

Men of the Bible

Jacob — The Man With The Limp

By Dr. Howard F. Sugden
(as preached in London, Ontario, Canada)

You saw him yesterday. It may have been in the busy thoroughfare or at the subway station. There were the milling crowds, and suddenly he stepped out from all the rest, this man with a limp. The very moment you saw him you began to think of all that this meant... Korea, North Africa, Germany. You heard the roar of bombers, the cries of the wounded, the moan of the dying. Then he was lost again in the crowd; however, you will not forget him. Every day you meet these men...men who are marked with a limp.

When the apostle Paul climaxed his letter to the Galatian Christians, a letter defending his own position as an apostle, he contrasted the marks of the Judaizers (that cost nothing) with the marks that he bore in his own body for Jesus Christ (the beatings with rods, the stripes, the imprisonments, the shipwrecks), and he said, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. There is something different about me."

When Robert Murray McCheyne stirred Scotland, someone asked how he preached. "Well," was the reply, "when I preach, I weep over the sins of my people, and in my study I weep over my own sins and failings." When McCheyne died, kind hands took the books that had been his tender friends off the shelves and gathered together his belongings. They came across letters that only McCheyne had seen. "Dear Mr. McCheyne," read one, "It isn't the way you preached or the message that you brought that led me to Jesus Christ. But it was something about your life that led me to come to Christ." McCheyne was a marked man.

The great desire, I am sure, of each one of us is not to become great men and women, to have our names lauded, or to be in the limelight of this world. But there is a desire in our hearts that we shall go in our pulpits, be in our homes or classes as God-marked men and women.

Jacob had been gone from his old home for twenty years. When he went away, he carried all his belongings in his briefcase. Jacob left because he had cheated, because he had swindled, because he was a hated, hunted man. Now God appeared to him and said, "Get thee back to thine own country, and to the land that I have given thee." Jacob gathered Rachel and Leah and the children about him and told them that he was going back to the land of his fathers.

You have heard about mother-in-law trouble, but Jacob had father-in-law trouble. Jacob had swindled Esau; he had practiced deception. It is a strange law in the economy of God that somehow we seem to reap what we sow. Jacob has been deceived, and these twenty years have been hard ones.

Now, in the night, he prepares to leave. I can see Rachel, who was her father's daughter, and the cunning of Laban was in her. Rachel took a family god off each shelf before they scurried away. Morning comes, and Laban misses the gods along with Jacob. When he saw Jacob was missing, he must have wondered what else was missing. Then Laban found that the gods were gone. It is an awful thing to have your gods stolen; so, he pursues and overtakes them.

He says, "Where are the gods you stole?"

Of course, Jacob did not know that Rachel had them. "Why," Jacob says, "you do what you want to do with the person you find these gods with."

Rachel is so clever; she sits on them. When Laban, her father, comes her way, she says, "My lord, I am so sorry that my arthritis is bad; I just cannot get up this morning."

Then Jacob makes the plea, and Laban kisses Jacob, and they give that wonderful benediction, "The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another." And Jacob says, "You stay on your own side of the fence, you old scoundrel, and I'll stay on mine, and if I catch you on my side, I'll clump your head! Mizpah!"

Laban leaves, and as Jacob watches him go in the distance, he shades his eyes, and he can almost see Esau coming with four hundred trained men. Laban's hosts leave. Esau's hosts are on the way. Suddenly Jacob sees God's hosts. Oh, how wonderful that in the hour of Jacob's need there were God's hosts. Jacob's company continues on its journey.

The spies that Jacob has sent out return, and the message that they bring about Esau causes Jacob's heart to fear. It is worse than he expected. Then Jacob begins to pray. Ellicott points out, as does quaint John Trapp, that this is the first recorded prayer in the Bible. Oh, how Jacob prayed! He reminds God of all the promises, and he leaves it in God's hands. God is responsible for his being there. (I like prayers like that, don't you?)

Some years ago we were having a prayer meeting for rain in Indiana. Although we had come to pray for rain, there was not a saint who brought an umbrella, not one. We had gone through the first part of the prayer session (which matched the weather conditions, dry) when suddenly to the back of me a man began to pray. I knew who it was; Mr. Sunday had come by for the meeting. Well, he did just what Jacob did; he reached out and took all the promises that God had ever made (I think), and he turned them in God's face as if to say, "You said You would do it. Now do something about it. Amen." If I had an umbrella, I would have put it up right there on the spot. I just knew that we would have rain, and we did!

Jacob prayed. When he finished praying, he did exactly what most of us do...he started planning. He said, "Now I'm sure that God could do this, but if God doesn't, I had better see if I can't help myself out of the mess I'm in." Oh, the wonder of it. He is going to appease Esau. He is going to make him a present, and he is going to cover Esau's face... for that is the same word. It is the word from which we get the word "atonement."

In this we see: **Jacob's Concern**

His chief concern, of course, was to save Jacob, save self, keep his position.

He calls his men, and takes 220 goats, 220 sheep, 60 camels, 50 cattle, and 30 asses, and he puts them in five separate droves. He knows that when Esau meets these droves, with characteristic oriental brevity he will say, "Whose servants art thou? Where art thou going? Whom do these belong to?" Jacob instructs his servants to say, "They be thy servant Jacob's. They are a present for thee, and Jacob is coming." Say, five droves! A lot of value is wrapped up in this. Jacob's a rich man. God has blessed him.

I find, and I am sure you do, so much of Jacob in God's people. The concern that Jacob had is so often the concern of God's people. Self...self is the great enemy. Not Esau, not the board of deacons, not the board of trustees, not the orneriness of people...but self.

I love the Book of Job, and I am sure you have found, as I have, that the heart of Job's trouble was not boils...but Job. This was the problem of the great apostle in Romans 7. Someone asked Spurgeon if he was not troubled about the Pope. Spurgeon said, "The Pope I have the most trouble with is Pope Spurgeon."

This is Jacob's concern as he begins his plans...self-thought, self-preservation, self-esteem, self-expression, self-praise. Self is like the Dead Sea...everything is flowing in. This was Jacob up to this moment. When he was born, you will remember, he was grabbing. The next thing we see him doing is getting. Everything is coming Jacob's way. That was his concern.

Now the nightshades are about to fall. Jacob has sent the presents on ahead to protect himself, and he takes Leah and Rachel and the servants and the children, and they cross the brook Jabbok. Where they crossed, I understand, the ravine is wide, perhaps three or four miles, before the high banks along the edge of the river are mounted. He takes Rachel and Leah and the others up on the bank. Jacob builds a fire for them, and then he goes back beside the brook along the river plains of Jabbok. It is wilderness country...trees, wooded places. Jacob is alone.

How much has been wrought out when men have been alone. Moses was alone, and the voice of God called from the

burning bush, "Moses!" Job was alone when he caught a glimpse of the Lord, and he cried, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of mine ear: but now mine eye seeth thee." Isaiah was alone, and he saw the Lord high and lifted up. Habakkuk was alone, and he heard the Lord say, "The just shall live by his faith." Nicodemus was alone, and he heard, "Ye must be born again." The woman at the well was alone, and she heard Jesus say, "I that speak unto thee am he."

It is so hard to get alone these days, isn't it? You think you are going to get alone, and then Willie's nose needs wiping; Mary is in trouble; there's the phone ringing; there's the serial story on the radio. The days slip away, and we are not alone with God, the world forgotten.

Jacob's Conflict

But Jacob is alone, and in that night suddenly there is the snap of a twig. Jacob thinks that Esau is there because up to this time Esau is his enemy, and his concern is about Esau. Out of the shadows comes a Man, and the Man wrestles with Jacob.

This is the way the Word says it. It does not say Jacob wrestled, but the Man wrestled. There was something this Man was trying to get for Jacob.

On through the night they wrestle. Jacob is a fair antagonist. He did not know all the holds but he had not led a shepherd's life for nothing, and self is strong in Jacob.

Then suddenly this unknown assailant reaches down and touches Jacob's thigh, and self is broken. Jacob had tricked dear old Isaac, and he put it over on Esau, but he could not do it with God. He has found One who is cleverer than he. God knows all the holds. Jacob's conflict comes to an end. He is broken.

Did you ever think that before God makes men, God breaks men? There is Saul...a broken will on the road to Damascus; broken desires in Philippians 3, "Things that were gain to me..."; broken health in II Corinthians 12...Paul is broken but blessed.

Jacob's concern, Jacob's conflict (not with Esau but with God), and now

Jacob's Confession

The Man said to Jacob, "Who art thou?" As though He did not know. He had seen Jacob when he grabbed Esau's heel. He had seen all of those things that had happened during those twenty years. "Who art thou?" Well, if this had been the previous chapter, the answer would have been, "I am a good shepherd; I have taken care of the flocks; I... I..." But now Jacob cries out of his crushed self, "I am Jacob!" That's who I am...crook, deceiver, supplanter. Say anything you want to say about me, I am Jacob!

I have discovered that you can get men to say, "I am a fundamentalist." "I am an Anglican." "I am a Methodist." "I am a Baptist." "I am a Presbyterian." But how few there are who will say, "I am Jacob!" Oh, to have at the beginning of life the right conception of self, that self is nothing.

There are four "ends" mentioned in the Scripture.

1. There is the end of the law in Romans 10:4.
2. There is the end of sins in Daniel 9:24.
3. There is the end of the Lord in James 5:11.
4. But in Genesis 6:13 the Lord speaks about the end of all flesh. The Lord says that the end of all flesh is judgment, condemnation. Oh, to know that in our flesh there dwells no good thing; to have no confidence in the flesh; to recognize that we are only evil continually. Man in the flesh cannot please God. I am Jacob.

Can you say it? Your concern has been about yourself. You have had some conflicts. You have been criticizing God. God has been wrestling. What a confession...I am Jacob. No wonder Elihu said, "If any man will say, I have sinned, God will say...quick...deliver him!"

Jacob's Conquest

"Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel."

A new name...no longer the old supplanter, no longer the old deceiver, but a man who is a prince with God. Thou art...oh, put your name in there. Thou art Jim; thou shalt be...Thou art Mary; thou shalt be...Thou art...thou shalt be...A new name.

But then Jacob cries, "Who are you? What is your name? A new desire was wrapped up in this simple statement, to know the name of this Man. It was the desire of the great apostle..."That I may know him."

The sun begins to mount over the eastern horizon, and there is a new day. The night is past, the mists have cleared, the smell of the freshness of a new morning has come, and there is a new name, a new desire, and a new day. It sounds like Exodus, doesn't it? "This shall be the beginning of months for you."

But there is also a new walk. Jacob limped. Can't you see it now? There is the little group gathered around the campfire in the cool of the morning, and suddenly one of the boys shades his eyes and says, "There comes Dad!" And Leah says, "He is limping! Something must have happened to him last night."

"I met God," says Jacob. "I no longer am Jacob, but a prince with God. There is a new name, a new desire, a new day, and I'll never walk the same again."

You remember that next day when they went out to meet Esau, Jacob...Israel, I should say...arranged those bands. He put the servants first, and next he put Leah and her children, and then he put Rachel and little Joseph. And Jacob... Jacob is not behind but he walks in front of the group, and he goes to meet Esau. I think that the thing that startled Esau was Jacob's limp. He was a God-marked man.

God-marked men and women may we be!