

## Man's Diplomacy and God's Discipline

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It is a remarkable fact, to which attention was called in this magazine not long ago, that Jacob is designated a "plain" or, as the word is elsewhere translated, "perfect" man (Gen 25: 27). The reference is, we believe, to the deep underlying current of life-purpose which characterized him. On the surface his life was marked by innumerable eddies and cross currents: no other of the patriarchs had so chequered a career as he. Yet the redeeming feature in his case was that from his early years he set his mind upon the Divine blessing connected with the birthright, and that blessing — though possibly he but very dimly apprehended it — centred in the Christ who was to come. Consequently he maintained the pilgrim character and went on dwelling in tents, when Esau adopted the line of things formerly favoured by Nimrod, and became a "cunning hunter."

In this we may compare and yet contrast Jacob with David. The *comparison* exists, because, as Psalm 132 shows, David too, had a deep underlying purpose in his life from his earliest years. He conceived the purpose in boyhood days at Ephrathah and never turned aside from it through all his afflictions. His great idea was to "find out a place for the Lord." This doubtless was one great reason, perhaps *the* great reason, for his being called "a man after God's own heart." The *contrast* lies in the fact that while David's purpose was "a place for the Lord," Jacob's was a blessing for himself. Still the blessing Jacob sought was God's blessing, it was at least a part of His purpose, and hence Jacob was in that sense a *perfect* man.

Of all the patriarchs, indeed of all the characters we have portrayed in Scripture, Jacob stands out as the diplomatist. In his case the field of operations was not found in the affairs of state or nations, but in the smaller matters connected with himself and his household. Still the *modus operandi* in either case is the same. The very word *diplomacy* is derived, as a dictionary will show, from a Greek word which has as its primitive meaning *a paper folded double*; and hence it carries to this day the suggestion of artful management or manoeuvring, of seeking one's own cause with paper folded double so that the opponent cannot see *all* that is written upon it. This of necessity involves a strain of selfishness running through all one's actions.

Thus it was pre-eminently with Jacob. He was an inveterate diplomatist until near the end of his career, always scheming, always seeking his own ends in clever ways. Concurrently we see God dealing with him in discipline, bringing him to an end of his cleverness and finally bringing him to the desired haven, that is, to the end that God himself proposed, which transcended anything that Jacob had before him.

A brief survey of Jacob's diplomacies cannot fail to be instructive, since we all possess his nature that loves to scheme for the attaining of its own ends, though not all possess his ability.

In Genesis 25 we have recorded the transaction with Esau over the pottage of lentils. The birthright was made the subject of a commercial transaction. Esau revealed himself as a "profane person" (Heb. 12: 16), saying "what profit shall this birthright do to me?" Jacob revealed himself as one who, though valuing the birthright, regarded it as a subject of barter, and to be purchased as cheaply as possible. Esau despised the birthright and lost it, but on the other hand there is no evidence that Jacob obtained it as a result of this sharp practice. Rather he obtained it in spite of it.

In Genesis 27 is recorded the artful way in which Jacob, instigated by his mother, deceived his

blind father, and supplanted Esau in the matter of the blessing. He lied both by word of mouth and in action. This episode was overruled of God to bring home to Esau the folly of his profanity and its irrevocable results. As for Jacob, he certainly got the *patriarchal* blessing, which had, as Heb. 11: 20 shows, an element of faith in it, and was according to the purpose of God. Yet he did not get *Divine* blessing by diplomacy of this disreputable order: he got rather a disagreeable chain of consequences that entangled him in life-long difficulties. He came definitely under the discipline of God.

The first effect of this discipline was to send him forth from home a fugitive to Haran. Though suffering in this way, however, God had dealings with Him in a dream, as Genesis 28 records, and Jacob had dealings with God. God's dealings with him were in pure grace, revealing what He would be on his behalf. Jacob's with God, were still on the lines of selfish diplomacy. If God would be with him and give him the good things of this life, then he would serve God. God was to him as yet but the Source of supply for all the food, and clothes, and protection and care he needed! Can we afford to throw stones at Jacob in this connection? Are there not thousands to-day whose "Christianity" does not consist of much more than that God is good to them, and they find comfort in Jesus amidst the trials, and needs, and perplexities of life, and they expect to go to heaven when they die!

In Genesis 29, Genesis 30, and Genesis 31, we have the record of the years of Jacob's sojourn in Haran, which resolved itself into a duel of diplomacy between Jacob and Laban his uncle. In the government of God, Jacob found himself in the hands of a man of even greater selfishness than himself. There was an extraordinary fitness about God's discipline in the matter of his marriage. He was deceived as to the two daughters of Laban, just as Isaac had been deceived by his two sons, only Isaac was blinded by age, and Jacob by the peculiar marriage customs of the east.

Laban, according to Jacob's complaint, changed his wages ten times. Jacob got his own back by cunning artifices connected with the breeding of Laban's cattle, and according to the complaint of Laban's sons had "taken away all that was our father's." Thus the contest was waged until again God intervened in a dream and made known to Jacob that it was He, rather than Jacob's stratagems, that caused the cattle to pass from Laban to him, and calling him out of the whole unpleasant business back to Canaan.

This at once brought Jacob into the presence of the original trouble, the anger and resentment of Esau. Genesis 32 and Genesis 33 record his skilful diplomacy in view of this emergency. They also show how unnecessary it all was, for the God who had warned Laban the Syrian not to touch Jacob had been before him again and softened Esau's heart. It was in connection with this experience that a climax was reached in God's dealings with him. The Angel of the Lord, in human form, wrestled with him until daybreak. Jacob resisted until he was crippled. When crippled in his own strength and clinging, instead of wrestling, then "*He blessed him there.*" Thus symbolically was the great lesson conveyed, and there began to dawn upon Jacob the light of this fact: that no wrestling, whether diplomatic or physical, can achieve the results that flow from dependence upon God and His power.

That Jacob did begin to learn this is evidenced by the end of Genesis 33 where we find him building an altar and calling it "God, the God of Israel." His thought still had a selfish bent. It was still *what God was for him*. Still it was what God was for him, *as a prince with God prevailing through weakness and dependence*. He called it not "El-elohe-Jacob" but "El-elohe-Israel."

Looking back over these diplomatic schemes of Jacob, thus hastily sketched, we perceive that one feature marks them all. Each was a failure. Even where the aim before him was in itself not unworthy, and the methods adopted not wrong, all his schemes proved to be just so much unnecessary trouble, for God had been before him and acted on his behalf.

From this point onwards Jacob's diplomacies fade away, though his troubles do not. In the government of God he has to reap what he has sown till his latest hour. Still he meets these disciplinary events in another spirit, and when later (Genesis 35) he is called of God to go up to Bethel he shows he now has some sense of the holiness which becomes God's house, and he calls the altar he builds there "El-beth-el" or "The God of Bethel," i.e., "The God of the house of God" — not now God in relation to himself, even as Israel, but God in relation to His own house.

Jacob's broken spirit is very manifest when presently he reaps back into his own bosom the harvest of deceit which he had sown in regard to his father Isaac, and is himself bitterly deceived by his own sons as to Joseph. Years after, when the glad truth concerning his beloved son reached him, together with the call from Joseph to travel to Egypt, and that call had been ratified by a word from God, he goes down in simple faith in the word that had reached him, and without the least attempt at ensuring his safety or prosperity by efforts of his own. Hence, conscious of the blessing of God he is able to stand before great Pharaoh and bless him instead of craving a blessing from him.

Last of all we come in Genesis 48 to that remarkable scene alluded to in Hebrews 11 when we read, "By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff." His eyes were closing upon the world which had been the scene of so much scheming on his part, and so much chastening on God's, for he was a dying man. His eyes of faith, however, were never more keen in their vision. He saw the real position in regard to Ephraim and Manasseh; and placing his right hand upon the head of the one whose name meant *Fruitful*, and his left hand on the head of the other, whose name meant *Forgetting*, he blessed them.

In the light of what has since been revealed we can see in this action of the dying patriarch a meaning of which he could not have been conscious. In figure there was the taking away of the first that the second — the fruitful one, a type of Christ — might be established.

But why should it be recorded that Jacob was "leaning upon the top of his staff"? Is it not that we might see in his bodily weakness, and consequent dependence upon outside support, a figure of that which now marked him spiritually? At last in conscious weakness he had exchanged diplomacy for dependence, and as a result of this happy exchange, his sun, after a stormy day, was setting in a blaze of glory!

Dying, dependent, and with the "Fruitful" man filling his mind's eye, he became a worshipper. He rose at last as the fruit of God's discipline to that which really was God's purpose for him. It is noticeable that all through Genesis 48 he is named *Israel*, for he was displaying the characteristics of "A Prince of God" at last.

In Genesis 49 Israel the worshipper becomes the prophet of God, and in blessing his sons speaks of things which have to do with Christ in both His sufferings and His glory.

The great value of Jacob's history lies in the fact that he so faithfully portrayed human nature as it exists in a saint of God. His foolishnesses are ours. His inveterate tendency to scheme with diplomatic cleverness to accomplish his ends, and even to reach ends which were right and part of the purpose of God concerning him, is just the tendency that is ours. Hence God's disciplinary dealings with him are very indicative of His dealings with us.

Happy it is for us if we, too, reach the end which he reached as a dying man. And happy, thrice happy, are we, if we reach that end in the midst of our careers, and before we come to die.