

*GOD WRESTLING WITH MAN, AND
MAN WITH GOD.*

(GENESIS XXXII. 24-28.)

How shall we name the strange story recorded in these Verses? what title shall we give it? Shall we call it "Jacob wrestling with Jehovah," or "Jehovah wrestling with Jacob"?

That is not a mere question of words and names, but a question which penetrates to the very heart of the story, and determines which of two wholly different lessons we are to learn from it.

The popular and accepted answer to the question is that, in this story, we see Jacob wrestling with Jehovah, in some mysterious way overcoming Him, and wringing from Him a blessing which He was reluctant to grant, which He granted only to force and importunity. And it must be confessed that there is much in the sacred narrative to account for this popular conception, and which seems to confirm it. The latter part of the narrative, indeed, seems hardly consistent with any other hypothesis. When we read that at daybreak Jacob's Divine Antagonist said to him, "Let me go," and that Jacob replied, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me;" when we read the words with which God closes the conflict, "Thou shalt be called no more Jacob, but Israel, for as prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed," we cannot

wonder that, at least in the popular apprehension, the story figures as that of a weak and mortal man contending with the Lord of all power and might, and compelling even the pure almighty will of God to yield to his importunity. We cannot wonder that the metaphor, so common in our hymns and prayers, of "wrestling with God in supplication" has been drawn from it. We can hardly wonder that scholars and theologians have adopted the popular conception, if they did not originate it.

And yet the very moment we "consider" it, the very moment that, instead of adopting and repeating it, we begin to ponder and weigh it, to take it out of the dusky atmosphere of traditional interpretation and ecclesiastical usage, and to look at it in the broad light of day, it grows dubious to us. God is *not* reluctant to give us any blessing that we seek and can use; we have not to wrestle with Him for them. The purport of prayer is not to deafen Him with vain and clamorous repetitions, or to weary Him with ceaseless importunities, till He gives us what we ask, in order that He may get rid of us. When we pray, we do not so "knock" at the door of Heaven as to disturb its peace, and compel God either to drive us from his door or to silence us with a bribe. He is more willing to give than we are to ask; and we do not seek to impose our will on Him, but to submit our wills to his in trust and love.

Not that prayer is useless and obtains no gifts for us. It has many uses, and brings us many gifts. When we enter into the Divine Presence with a humble and an open heart, we enter into a pure and sacred Light, in which we learn to know ourselves, to

read and interpret our various and innumerable desires, to distinguish their several qualities and comparative moment, to select and urge those which are highest and best; our life grows simpler to us and truer, our duties more plain and imperative, our burdens more endurable.

In prayer, moreover, we make a sincere and continuous endeavour to lift our wills into harmony with the will of God, to blend it with his, and say, "Thy will, not ours, be done;" and by thus drawing, or permitting Him to draw, our wills into a fuller and more cheerful consent with his will, we fit ourselves to receive, and to use for good and worthy ends, many great gifts which could not otherwise be safely entrusted to us. When we can *do without* any outward good, if that should be God's will, we can often *do with* it; it will not harm us now that we are of one will with Him, although it might have harmed us before. So that by submitting our wills to God, by lifting ourselves into a sincere assent to his will, we often reach a point at which He can let us have our own will, since our wills are now purified and strengthened by prayer. In short, God's will always stands at the giving-point; all that remains to be determined is how much we are fit and able to take—just as the sun shines on all things with an impartial bounty, and yet every substance and texture on which it shines only appropriates just as much as it can absorb and use.

We have not to deal with a reluctant God, therefore, nor with an unjust Judge, who can be worn out by our importunities, nor with a fond and too amiable Friend, who may be moved to bestow what yet he knows it will do us harm to get. We can neither storm nor coax a gift from the Father of lights. We have not

to wrestle with and overcome Him whose will is always our welfare. And if his will already and always points to our welfare, can we even wish, save for a base and passing moment, to deflect his will from the point at which it stands? If his will be pure and almighty, can we *hope* to compel Him to change and lower it? The laws of mechanics do not hold in the spiritual realm; and if we ever "move the Hand that moves the universe," we move it by no mere mechanical pressure, but by the impact of spirit on spirit. For myself, indeed, I shrink from the conception of prayer implied in the boast, "We move the Hand that moves the universe," though I do not at all doubt that we get by prayer what those who use that phrase mainly mean by it. For all things may become different to us, all things may become new even, without any external change passing over them—simply by some new and different adjustment or relation of our spirits to them. Earth may be made heaven, and loss gain, and sorrow joy, not by any change in our physical conditions, but by a change in ourselves, *i.e.*, in our mode of regarding them. And thus God may answer our widest prayer, may really move and change the universe for us, not by interfering with the physical forces and motions and laws which constitute the universe, but by so touching the springs of thought and emotion within us that, to our new and altered selves, the whole world not only seems, but is, a new and altered world. It is in this region of inward and spiritual experience that we must look for the answers to most of our prayers; it is in this region that we get power with God and prevail. So that God is better to us than we think Him to be. Instead of giving an answer in the outward and perishable ele-

ments of the world, which we must soon lose, He gives us answers that we may keep for ever, because, being spiritual, they are also eternal.

As soon, then, as we think and consider, we discover that we cannot force the hand of God, that we have no need to force it, since He is not reluctant to give us anything which it will be good for us to have. We discover also that prayer does both fit us to receive many gifts which could not else be safely entrusted to us, and confers on us a power with God which is all the more valuable and enduring because it is a spiritual power. Now can we find anything in this incident in Jacob's life which confirms or illustrates these thoughts? Assuredly we can the very moment we observe that the passage before us describes *two* conflicts, in one of which God wrestles with Jacob, and in the other of which Jacob wrestles with God.

(1) In *Verses 21 and 22* God wrestles with Jacob. We are not told that Jacob went to God, but that God came to him, and wrestled with him until daybreak; and that, when He found He could not otherwise prevail with him, He touched a sinew, which shrank at his touch, and *thus* overcame him. What are we to understand by such a story as this? What is the historical and spiritual meaning of it? If we grant, as I am very willing to do, that there was a real human or angelic form which came into physical contact with the form of Jacob, which strove and panted with him, and by some dexterous wrench or throw strained and cracked the sinew of his thigh, yet no man supposes that this physical struggle is the very heart of the matter. No, we must look through this outward show for that which

passeth show. And if we do look through it, we can easily see that in this scene the meaning, the intention, of God's whole dealing with Jacob is summed up ; that at this critical moment the weak, smooth, subtle man—whose very subtlety, perhaps, was only the wrong side of that spiritual susceptibility which made the invisible world near and precious to him—passed through some such inward experience as this.

Filled with restless anxieties and fears at the prospect of meeting a brother whom he had cruelly wronged and defrauded, Jacob remained in solitude on the northern side of the brook Jabbok, to ponder, in the silence and darkness of the night, what he should do, what he could still do, if indeed ought were still possible, to avert the anger of Esau. All his life long, despite the more upward and spiritual aspect of his nature, Jacob had relied on his own cunning to deliver him out of the difficulties and dangers which that very cunning did so much to induce. And, now, he bids his brains go about and see if they cannot devise some further scheme for turning away his brother's wrath. He reflects, perhaps, with some complacency on the device he has already set in motion, on the series of propitiatory presents which he has despatched to "my lord Esau," and indulges the hope that they may go far to appease his anger. But will they go far enough? Can he hit on nothing else and surer? Probably he thinks with deepening remorse of the sins of his youth, and wishes that he had not committed them. Possibly a vein of anger tinges his very remorse, and he deems it hard that after so many years, years of toil and suffering, the sins of his youth should still overtake and compass him about, But, great and perilous as the

difficulty is, there must surely be *some* way out of it, if only he can shake off the fears which confuse and blind him, and survey the position with cool and wary eyes. And so he paces to and fro on the rough edge of the torrent, vexed by many thoughts and schemes and cares and fears, but still trusting in himself, in his own subtlety and dexterity, for some way of deliverance. At last, towards morning, his care and fear take, or seem to take, bodily shape; and he is grasped by a force he cannot see, and has to wrestle with it in the darkness. What does that mean if not that a conviction, an unwelcome conviction, a conviction against which he struggles, rises and grows within him—the conviction that he is on a wrong tack, and has been on it all his life; that he is leaning on a broken reed, that his subtlety will no longer avail him, although it be the very core and strength of his nature. If he has not sought God, God has sought and found him; and Jacob's first thought is, "Hast *thou* found me, *O mine enemy!*" But God is not his enemy. He is his friend; and, as a friend, He has come to teach him that a higher Wisdom than his own guides and rules the fates of men, and that he must submit to that higher Wisdom before he can be in safety or at peace: that he must no longer trust in himself, in his own craft and policy, but in God, in doing that which is right and good at all hazards and all costs. The conviction comes and grows within him that if he will humble himself before Esau, confess and renounce the wrong he has done him, resolve henceforth to take the plain way of honesty, of right doing, and of trust in the great Lord and Friend of righteousness, he will thus secure the favour of God and man. Let him take *this* course,

instead of trying to get the better of men and to evade the eye of God, and all will be well with him.

But a man's whole nature is not to be changed at a touch, in a moment, whether for evil or for good ; he cannot cast off the inborn or ingrained habit of years without passing through an agony of conflict ; and so Jacob strives with his conviction, contends against the God who is rousing and strengthening that conviction within him ; he clings to the hope that by the subtlety which is natural to him, which he has long trained and fostered, he may yet hit on some crafty and ingenious scheme by which he may save himself out of the hands of Esau. It is not till he is faint with the long struggle, and God touches and breaks the very sinew of his strength, making him at once helpless and conscious of his helplessness, that he yields, submits himself to the wisdom and will of the righteous Lord, and consents to abandon the crooked by-path of craft and policy for the beaten way of honesty.

(2) But when he is overcome, shall he not in his turn overcome ? Yes ; for this defeat is in very deed a victory. When, by the cares and sorrows, the fears and perils of life, we have been constrained to submit our wills to the will of God, to prefer his will to our own, God Himself becomes ours and all that is his. When we no longer trust in any power, or wisdom, or craft, or dexterity, that we have acquired, but resolve to trust only in doing that which is right and in Him who favours and blesses all righteousness, all things work together for our good ; we call in to our help all the forces of the universe ; we become princes with God. The very moment, though it is commonly long before that auspicious moment comes, that we "weep and make

supplication to Him"¹—weep over our previous departures from the way of righteousness, and ask him to put us into that way and keep us in it, we have power with God and with man, and prevail. We fling away the broken reeds on which we have leaned, and settle into our true strength. For sooner or later God's righteous will must be done on earth even as it is done in heaven; and when his will is done ours will be done too, since we have made his will our own.

The choice and admirable saying of an old rabbi, himself a descendant of Jacob, is true then: "Do thou God's will as though it were thine, and thou shalt find Him doing thy will as though it were his." And this was the truth which Jacob was now being taught. God had wrestled with him till He had wrested from him that trust in his own subtlety which had been the bane of his life; and now Jacob finds that he can wrestle with God, that his old and vain self-confidence is being replaced with a strange new strength, that when he is weak then is he strong. No sooner has he resolved to take God's way rather than his own than he feels that all is well with him, and will be well. God is his friend; and even Esau can but do God's will.

Who can say with what purpose Esau came out from the fastnesses of Edom, with his four hundred men? Why did he bring four hundred brave and reckless freebooters in his train? Was it only because he was accustomed to ride forth attended thus? Was it only that he wished to shew Jacob what a great man he had grown, and to take the innocent revenge of dazzling his crafty brother's eyes with his state and splendour? We commonly assume that Esau harboured none but

¹ Hosea xii. 4.

innocent and generous intentions towards Jacob. But what warrant have we for that? Who can say that Esau, the hunter and the nomad, did not cherish in his heart an enmity against his "supplanter" such as many of his descendants have nursed through long years, and come forth from his mountain haunt to indulge it now that the whirligig of time had brought round the propitious hour? I do not affirm that he did; but I can very well believe that he did. I can very well believe, therefore, that, besides the inward answer to his prayer, in the changed character wrought upon him, in the lifting of the centre of rest from himself to God, Jacob received an outward answer to his prayer. Even those who doubt whether our supplications move God to vary or alter the laws of the physical universe cannot doubt that the Great Spirit, the Father of our spirits, may lay his finger on our spirits, and touch, and trouble, and purify the springs of thought and emotion within us. And therefore it is not impossible, even on their hypothesis, that, if Esau did come out cherishing thoughts of revenge, and intending to gratify his ancient grudge against his brother, God, by a dream in the night, by quickening and illuminating the records of memory, by opening the gates of pure natural emotion, may have reversed the whole current of his thoughts and moved him to change his intent. Who can tell what fond and happy recollections of childhood were stirred within the soul of Esau as he lay in his tent on the night before he encountered Jacob? And when he saw the long-absent, and perhaps long-hated, brother limping towards him, a weak and wearied man, aged with toil and care before his time, who can tell what share God had in producing that rush of pure

and generous emotion which flung Esau on to his brother's neck, so that the two men kissed each other and wept together as they had done when they were boys playing about their father's feet? For all that we can tell it may be that it was that very "halting in the thigh" which most touched the heart of the bold and active hunter, to whom the loss of free vigorous motion must have seemed one of the worst of ills: and in that case Jacob owed his safety to the sinew which shrank at the touch of his Divine Antagonist so as to put the hollow of his thigh out of joint; in that case his safety was the direct result of that strange wrestling beyond the Ford. But, in any case, Jacob *was* safe now that he had consented to the will of God, and had replaced self-confidence by confidence in Him. Even if the worst had come to the worst, and Esau had slain Jacob, as twenty years before he had threatened to do in his fury, even that could have done him no real harm now that he was of one will with Him who is the God of the dead as well as of the living—nay, of Him who is *not* the God of the dead simply because all, even those whom we call dead, live unto Him. To be at peace with Him is to be secure under all changes to the very last, and in all worlds, most of all in the world invisible.

If, then, we revert to the question with which we started, and ask "How shall we name this story?" Shall we call it "Jacob wrestling with God," as most people do; or shall we call it "God wrestling with Jacob"? I think we may reply, "It should bear both titles; but if we must choose one of the two, we will call it, not 'Jacob wrestling with God,' but 'God wrestling with Jacob,' since it was God who came to

Jacob, not Jacob who went to God ; and because the main intent of the story is not to shew us man wringing a gift from the reluctant hand of God, but God graciously constraining man to accept a gift higher and more precious than he had desired or conceived, by compelling him to give up self-trust for trust in the Lord."

This, indeed, is the meaning, or one of the gracious meanings, of all the losses, conflicts, fears by which we are exercised. So long as things go smoothly and happily with us, we are apt to assume, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, that that is owing to some happy or superior quality in ourselves, rather than to the grace and bounty of God. If other men suffer or fail, we are not much surprised ; we can generally see to what folly or weakness, what lack of skill or defect of character, it is to be attributed. We assume that there is no such lack in ourselves ; that we are capable of handling not our own affairs only, but much larger affairs, if only we had the chance. And so we pass on our way in a happy self-confidence and self-complacence, and form a habit of believing in ourselves, and taking our own way, and being impatient with those who question the wisdom of it, which is a sore let and hindrance to our spiritual culture and growth, since it arrests that solicitous endeavour to ascertain what the will of God is, that we may do it, which is the open secret of righteousness. Let no man complain of any loss, care, fear, of any crisis and conflict in his history, which lowers his self-will or his self-confidence, which constrains him to feel his own helplessness, his constant need of a Divine guidance and support. The very kindest thing that God can do for us, the greatest gift He can confer upon us, is, by

whatever painful discipline, to drive us out of that easy smiling self-content, to lift our wills into a fuller harmony and concert with his will, to compel us to say, from the heart and in our lives, "Thy will, not ours, be done." For when once God has so far prevailed with us as that, we shall prevail with Him, we shall gain power both with God and man. We shall not then have to wring a reluctant gift from Him; He will already have conferred his greatest gift on us, the gift which includes or guarantees all others. A man cradled and lapped in good fortune may lose all that he has at any moment, and by a thousand different strokes of change; he, therefore, is not the man most blessed of God. But he whose will blends with God's will, and whose feet take and keep the ways of God—this man is both truly and most greatly blessed; for since all changes are ruled by God, and express his will, no change can injure *him*; he sits with God in the heavenly places, high above the reach of change; and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, fills and satisfies his heart.

NIGER.

STUDIES IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST.

XIII.—JERICHO AND JERUSALEM.

THE mission to Bethany had been one of danger and of mercy: of danger to Jesus, of mercy to the sisters who had loved and lost. In their home sorrow had been turned into joy; their brother lived and their Friend was present.

From every house the neighbours met,
The streets were fill'd with joyful sound,
A solemn gladness even crown'd
The purple brows of Olivet.