

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF GENESIS.

GENESIS XXXII. 24, 25.

'And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him' (R.V.).

EXPOSITION.

'And Jacob was left alone.'—Jacob *remained* or *was alone behind*, on the right or north bank. It was the natural duty of the head of the party and owner of the flocks in such a case to be last on the ground, and see that nothing was left behind.—DILLMANN.

'There wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.'—The word *wrestle* occurs only here and in v. 26. The choice of the rare word is determined by the wish to play on the name Jabbok, as if it meant *river of wrestling*.—DILLMANN.

VIGOROUS as the wrestler's grasp is, Jacob is in no mood to be easily thrown; and maintains the struggle, how long it is impossible to say, but at any rate *until the breaking of the day*; 'wile baffled wile, and strength encountered strength, thus long, but unprevailing.' Jacob was not the aggressor, it was the man who wrestled *with him*. In fact it was, not as Jacob might first think, an emissary of Esau, but the real Champion of the land who must first be met before Jacob found entrance into Canaan. He had made his arrangements as if Esau alone had to be propitiated: he finds there are more formidable persons than Esau concerned in the matter; God always appears as the Champion for the wronged party.—DODS.

'When he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh.'—Jacob is confident he is sufficient for all comers and wrestles on, till at last the wrestler *touched the hollow of his thigh*. By a mere touch Jacob finds himself crippled. This suddenly discloses to him the real nature of his antagonist. And now his whole attitude changes; from a self-confidence which had got many heavy falls during his past life, but was still vigorous and hearty, he passed to dependence on another. No longer wrestling, no longer Jacob the supplanter, the clever tripper-up in wrestling who depended on his own skill and toughness; he hangs now on his antagonist and cries, *I will not let thee go, except thou bless me*. From wrestling he passes to praying, and so his self-confidence and his name Jacob pass away together. He is now *Israel, a prince of God*, 'for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.'—DODS.

'The hollow of the thigh.'—The socket of the hip-joint, the hollow place like the palm of a hand (Heb. *Caph*) into which the neckbone of the thigh is inserted. The reason of this act of the angel was very probably lest Jacob should be puffed up by 'the abundance of the revelations'; he might think that by his own strength and not by

grace he had prevailed with God; as St. Paul had the thorn in the flesh sent to him lest he 'should be exalted above measure.'—BROWNE.

METHODS OF TREATMENT.

I.

God's Contest with the Soul.

By the Rev. William Bright, D.D.

Jacob's character is hard for us to appreciate justly. We are repelled by the timorousness and craftiness of his Oriental nature. When he has to face a danger, he is frightened and gets round it by some elaborate artifice; yet his devices go on side by side with habitual piety. But if he is really religious why 'help Providence' by the schemes of a trickster? It vexes us to see a character so inconsistent with itself, but are we in a position to marvel at him? He is not given us as a pattern of a saint. He receives repeated tokens of Divine favour, but he suffers the penalty of his early sins, suffers danger, anxiety, bereavement. Yet through all he has a sense of the Unseen, and his character is gradually 'purified and elevated by the fixed religious principle, the resolute sacrifice of present to future' which Esau lacked.

In the contest at Peniel Jacob's sense of utter dependence on God has recently stirred the depths of his nature. He represents a soul constrained to feel its dependence on God as the Fountain of personal being and its Refuge. It is thrown upon itself, removed from the sympathies which halve the burdens of life, and then Divine grace finds its opportunity. Then God comes to the soul and forces the controversy upon it, and will not be denied. But human nature recoils and resists, and this unresponsiveness is not inconsistent with previous earnestness, with acts of faith and thanksgiving. The struggle may go on 'till the day breaks.' The lesson is harder than we thought; we are afraid of what we may be committed to; but then comes the touch on the hollow of the thigh,—some distress, illness, bereavement, anything which proves to us our own impotence.

Then the question is whether we will take the 'touch' in the right spirit. Pain does not always soften and subdue. It sometimes embitters, and the sufferer resists and may end in that fixed obduracy which extorts from God the sentence 'Let him alone.' And hell consists in being thus 'let alone' by God. Happy the soul which, like Jacob, accepts the touch as a warning given in mercy, seeks for closer union with Him who chastens in love, and begs for a fuller blessing. It comes, and the soul feels that its previous knowledge of God had been but 'the hearing of the ear,' that now it 'sees' Him. The vision passes, but so does the darkness. The sun rises upon the wayfarer for whom the night's experience has changed the face of life and of the world.

Are we resisting the appeals of grace? Do we need the touch on the hollow of the thigh? Let us beg God to show why He is contending with us. And if He has inflicted the shock, if we halt as we go forward on life's journey, let us adore the Hand which withers the strength of nature in order to bless us with the succours of grace. Let us believe that striving prevails with God, and that prayer takes the kingdom of heaven by force.

II.

Face to Face.

By the Rev. T. F. Lockyer, B.A.

1. Jacob's life might be called the History of a Sin. Perhaps it is this very fact which invests it with its enduring charm. While we admire Abraham's life, we are liable to be discouraged when we contemplate its moral greatness. But Jacob, full of infirmities yet desirous of better things, is nearer to us. With equal truth his life might be called the History of a Retribution, for retribution followed him throughout his career, and now when perhaps he had thought all danger and suffering past, his old sin rises up once more to condemn him. He is held fast by his sin, and his only hope is that he may find God. His desire is heard. He would touch God, and now God's very touch is felt; but it seems rather the assault of a Foe than the greeting of a Friend. And if God is Jacob's Foe, Jacob is, at first, God's foe. We do not easily let go our sin. We fight against God till He brings us to repentance by

His touch. Now Jacob discerns that this enmity may be real friendship. God wrestles with his sin, but it is on Jacob's behalf; God's foe is Jacob's foe too. So he opposes God no more, but strives to lay hold of His saving strength.

2. The conditions which produced this crisis were twofold; evil circumstance and evil self—danger from his brother, and sin within. There were subsidiary conditions also—the darkness, the strange land, the solitude. It is only in solitude that the soul meets God face to face.

3. The consequences of this crisis in Jacob's history were a strong life and a strong death. His following life was strong and pure in comparison with the years before. He gained power over circumstance and power over sin, for when we have seen God face to face, and made His strength our own, He gives us peace from the tyranny of both. And he died as a conqueror, without fear, with princely dignity, for if we have known God face to face in life, we shall not fear to come face to face with Him in death, but to us, as to Jacob, death will be His messenger to take us home.

ILLUSTRATIONS.

WHEN conscience wrestles with me, it is always in the form of a man. It is my higher self that strives with me—the Christ within. We have all a higher self—a photograph which God took in some pure moment. We have left it behind, but it follows us. It meets us in our silent hours. It confronts us with the spectacle of what we might have been. It refuses to let us go until it has blessed us. It is the same thing which Paul felt when he spoke of the spirit lusty against the flesh. The spirit was his better photograph, his Christ, his hope of glory. It is to all of us our hope of glory. It is not the actual man that makes us feel immortal; it is the ideal man—the man that might have been. That is the reason that to me conscience is precious even when it wounds. It is no foreign hand that strikes me; it is my higher self, my inner man, my likeness as God sees it. It is the image of me that is hung up in heaven—the picture on which my Father gazes to avert despair. It is not only with *me* that the man wrestles; he wrestles with the Father *for* me. He pleads my future possibilities. He suggests my coming glory. He tells what I would be, in less vile raiment. He shows what I *may* be with the ring and the robe. He reveals how I shall look at the breaking of the day.—G. MATHESON.

MANY a man, at the close of his trial, has found out that he has been trying to throw down his own blessing.—T. DE WITT TALMAGE.

THE blessing came when the wrestling was over, and when the clinging came; and that is what God means, but He means all that—to come down upon us, and to stand over us, and to set Himself against us, and to seem to be the worst enemy we have—an enemy who springs upon us in the darkness, and makes our faces to grow white with fear. If He put out all His strength, He could hurl us shrieking into the outer darkness. But it is not meant for that. It is meant at last to bring us to understand Him, and to cling to Him, and to give up all duplicity, and all deceit, and all dissimulation, and all double-mindedness, both before God and men, all playing fast and loose with our own conscience, and with what we know to be right—to bring all that to an end, and with the arms of our faith round about Him, just to cling, and cling, and cling. Then we win.—J. M'NEILL.

IMPORTUNITY is of the essence of successful prayer. Our Lord's references to the subject especially imply this. The Friend who is at rest with his family will rise at last to give a loaf to the hungry applicant. The Unjust Judge yields in the end to the resistless eagerness of the widow's cry. Our Lord's blessing on the Syrochœnician woman is the consecration of importunity with God. And importunity means, not dreaminess, but sustained word. It is through prayer especially that 'the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.'—H. P. LIDDON.

PEOPLE read this passage as though the leading thought in it were *the power of prayer*—as though Jacob wrestled with God all night, and so at last obtained the blessing. Surely this is wrong. It was *God* who wrestled with Jacob all night, to break down proud self in His child; and this in order that He might, as a matter of free grace altogether, bless His child.—A. C. PRICE.

COME, O Thou Traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see,
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee;
With Thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.

I need not tell Thee who I am,
My misery or sin declare;
Thyself hast called me by my name;
Look on Thy hands, and read it there!
But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou?
Tell me Thy name, and tell me now.

In vain Thou strugglest to get free,
I never will unloose my hold;
Art Thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of Thy love unfold.
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go
Till I Thy name, Thy nature know.

Yield to me now, for I am weak,
But confident in self-despair;
Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,
Be conquered by my instant prayer!
Speak, or Thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me if Thy name is Love.

Contented now upon my thigh
I halt, till life's short journey end;
All helplessness, all weakness, I
On Thee alone for strength depend;
Nor have I power from Thee to move;
The nature and Thy name is Love.

C. WESLEY.

Sermons for Reference.

- Aitken (W. H. M. H.), *Mission Sermons*, iii. 38.
Beecher (H. W.), *Sermons*, ii. 106.
Bright (W.), *Morality in Doctrine*, 199.
Brown (H. S.), *Manliness*, 129.
Burns (J.), *Select Remains*, 87.
Calthrop (G.), *Eden to Patmos*, 20.
Candlish (R. S.), *Discourses in Genesis*, ii. 74.
Clifford (J.), *Daily Strength for Daily Living*, 39.
Davies (D.), *Talks with Men, Women, and Children*, iv. 466.
Dix (M.), *Sermons, Doctrinal and Practical*, 180.
Ewing (A.), *Revelation as Light*, 1.
Farrar (F. W.), *Fall of Man*, 236.
Harrison (W.), *Clovelly Sermons*, 101.
Hutchings (W. H.), *Sermon Sketches*, ii. 95.
Jukes (A.), *Types of Genesis*, 351.
Litting (G.), *Thirty Children's Sermons*, 154.
Lockyer (T. F.), *Inspirations of the Christian Life*, 177.
M'Neill (J.), *Regent Square Pulpit*, i. 193.
Magee (W. C.), *Sermons*, i. 170 (*Contemporary Pulpit Lib.*).
Matheson (G.), *Searchings in the Silence*, 108, 110.
Moorhouse (J.), *Jacob*, 35.
Mozley (J. B.), *Parochial and Occasional Sermons*, 347.
Parker (J.), *City Temple*, 1870, 373.
Plumptre (E. H.), *Theology and Life*, 296.
Price (A. C.), *Fifty Sermons*, i. 73.
Robertson (F. W.), *Sermons*, i. 36.
Stanley (A. P.), *Addresses and Sermons in America*, 71, 200, 228.
Taylor (W. M.), *Limitations of Life*, 30.
Thorne (H.), *Foreshadowings of the Gospel*, 32.
Trench (R. C.), *Sermons Preached in Ireland*, 1.
Vaughan (C. J.), *Family Prayer and Sermon Book*, ii. 531.
Vaughan (J.), *Fifty Sermons*, 1874, 235.
Walker (E.), *Sermons on Old Testament Subjects*, 44.
Wilberforce (S.), *Heroes of Hebrew History*, 48.