

THE LOCALITY OF BLESSING

"He blessed him there." Genesis 32:29

With the dramatic story of Jacob before us, we should admit that no place is too strange or unlikely for a man to meet God. Jacob met Him on a dark night under an open sky by a rushing brook. Moses met Him out on a wide, sun-baked desert. Elijah met Him in a mountain cave. Ezekiel met Him by a melancholy stream in far-off Babylon. The Samaritan women met Him at a wayside well. Saul of Tarsus met Him along a caravan trail.

This man Jacob learned a profound lesson that night by the brook Jabbok. He learned that any place can become a hallowed place with the living God when certain internal, rather than external, conditions are met. Wherever that is, there is the place of blessing, where God confers some needed grace, some required cleansing or some demanded empowerment.

Delivered from the thralldom of Laban's service, Jacob goes on his way towards the old home, only to realize before long that another difficulty confronts him in his brother Esau. Between the two difficulties "the angels of God met him." It was one more proof of the Divine assurance that Jacob should not be left until the purpose of God had been accomplished in him. As he nears the borders of the old country, memory begins to move and conscience to work. He knows that there cannot be any peace until his relations with Esau are assured and put on a proper basis. Unconfessed sin and unforgiven wrong must be dealt with and put right.

Jacob sent messengers to his brother, obviously to learn Esau's mind towards him. These messengers returned with the alarming news that Esau was on his way to meet him with four hundred men. There was not a word of friendly greeting in response to the fawning message, not single indication of reconciliation in spite of all the intervening years. Jacob's intense fear and distress were evidently due to his conviction that Esau's coming meant hostility, that the past had not been forgotten or overlooked. But he soon recovered his balance, though, instead of casting himself on God at once, he began his characteristic work of planning. He divided his possessions into two parts, so that in case Esau fell on one of them the other might escape and at least something be left.

In spite of all his clever planning, he could not help turning to God, even though he arranged matters before he began to pray. He called on God to help him in the execution of his own projects, instead of reversing the order and asking, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" It was a prayer of real and yet partial faith. The prayer was also marked by true humility. He acknowledged his own unworthiness of all that God had done to and for him, and with heartfelt gratitude he testified to the way in which blessings had been showered on him. He earnestly prayed for protection from his brother. He had little faith in the efficacy of his prayer, for immediately after he had offered it he began scheming and planning again. If we express our needs in prayer, it is obviously unfitting to go on arranging and scheming as though we had never prayed. It is one thing to seek wisdom from God and trust Him for it, but it is quite another matter to ask God's blessing on our own wisdom.

Let us trace the more significant features of this locality of blessing in the experience of Jacob.

I. It was a place of separation.

"And Jacob was left alone." Verse 24. More than twenty years earlier, by a piece of cunning graft, Jacob and his overfond mother had swindled his elder brother Esau out of the birthright. To dodge the wrath of the resentful brother, Jacob had run off to live with his mother's kinfolks in distant Mesopotamia. The years had brought Jacob a family and considerable prosperity. After more than twenty years Jacob is returning with his possessions to Palestine. His caravan is coming down through one of the passes in the Gilead hills, headed toward the Jordan valley, when news comes that Esau is advancing to meet him with four hundred armed men.

There is no more shrewdly self-reliant man than Jacob at this stage of his life. That

was his trouble--too much Jacob. There were times when he worshipped God; but, for the most part, he trusted greatly in himself. This old self-reliance immediately comes into play again. He figures that a good bribe may possibly "soften up" his unrelenting brother. So he orders that his flocks and herds be driven over to the south side of the Jabbok. When they are across, and properly grouped, he sends over his family. And now, alone, he faces himself and God. Alone! Why was he alone? He was clearly conscious that a great crisis had come in his life. Anything might happen on the next morning when Esau and his four hundred men arrived. He had planned and prayed, prayed and planned, and now there was nothing more for him to do. There he was in the darkness of the night, alone, with all the events of the past day clear before him, with all the awful possibilities of the coming day well in view. He was alone. Most of us dread to get alone. We want to be where there is talk, laughter and flattery. We want to keep up the illusion that we are something when we are nothing, or the conceit that we are right when we are wrong. Isn't it strange that men should love themselves above all of the rest of the world, and yet never endure to be alone? Alone with oneself and God again and again proves to be the place of blessing.

II. It was a place of struggle.

"There wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day." Whoever he was, his commission was to take hold of Jacob and subdue him to the realization that he was his own worst enemy. It should be noted that it was not Jacob who wrestled with the Man, but it was the Man who wrestled with Jacob, which was an entirely different thing. The wrestling was an endeavor on God's part to break down Jacob's opposition, to bring him to an end of himself, to take from him all self-trust, all confidence in his own cleverness and resource, to make him know that Esau is to be overcome and Canaan obtained not by craft, but by divine grace and power. The self-life in Jacob is to be overcome, the old nature is to be conquered, the planning is to be rendered futile, and the resourcefulness made impotent.

Here was a man who was a curious mixture of faith and unbelief, of courage and fear, of self-dependence and trust in God. He was a double-minded man if there ever was one. With part of his mind he voted for God, but with large parts of it he voted for himself. And God wanted a wholehearted surrender. Hence the struggle.

At the close of World War II, long after V-J Day there were small groups of Japanese soldiers in the Philippine Islands who refused to surrender. The over-all cessation of hostilities had taken place, but they, in their defiant hideouts, refused to go along. So in the lives of many of us Christians there are inner "pockets of resistance" which Christ must somehow destroy if He is to have us wholly for Himself. It may be a habit on which He has put the ban. Whatever it is, it is your Jabbok. It is your place of struggle. And, whether you realize it or not, the very sharpness of the struggle suggests that you are in the locality of blessing. "He blessed him there."

III. It was the place of submission.

Night was beginning to lift its blackness from the hills of Gilead. There were faint streaks of dawn yonder where the Jabbok had its rise. The crisis moment had arrived. So strong was Jacob's opposition that nothing short of a special manifestation of Divine power would suffice to break it down. God could have done this earlier in the struggle, but He would not, for He wanted Jacob's willing surrender. Yet at length, as He could not obtain this, there was nothing else to be done but to deal with him in severity, and by an assertion of Divine power to bring this masterful man to an end of himself. God wanted Jacob to see and realize that only by divine grace could he meet Esau and enter Canaan; that only by mercy, grace and favor could his difficulties be met and his way prospered. As a final stroke of subdual the Heavenly Wrestler pressed against the socket of Jacob's thigh and threw it out of joint. This took away the very power required for wrestling, brought him by one swift blow to the very end of his resources, and left him utterly powerless. Thus divine love dealt with him in mercy and taught him, albeit in severity, the one lesson he needed most to learn. No longer able to wrestle, Jacob began to cling. Instead of opposition came tenacity,

and Jacob proved himself to possess the latter as fully as the former. The resister became the clinger, and learned that the hour of his physical prostration was the hour of his spiritual triumph. Hitherto the carnal life had dominated him; henceforth his life was to be divinely ruled. At last he was in the right position, but at what cost! If only he had learned the lesson sooner, how much trouble and anxiety he would have been spared! No fears of Esau, no need of planning to appease him, no concern for his wives and children, nothing but rest of heart in the love of God. What he had struggled for, he lost; what he trusted for, he gained. So it is always. It is always best to trust God and put Him first in everything.

None of us can receive the fulness of the blessing of God so long as we are consciously surrendered in any area of our lives. It is when we, like Jacob, stop contesting with God's will and begin clinging to it that the depths of our nature are cleansed and a new day dawns. When we hand over to God the thing which He is asking for, the miracle of spiritual empowerment will take place. At Jabbok Jacob might have sung:

"Higher than the highest heavens,
Deeper than the deepest sea,
Lord, Thy love at last hath conquered:
Grant me now my soul's petition,
None of self, and all of Thee."

IV. It was a place of splendor.

From separation through struggle and submission to splendor--that's the highway over which Jacob passed. And what splendor!

1. The new disposition was splendid.

Withered now was the selfish pride that had so long held and hampered him. Blooming now was the gracious princeliness that God had conferred upon him.

2. The new dynamic was splendid.

"As a prince thou hast power with God and with men." Verse 28. Power! Not brain-power! Jacob had used that to scheme and plot his way to honor and glory, only to have it come back to him like an ever-circling frustration. Not leg-power! Jacob had used that to run for his life when his meanness got him into a tight place. Not will-power! Jacob had demonstrated that when he worked fourteen years to gain his wife Rachel. No, not any of these, but God-power--the power that comes through prayer, love, faith and humility.

3. The new disclosure was splendid.

God had met him, taught him, blessed him; and now he could meet Esau without fear, and face any emergency, in the strength of that glorious vision. With an awe that bowed him low and an exhilaration that lifted him high, Jacob exclaimed, "I have seen God face to face." Verse 30. It was not the first time a vision of God had come to him. But never had Jacob seen Him so clearly or with such transfiguring effect upon himself as now. To "see" God with the eyes of the soul is, for us Christians, to admire, adore and worship Him as He is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Can't you visualize little Joseph and hear him say to his mother that morning when Jacob came over the ford of Jabbok after his night with God, "Look, mother, who is that man? Is that father?" And Rachel, quite astonished and awed herself, exclaims, "Why, Jacob, it is you, isn't it? What has happened to you?" The new light was there upon the old crafty, worried face.

4. The new day was splendid.

"And as he passed over Penuel, the sun rose upon him!" And when, shortly, he met Esau, Esau's resistance and resentment melted like wax. We are told: "And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they

wept." 33:4. Not the tragedy of revenge, which might have been! Instead, the tears of reconciliation!

"And He blessed him there!" It was a strange and unlikely place by any physical or visible test. Yet it became the very gate of heaven for one man, at least, who discovered that there, alone under the stars, through a struggle that spelled death to himself and submission that gave up all, God would meet him.

The locality of blessing! Where is it? you ask. It is right there where you are now--if only you will pay the price.