the vision at Bethel.

It came in the darkest hour of his life, when midnight was around him, and a stone was his pillow -- a symbol of the darker and sadder lot which seemed to await him. And yet it was in that dark hour in the wilderness, on that stony pillow, that the God of heaven was about to meet him in covenant blessing. The vision of Bethel tells of God's first revealing of Himself to the soul that has chosen Him. Jacob chose God when he chose the birthright.

But God had not met Jacob. Jacob was like us when we take the promise, and have not yet seen the Promiser. You kneel at the altar, and claim the blessing; you hold it by faith, but God always makes the faith a reality. The days pass by, and when He seems to have forgotten his promise, and faith begins to faint, then it is that all heaven gathers about you. You trust God. When it begins to grow dark and dangerous, when Esau threatens your life, when it is with you the wilderness, the midnight and the stony pillow, then God comes and meets you, and makes real to your soul that which was accepted by your simple faith before. So it has been with you in the revelation of Christ's indwelling Spirit; so, perhaps, in the healing of your body; and so it has been in prayer for temporal things for which you have believed. Vision first, then victory; faith first, then sight; trust simply in His word, and then God Himself in all the fulness of a blessed realization.

Jacob's vision is also a foreshadowing of the pathway of his own life. He sees a ladder, and the top of it reaches to heaven, while God appears at the top as the God of his fathers. How it teaches us that the only true ladder of life is one that reaches to the sky. Jacob's ladder went all the way up to heaven. The ladders of human ambition only reach a few years ahead. Man's highest ambition is satisfied when he can mount the pinnacle of fame, or reach the fulfillment of some cherished dream: knowledge, perhaps; friendship, perhaps; or, perhaps wealth. That is the length of their ladder, it reaches only a very little way. There are fifty, sixty, seventy, perhaps, it goes up as high as fourscore years, but Jacob's ladder had scarcely begun then; it reached to heaven. O, you that are young, and, looking to the future, and count so much on it, have you made sure of the highest issues of life and eternity? Let your ladder reach up to the sky.

And then Jacob's ladder was not only a long one, but it ascended step by step, rung by rung; not all at one bound, but little by little, moment by moment; so God is leading us on, on, step by step. Are you willing thus to walk patiently moment by moment, overcoming and ascending?

Again Jacob's ladder rose out of the darkest hour of his life; and so our blessings are born out of our greatest trials. Is your pillow a hard one? Is your sky very black? Look out for the ladder; it is there against the sky. You will see it if you look up. Shut your eyes and ears to all the care, fall asleep on Christ's bosom in the trust of faith, and it shall meet your vision with its heavenly vistas and its Divine covenants of promise.

But the best is that Jacob's ladder ended with God, and it had God at the top of it, and God all the way down, holding it up yonder that it might not slip, and supporting the traveler at every step. Let your ladder be guided by His hand, not leaning against the cloudy tower of your ambition, but by the hands that were pierced for you. Have you never noticed a servant, or some one busy about your house, how they wanted you to hold the stepladder while they climbed it? There is one, dear friends, to hold the ladder while you mount to heights that would make you tremble but for His everlasting arms.

And once more we are taught that not only is God at the top of the ladder, but the angels of His providence are moving up and down every rung, and guarding your steps. So your way is under His direction. Every step is under His care. And so He says to you, as to Jacob, "I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land: for I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of."

Again, Jacob's vision is the symbol not only of life's pathway, but of Jesus Christ Himself -- the open Door and the only Way of communion and communication with heaven. Christ Himself has given us this interpretation of Jacob's vision. Speaking to Nathaniel under the fig tree (who seems to have been reading this very chapter) he says, "Here after ye shall see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." As much as to say, "I am the ladder of Jacob; it is through me that heaven is open; it is on account of my work that the angels of God come, and henceforth it is not to be in the old visionary way, but through the flesh of the Son of God, that you are to have communion with God." So God is not only at the top of the ladder, but all the way along. Jesus Christ comes from God, and reaches down to man, a living ladder of human steps, and saying at every step, "I am the Way; I am the Shepherd; I am the Guide; I am the Life; I am the Author and Finisher of your faith." Is Jesus your Ladder, dear friend? your Way? your Life? Is every step you take a step in Jesus? Is every step you take a step with Jesus? A keeping step with Jesus? A walking in Him as well as with Him, and a finding that He is something unto you, this week, and week by week, that He never was before? This is the blessed meaning. It is God at the beginning, God at the end, God all the way along, and God all and in all.

Again, we see not only the pathway, and the ladder, but the covenant and the consecration. Jacob rises, and on the altar consecrates himself -- with poor, imperfect words it is true -- and if it looks like wavering faith, still God takes it, and henceforth his life is linked in tender bonds with Jehovah's everlasting love. Have we made that consecration and claimed that covenant? Is there a voice saying to you, beloved, "I am with thee, and I shall keep thee in all the places thou goest; and I will not leave thee until I have done all I have spoken to thee of"? Is

it not safe to leave all in those mighty arms? Has He given you this mighty word, "I will not stop until I have done all unto thee that I have spoken to thee of"? How terrible life's perils without it; how blessed with it. Have you said, like Jacob, "Of all Thou hast given me, I will give the tenth"? Or, rather, have you cried, "It is all Thine, and I am Thine, and Thou art mine"?

SECTION IV -- The Victory at Penuel.

We see Jacob now many years further on, but not many rounds up. He is about where he was at Bethel, and so God has to throw across his path a tremendous shock to arouse him to the true meaning of his life. He lets a trial come that threatens the life of himself and his dearest ones. His infuriated brother with hundreds of armed followers is sweeping down upon him. Here are the little ones, and here the helpless wives and flocks, and the pilgrim with his staff is helpless against the mighty warrior. It is an hour of most extreme trial; but poor Jacob is at it again, putting out his feelers, sending on his presents, and trying to coax the lion, and see what his ingenuity can effect. Then there seems to come over him a sense of his helplessness, and putting his dear ones in the hand of God, he goes alone at Jabbok's ford. It was night again; a dark night; there was not a star in the sky, and I am afraid he did not even see the ladder there now -- but he had it out with God, and God came nearer than He had in Jacob's dream. Clouds and thick darkness are round about His throne, and in the darkest clouds you will find Him. But it is different from the vision at Bethel. The danger is nearer now, and God is nearer too. Then it was God at the top of the ladder, now it is God on the level of Jacob, wrestling with him; having Jacob in His very arms; and Jacob able to put his arms around his very God. God has come very close to Jacob, because God wants Jacob henceforth to live very near to him. That wrestling has much of mystery in it. That deep, convulsive struggle some of us can understand who have ever had a night of agony, in which it seemed as though your very loins were wrestling, and the cords of your very heart were taking hold of something invisible. So Jacob went through the mystery of trial, and came forth in the morning another man. It is impossible to analyze all this without destroying the beauty. I took up a hyacinth blossom this morning; it was beautiful and very fragrant; I took it in my fingers and pressed it, and the fragrance was gone. So you have to take the spirit of these things. There are lessons here that touch many points. It teaches us that out of the thing that is hardest, we often may get the greatest blessing. Out of the thing in your life by which you are nearly crushed, you are to have your grandest victory. Out of the thing that seems ready to conquer and destroy you, God wants to bring to you a faith that you never had before, and a revelation of his love and power that you never dreamed of. That very thing you thought a stumbling stone, God means to make a pillow for your head, and a ladder of ascension to His very presence. So do not wait until you get into a comfortable position, and say that then you will live a Christian life. "I am going to get to a certain place; I am going to get things fixed up; and then I will serve God." Don't say that, but go to God and let him fix up the things, and you will be a Christian through the very experience your trial and deliverance have brought you.

There is something else here that we must have to be strong in prayer, and that is the element of intense earnestness. There is something else in prayer, I know -- a rest and trust; but I do not think the rest comes before the throes of agony are past. There is something in prayer that takes hold of God, and cries, "I will not let thee go until Thou bless me." It is not weakness; it is earnestness; it is life; it is the throes and travailing of a birth that cannot come any other way. It isn't doubting; it is power, and it will end in rest if you will let God have his way. This is the meaning of your distress and the burden that is on you. It is the Holy Ghost "groaning within you with groanings that cannot be uttered." Do not try to work up a frenzy of prayer; that is offensive to God and good taste; but when you have the throes and the agony of Jacob's prayer, remember Christ had it, too.

And then, again, we learn at Penuel not only the efficacy of the prayer that overcomes, but also the element that breaks down. Jacob did not get his answer by struggling, until at last he yielded, and fell prostrate at the feet of Him that wrestled with him; then he received the blessing. The angel touched his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, and in his anguish Jacob gave a cry of despair, and he fell at the feet of the Mighty One, crying, perhaps, "Lord, help me; I cannot even pray any more." And God may have said, "It is done; you have your answer and your lesson; you have been too strong; you have tried to do too much. You thought you could wring the blessing from Esau, outwit Laban, and now propitiate Esau; you have tried to do things yourself. O Jacob! fall a helpless child at My feet, and let me be your strength, and carry you henceforth." And as he fell, I am sure he did not go quite down; he fell into the arms of God and as he went forth, though halting on his thigh, he was leaning on Omnipotence. He had not as strong a thigh, but he had an infinitely stronger Savior. And so, beloved, when we come to this place, too, where our strength is gone; and when we have no arm but Christ's, I am sure that, after that, we can say, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

I need not say the answer came to Jacob next morning. God came to him here, and Esau had to follow. The next

morning Esau was there -- but a tamed lion -- with weeping eyes, and loving arms, and a brother's heart, meeting his brother with reconciliation and tenderness. God had done all that. We must have power with God first, and then we have it with others.

But the best of all was that Jacob was a new man. And God said as he rose, "Thou shalt no more be called Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name, for, as a Prince, hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed." And so, brethren, we rise out of our trials, ourselves gone -- the old man and woman canceled, and wearing His new name. What you want to get rid of isn't the sins of Jacob, but Jacob himself. It is to leave yourself, and go out another person in the life of Christ.

SECTION V -- Jacob's Return to Bethel.

He did not get his full blessing at once; he seems to have got away from it for a while, and God says a little later, "Arise, Jacob, and go to Bethel, and stay there." After our hours of prayer and victory, we may go back. You say I had such a blessing, but I lost it. You can go back to Bethel and dwell there. Perhaps you cannot go to the same altar, but you can be in the same arms. Go back to Bethel; then God will finish the work, and the covenant will be confirmed forever. The failure of Jacob to do this fully was, perhaps, the secret of all his later trials; Jacob went back, but he did not stay there. If he had, I believe he would have escaped the bitter trials that followed. But a little later we read that Jacob wandered through the land again. And soon after came the shame of Dinah's fall; the strife of his sons; the betrayal and sale of Joseph to the Midianites; and the wreck of Jacob's hopes for years. O, consecrated children of God, it is a glorious thing to get over Jabbok, but it is a more terrible thing after that to go back! Jacob went back from Bethel, and for a time he had the bitterest cup that a mortal ever drank. I don't know anything sadder than the second failure after consecration. We read in Judges that after they had entered the promised land, they went back to sin, and their fall lasted four hundred years. O, you that have come, be sure to stay at Bethel; rear your altar, and dwell forever under the shadow of His presence!

The closing scenes of Jacob's life are full of instruction and comfort. At last it is all right, and standing before Pharaoh he can say, "All things have worked together for good." "The angel that led me all my life long, and hath redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads." It was all right at last, and it will be all right for us poor erring ones. But how many sorrows we may escape and how many snares we shall miss if we will always literally and wholly obey our covenant God, and abide in Him.

SECTION VI -- Jacob's Grave.

The last emblem that I shall give you, is Jacob's grave. He was dying in Egypt; he called his family about him and his beloved Joseph, and said, "If I have found grace in your eyes, swear unto me that you will not bury me in Egypt, but with my fathers in their burial place." So they swore unto him, and after a time the long procession moved back again, and they laid him in Machpelah's Cave. Jacob was looking to the time when the trumpet should sound, and the dead arise, and he wanted to have his very bones within the covenant of God. And so, beloved, have you chosen your grave among God's people -- I don't mean so much your literal grave, as the future, the resurrection glory? That was the beautiful faith of Joseph when he died; he commanded that his bones should be carried back when Israel went through the Red Sea. And God wants us to look out for our bones -- not as some people do, looking forward to their funeral expenses or a grave stone -- but for the time when you shall rise again, and your dust shall be glorified with Christ and his ransomed ones, or covered with everlasting shame and contempt.

Dear friends, what a life; how weak, how poor, how wrong, how erring, how much it needed the grace of God. But the God of Jacob -- how tender, how faithful, how good, how patient; and He is willing to be your God and mine. Let us take Him in the spirit of the old hymn, which has been the cradle song of our childhood.

O! God of Bethel, by whose hand
 Thy people still are fed,
 Who, through this weary pilgrimage,
 Hast all our fathers led.
 O! spread thy covering wings around
 'Til all our wanderings cease,
 And at our Father's loved abode
 Our souls arrive in peace."