Genesis - Commentaries by John Gifford Bellett

Christian Truth: Volume 11, Bethel and Peniel: Jacob in Different Circumstances

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There are arresting thoughts on "Bethel" and "Peniel." or the empty and the full Jacob—the Jacob of Gen. 28 and the Jacob of Gen. 32 The principles illustrated there and lessons taught there aw equally divine, I need not say; but they are strikingly different. Jacob has grieved the Spirit, he has offended the Lord, having taken the way of nature, listened to the counsels of unbelief, and separated from his call and his path as an elect one of God. He is therefore under discipline and he must know the bitterness of his departure from the ways of life. His place that night on which he left his father's house was therefore the place of the people of God. It was the witness of his shame and evil, I know, but it was the witness that God, as his God, had known him among the children of men, and would therefore visit him for his transgression. The place, therefore, is such a place as may count upon God's presence. It was not the place of sin, but of discipline. Had it been the tent where, in subtlety, he and his mother were preparing the calf for Isaac's feast, God could not have been there; but at Luz, the place of desert and stones, when Jacob is under discipline, there the Lord can be.

And then the Lord comes to make glory a great reality to this poor, solitary, disciplined saint. He does not come to change his present circumstances, to soften his pillow, or to turn him back to his father's house. He leaves the present fruit of Jacob's departure from the way of God just as bitter in itself as it was before. Exile and bondage were before him then, and they are before him still. But God comes to make glory a great reality to him! He comes to assure his heart afresh in the nearness and sufficiency of His own favor and strength, and to show him how the resources of heaven waited on him, though in circumstances so bitter and grievous, to which his own way had reduced him. Onward, accordingly, he goes, and for twenty years he proves the taskmaster in the land of

Padan-aram. But, his servitude over, he returns full of the blessing of the Lord, and He who had met the empty Jacob on his way from Canaan to Aram, now meets the full Jacob on his way back from Aram to Canaan.

It is, however, a different Jacob as well as a different journey. Jacob has now become two bands. Flocks and herds, servants and wives and children surround and accompany him who of old lay unfriended and alone amid the stones in the wilderness.

Then it was only discipline, but now it is unbelief which gives character to the scene under the eye of the Lord. Jacob trembles; he hears of Esau and his four hundred men. He fears for his cattle, for his children, and for his life. He has something to lose now. He has become a rich man. He has a stake in the world, and may well be an object for others, and easily, as he fears, a prey to them. He trembles; he manages as well as he can and religiously commits himself further to God. And the Lord came to him, came to him as surely as He had come to him at Bethel. But it is not to comfort, but to rebuke him. It is not to break open the heavens over his head and to speak in promises to him, but to rebuke him. "There wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day." This was the Lord in controversy with Jacob; his unbelief and slowness of heart had provoked the Lord to jealousy, and the Lord withstands him.

But what is the issue of it all? Grace is made a great reality to him here, as glory had been made a great reality to him at Bethel. The wrestling Stranger allows Himself to be prevailed over by Jacob. Faith revives in Jacob's soul. "I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me." The decision of faith which will get a blessing quickens him; he comes "boldly to the throne of grace," his soul is restored, and the fears of unbelief touching Esau yield to the confidence and joy of faith in God. It is now the unbelieving Jacob restored, as at Bethel it had been the disciplined and chastened Jacob comforted. He had then walked close to the gate of heaven; now he walks under the sunshine of God's favor. The house of God was then his; the face of God is now his. Such was Bethel on his way out; such is Peniel on his way home. All is of God. Grace and glory are great realities—heaven and Christ are both ours. Heaven in its enriching glories is shown to us if in the sorrow of discipline. Christ in His restoring grace is given to us, if in the power of unbelief or the fears of nature.... To have glory made real to us in the day of

trouble and grace made real to us in the day of failure, we need to walk along by Bethels and Peniels; they sweetly vary the journey, but it is a journey with God still.

"Then gladly sing and sound abroad The great Redeemer's praise, The glories of the living God, The riches of His grace!"

Family Character and Family Religion, Family Character and Family Religion: Family Character

Family Character

Gen. 11:28.

There was, as we know, a day of visitation of the house of Torah. The family of Shem had become very corrupt, and in the days of Torah, the sixth or seventh from Shem, they were serving false gods. But the power of the Spirit and the call of the God of glory, visited the ear and the heart of Abram, the son of Terah, and separated him from that corruption.

We also know, that a godly influence extended itself from this in the family. Terah the father, Sarah the wife, and Lot the nephew, join Abram in this, and they all leave the land of Mesopotamia together.

Nahor, however, another of Terah's sons, did not come within this influence. He was comfortably settled at home with his wife, and at home they remained, when Torah, Abram, Sarah, and Lot, took their departure from the land of their fathers. (Chap. 11.)

This is to be much observed, for the like of it we may witness every day. One of the family becomes the first subject of divine power, and then family religion, or the knowledge of the Lord Jesus in the household, spreads itself, but some remain uninfluenced.

Of course we know that each quickened soul must be equally the object of the hidden effectual drawings and teachings of the Father. (See John 6:44, 45). But I speak of the history or manifested character of the scene. And, as we have seen in the history of this household, Nahor remains unmoved in this day of the visitation. He and his wife continue in Mesopotamia, and they thrive there. Children are born to them; goods and property increase. They pursue an easy and respectable journey across the world; but they do not grow in the knowledge of God, and bear no testimony, or at least small and indistinct testimony to His name.

The character of Nahor's family was thus formed. They were not in gross darkness, like the people of Canaan, descendants of Ham, among whom Abram had now gone to sojourn. They had a measure of light, derived from their connection with Terah and Abram, and as descendants from Shem; but all that was sadly dimmed by the cherished principles of the world from which they had refused to separate themselves. And a family character and standing were thus formed.

This is serious—and all the principle of this is of daily occurrence among us, and of constant application to our consciences.

We lose sight of this family for a time altogether, for of course they are not the direct object of the Spirit's notice; but being connected with Abram, may naturally come within view; and accordingly, in process of time, tidings about them do reach Abram in the distant place of his pilgrimage. (Chap. 22.)

Bethuel was the son of Nahor—one of his many sons rather, and the one most brought into view. He had flourished in the world, and though perhaps a man of little energy, or character himself, had a son named Laban, who most evidently knew how to manage his affairs exceedingly well, and to advance himself and all who belonged to him very advantageously in life. He seems, as we say, to have known the value of money; for the sight of gold could open his mouth with a very hearty and religious welcome even to a stranger. (Chap. 24.) Here, however, we reach a period in the history of this family, which is chiefly to be considered.

A fresh energy of the Spirit is about to visit it. As I have already observed, this family is not in the gross darkness of the Canaanites, nor in the simple idolatrous condition of Terah's house (see Josh. 24), we may assume, when the God of glory called Abram. They had been brought into a certain measure of light, and within a certain standing by profession as Abram's act and word seem to allow. (Chap. 24:4.) But this being so, this being a professing household in some sense, apart from the dark state of the men of the world, it becomes serious to notice the nature of that visitation which the Spirit makes to it. For it will be found to be a separating power or visitation. As the call of the God of glory had before disturbed the state of things in Torah's house, so now the mission of Eliezer disturbed the state of things in Bethuel's house: Abram had then been separated from home and kindred, and so is Rebecca now to be, all this leaving behind it this serious impression, that a respectable professing family may need to be visited by the very same energy of the Spirit as a more worldly or idolatrous family.

This a serious thought. It is a disturbing or separating power of God which now comes into this family, and not simply a comforting or edifying power. This has meaning, I believe. The ministry of Eliezer, God's servant as well as Abram's, came to Bethuel's house to draw Rebecca out of it, and to lead on that very journey which, two generations before, the call of the God of glory had borne Abram. I do indeed judge that there is a lesson in this which is much to be pondered. A professing decent family have to be aroused, and a fresh act of separation produced in the midst of it.

But there is another lesson in the history still.

Rebecca, we know, comes forth at this call. But her character has been already formed, as it is with us all, more or less, before we are converted. The moment of quickening arrives. The separating call and power of the Lord is answered. But it finds us of a certain character, a certain shape and complexion of mind. It finds us, it may be Cretians (Titus 1), or brothers and sisters of Laban, or the like, and “the Cretians are always liars.” Character and mind derived from nature, from education, or from family habits, we shall take with us, after we have been born of the Spirit, and carry it in us across the desert from Mesopotamia to the house of Abram.

This too is serious. It is serious, as I observed before, that a respectable professing family is visited by a separating, and not merely by an edifying, energy of the Spirit; and it is serious, as I now have been tracing, that with the quickening or converting power of the Spirit, nature, or the force of early habits and education, or of family character, will cling still. And these serious lessons the story of Rebecca reads to us.

For I need only briefly speak of what her way was in the further stages of it. It is a well-known story among us, and well known too as very sadly betraying what we may call the family character. Laban her brother, with whom she had grown up, and who was evidently the active stirring one in his father's house, was a subtle, knowing, worldly man. And the only great action in which Rebecca was called to take part gives occasion to her exercising the same principles. In the procuring of the blessing for her son Jacob we see this Laban-leaven working mightily. The family character sadly breaks out then. The readiness of nature to act and take its way shows itself very busily. A mind she had, too little accustomed to repose in the sufficiency of God, and too much addicted to calculate and to lean its hopes on its own inventions.

What have we to do, then, but to watch against the peculiar tendency and habit of our own mind—to rebuke nature sharply, that we may be sound or morally healthful in the faith (Titus 1:3); not to excuse it, because it is nature, but rather the more to suspect it therefore, and to mortify it for His sake who has given us another nature?

These lessons we get from the story of this distinguished woman. Beyond this her way is not much tracked by the Spirit. Was it that He was grieved with her and leaves her unnoticed? At any rate, she reaps nothing but disappointment from the seed she had sown. No good comes of her schemes and contrivances, but the reverse. She loses her favorite, Jacob, and never sees him after the long exile to which her own schemes and contrivances had ended in sending him.

But there is this further to tell. Jacob got his mind formed by the same earliest influence. He was all his days a slow-hearted calculating man. His plan in getting the birthright first, and then the blessing; his confidence in his own arrangements, rather than in the Lord's promise, when he met his brother Esau; and his lingering at Shechem, and settling there, instead of pursuing a pilgrim's life through the land like his fathers: all this betrays nature and the working of the old family character.

What need have we to watch the early seed sown in the heart—yea, and to watch the early or late seed which we are helping to sow in others' hearts! For the fuller details of this history warns us of such things still.

The birth of Esau and Jacob is given us at the close of chapter 25., and as they grow up to be boys, occasion arises to let us look in at the family scene; but it is, as we shall find, truly humbling.

This was one of the families of God, then on the earth. Nay, by far the most distinguished; where lay the hopes of all blessing to the whole earth, and where the Lord, eminently above all, had recorded His name.

But what do we see? Isaac the father had dropped into the stream of human desires: he loved his son Esau because he ate of his venison! We need not stop to consider Esau himself: as a child of the family, he was entitled to the care and provision of the house—that is most true; and Isaac and Rebecca should surely have given him all that, together with their parental love and diligence. But for Isaac to make him his favorite because he ate of his venison, this was sad and evil indeed. Even in this, however, do we not see some further illustration of our subject.

Isaac had been reared tenderly. He had never been away from the side of his mother, the child of whose old age he was. But his education perhaps had relaxed him too much, and he appears before us as a soft and self-indulgent man.

But, O what sad mischief, what grievous defilement opens here to our view, in all this family scene! Are we saying too much, that one parent was helping to comfort one of the children, and the other the other? Indeed there is something like it here, and ground for fears so terrible. Isaac's love of venison may have encouraged Esau in the chase, as Rebecca's cleverness, got and brought from her brother's house in Paran, seems to have formed the mind and character of her favorite Jacob.

O what sorrow and cause of humiliation is here! Is this a household of faith? Is this a God-fearing family? Yes. Children of promise and heirs of His kingdom are these, Isaac, Rebecca, and Jacob. Looked at in other actions, they would delight and edify you. See Isaac in the greater part of chapter 26, and his conduct is beautiful, altogether worthy of a heavenly stranger on the earth: suffering, he threatens not, but commits himself to Him who judges righteously. He suffers, and takes it patiently; and his altar and his tent witness his holy unearthly character. So see Rebecca in chapter 24. In faith she consents to cross the desert alone with a stranger, because her heart was set upon the heir of the promises, leaving home and kindred, forgetting her father and her father's house. But here looked at (in chap. 27.), what shame fills the scene, and how should we blush and be confounded that heirs of promise, and children of God, could so carry themselves!

But shall we go on to expose this even more? I feel that I could; for the heart is not only base and corrupt, but it is daring also, to take its naughtiness even into the sanctuary, as the close of this story shows me.

The word to Aaron, long after this, was, “do not drink wine, nor strong drink, thou nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation.” (Lev. 10) For nature was not to be animated in order to wait on the service of God, nature was not to be raised, or set in action, by its own proper food, for the fulfilling of the duties of the sanctuary: strong drink might exhilarate and give ebullition to animal spirits, but this was not the qualification of a priest.

But even into such a mischief as this, Isaac seems to have been betrayed. “Take, I pray thee,” said he to Esau, “thy weapons, thy quiver, and thy bow, and go to the field, and take me some venison, and make me savory meat such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, that my soul may bless thee before I die.” He was going to do the last religious act of a patriarchal priest, and he calls as for wine and strong drink, the food of mere nature, to animate and fill him for the service of the temple! Terrible abomination! “whose god is their belly,” it might be almost said, thus to deliberate on the venison. We may all be conscious how much of nature soils our holy things, how much of the excitement of the flesh may be mistaken for the easy and strong current of the Spirit. We may be aware of this in the places of communion. But this is to be our sorrow; we confess it as evil, and weakness, and watch against it. But to prepare for this, thus carefully to mix the wine and the strong drink, thus advisedly to take a hearty draft, after this manner—surely this is sad abomination We all know full well the guile that Rebecca and Jacob practiced in this scene. I need not rehearse it. As I have said before, it is a well-known story. But the holiness of the Lord consumes every bit of all this. Nothing comes of this subtlety and fleshliness. The holiness of the Lord lays it all in ashes. Isaac loses his Esau, Rebecca never sees Jacob again, for her promised few days were an exile of twenty years, and the calculating supplanter himself finds himself in the midst of toils, and an alien, for that long and dreary season, from his father's house. Nothing comes of all this, whether we look at the carnal policy of the one party, or the fleshly favoritism of the other: all is disappointment, and rebuked by the holiness of the Lord.

Serious, but still most precious lesson! Precious surely it is, to see the Lord thus resenting the uncleanness of even His dearest choicest servants.

But it remains for us to see grace assuming its high triumphant place and attitude. Its holiness is established, by the Lord thus, with great decision, setting aside all advantages which sin had promised itself, and then grace reigns.

In the great mystery of redemption, grace takes its triumphant place in the promise that the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head: but there is also, the full execution of all the decrees of holiness against the sin—for death came in as was threatened, and penalties fell on the man, and on the woman, and a curse upon the serpent. So here; Isaac loses his purpose touching Esau, Rebecca has to part with Jacob, and Jacob himself, instead of getting in his own way the birthright and the blessing, has to go forth a penniless exile from the place of his inheritance, and the scene of all his promised enjoyments. For the only wages of sin is death. But then grace takes its high place and bearing. Way is made for it by all this burning holiness to ascend its throne, and there it shines, delighting in the splendor of its own glory. (Chap. 38.)

And it is glorious. Even the misery to which his sin had reduced the object of all this grace only sets off its glory. When even the servant of the house had of old gone forth on a like errand (chap. 24.) he had his camels and attendants, and all entertainment to make his journey across this very desert, honorable and pleasant. But now the son and heir, the promised bridegroom himself, for whom the honor of the house, and the joys of the marriage, were preparing, has to lie down alone, unfriended, uncared-for, unsheltered, the stones of the place his only pillow. But grace, which turns the shadow of death into the morning, is preparing a glorious rest for him; he listens to the voice of wondrous love, and he is shown worlds of light in this place of solitude and darkness. He dreams, and sees the high heavens linked with that very dark and barren spot on which he then lay, and with unwearied feet the heavenly people keeping up the happy intercourse; and he hears the Lord of heaven Himself, at the top of this mystic scene, speaking to him in words of promise, and of promise only. He sees himself thus associated with an all-pervading glory, and heirs of his own present mercies, and consolations though so erring, so poor, and so vile, till all this glory were ready

to appear. The holiness of grace still leaves him a wanderer; but the riches of grace will tell him of present consolation and of future and sure glories.

And this is surely so. But it has borne me a little beyond my immediate subject.

There is then such a thing as family character; and the recollection of this, when we are dealing with ourselves, should make us watchful and jealous over all our peculiar habits and tendencies; and, when we are dealing with others, should make us considerate, and of an interceding spirit, disposing us to plead this fact, that there is family character, or force of early habit, and education, working more or less in all of us.

The remembrance of this may in these ways be healthful. But I would not forget to add, that if we are more than likely to gather a certain character from the family, or the habits with which birth and character have already connected us, so are we debtors to exhibit that character with which our birth and education in the heavenly family have since connected us.

In John 8, the Lord reasons upon this ground that our sonship or birth, or family connections, is to be determined by our character or doings. “If ye were the children of Abraham, ye would do the works of Abraham.” This He says, and more of the same kind. And thus we see the necessity of our bearing the family character.

But we are exhorted also to the same thing—to take after our Father, as we might say. In the cultivation of all charities, and unselfish unrequited kindness, the Lord says, “be ye perfect;” and the apostle takes up the same thought in pressing the duty of love and forgiveness, “be ye imitators of God as dear children.”

O then that we may be set on the cultivation of family character! let the old man go down in us, and the new man rise and assert his place in us let the character, be it what it may, which we have gathered from natural ties or natural habits, be watched against; and the character of our heavenly birth be cherished and expressed to His praise, who has begotten us again as alive to and with Himself, from the death in which we lay.

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