

Night unto Night

THE STRUGGLE IN THE NIGHT

Twenty years after Jacob had left his father's house, we again meet with him, this time returning. During the interval his brother Esau had become great and powerful. Jacob had sent a very respectful message to him of his return, and Esau comes to meet him with 400 men. Jacob, of course, would not know of his intentions. They might be friendly because, according to Eastern custom, the respect shown to a person was in proportion to the embassy sent to meet him.

They might, however, be hostile—though it does not often happen that a man of Esau's impulsive temper retains his animosity for 20 years. Still, Jacob was afraid and takes precautions. He first divides the people and the flocks into two companies, one in advance of the other, so that if the first is smitten by Esau, the other—containing the women and children—would escape.

What more could he do? There was one more thing that he could do—and he did it. He prayed. There had been many prayers offered before Jacob's, but his is the first on record as such, and therefore is worthy of special interest and consideration. It is short, emphatic, comprehensive, and strictly appropriate to the circumstances.

A Model Prayer

There could hardly be a finer model of what a prayer should be. He first claims an interest in the Covenant made with Abraham and Isaac. He then urges the Covenant of personal mercies and promises. And finally he humbles himself to the dust before God, confessing his utter unworthiness of the blessings showered upon him, yet confident of divine help.

His prayer was heard. The same night, when he had sent all the people over the brook Jabbok and was alone, a stranger engaged in a struggle with him, without revealing his identity. He allowed Jacob to seem to prevail until—by putting forth an atom of his strength and by a simple touch—he caused the sinew of Jacob's thigh to shrink. Then, knowing that his struggle was not with human flesh, Jacob refused to let his opponent go unless he received a blessing.

And he WAS blessed. And not only so, but he received a new name—ISRAEL—bestowed to denote his power with God and to assure him against any fear of man. His reliance on God was fully justified. When his brother saw him he "ran to meet him and kissed him, and they wept." Could Paul have had this incident in mind when he said (Eph. 6:13)—

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

Not, of course, that there was anything spiritually wicked about the angel Jacob wrestled with, but this struggle through the night is typical of our dark, inner conflicts. Paul himself wrestled with an angel—"a messenger (angellos) of Satan (adversity)" sent by God to buffet him lest he should be exalted above measure (2 Cor. 12:7). All our trials are messengers sent to test and humble us, and we must wrestle faithfully and patiently with them until they bless us.

Strong at the Center

The more serious a man is about his character, the more deeply he realizes the attention and self-discipline that character needs. The words of Jesus in which he speaks of the necessity for cutting off or plucking out hand or eye, if hand or eye cause us to stumble, warn us that we must be strong at the spiritual center of our being before we can be free for external action. Jesus himself could not

redeem mankind without himself first "wrestling with the angel." We see this in his temptation, and in his agony in the Garden.

So Paul emphasizes the personal spiritual struggle. To be a good member of the body of Christ, he says in effect, you must be in personal character a strong man, strong enough to win the victory in a fearful struggle. Against what is our spiritual struggle? It is against the weakness and lawlessness of our own flesh. And not only our own flesh, but against the evil of the world—unseen, latent in men, and organised for evil. It is not, says Paul, a carnal, physical struggle, but a battle for light against darkness and truth against error. We know the weird construction put on Paul's words by Christendom, colored by their background of Greek mythology and the speculation of the heathen philosophers so highly revered among them. Here is a sample of an "orthodox" paraphrase of Paul's words—

"For the Christian's warfare is not against flesh and blood which is able only to destroy the body, but against spiritual beings leagued for his eternal destruction, the various orders of evil angels who rule over the dark elements of the world and who surround the earth, looking down upon us and seeking whom they may devour."

Let us, brethren and sisters, be truly thankful that by the light of the Truth we have been freed from such heathen superstitions and witchcraft. It is God alone, as the Scriptures testify, Who has the power to destroy both body and soul; and it is He alone Whom we should fear, not the murky bogies of paganism. True enough, there are evil influences. The believer not only has to wage a constant warfare against sin in himself, but the sinful influences of other men. We see the several phases of sin's manifestations—subjective, individual, aggregate, social, political, historical, current and prophetically future.

Wrestle in the Night!

We see it in the system of things established among men in its official relations. The world as it now is, with its ecclesiastical, social and political organizations, is in corporate and organised antagonism to God and His Truth. THIS is the "spiritual wickedness in high places."

It was sin incorporate in the authorities of the Roman State which incarcerated believers, and this is what Peter meant when he referred to the devil roaring through the world seeking whom he may devour. All those in high places in the kingdoms of this world are in spiritual darkness and are opposed to God's commands, though many pay Him lip-service and invoke His help in accomplishing their own desires. When Jesus returns and demands their submission to a rule of strict righteousness they will league themselves together against him to their own destruction.

Until that time we have to watch and pray and wrestle in the night. The cry of the Bridegroom's approach comes at midnight!

—H. F. W.
