

Our Pulpit.

JACOB'S FEAR OF DEATH,

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"Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him; lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children. And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.—Gen. xxxii. 11, 12."

I. I am first going to speak about Jacob's fear, as we have it mentioned in our text: "I fear him lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children."

My first observation is, that Jacob, in his fear, is not to be held up as an example to us. He is not to be commended for thus fearing Esau, neither are we to imitate him in this respect. My next remark will, perhaps, seem strange to you, but I ask you to weigh it well, and consider it carefully. There is a great deal that Christians feel which they never ought to feel. There are a great many things which Christians do which they never ought to do; and there are many places into which Christians come into which they never ought to come. It was so with the ancient believers, and especially with Jacob. His experience is the experience of a good man, but it is not in all respects the experience that a good man ought to have. Why should he have been filled with fear at the prospect of meeting his brother? There was no necessity for it; his grandfather Abraham would not have had any such fear, and if Jacob had possessed more grace, he would not have said, concerning Esau, "I fear him." He knew that God had given him the blessing which Esau despised; again and again had the Lord appeared to him, and he must have known that he was blessed in a way that Esau was not. Why then should he fear his brother? Should the elect of God be afraid of one who has neither part nor lot in the matter? Should he not rather feel that the son of the King of kings should not fear the child of Satan — the heir of wrath? The friends of the wicked Haman said to him, "If Mordecai be the seed of the Jews, before whom thou has begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him." So, well may Mordecai stand upright in the king's gate, and never bow his head before Haman. Why should he fear and tremble even though Haman hath the ear of the king? Mordecai hath the ear of the King of kings; so he need not be afraid of anything Haman will do.

Jacob's fear was wrong; first, because it followed immediately after a great deliverance. He had left his father-in-law, Laban, in great haste — he had stolen away by night, and Laban had hurried after him. Encumbered as Jacob was with so many children and so many cattle, he had to move very slowly, and Laban soon overtook him. He was boiling over with rage when he started, and meant to do desperate things; but God interposed, and made him put the sword into the scabbard; so that, instead of there being any slaughter, there was as kindly a state of feeling between the two as could be expected under the circumstance. After God had preserved his servant Jacob from the wrath of Laban, it is strange that he should have been afraid of Esau. He had been delivered once, cannot he expect to be delivered again? He has just been rescued from one peril,

yet he trembles at the prospect of another.

Do you know anybody who ever acted in that way? If you do not, I do. I know where he lives. I will not say that I live with him; but I will confess with sorrow that I have sometimes been that very person. Have you also been one of the same sort of persons? If so, I will not say what I think of you; but I will say of myself, "How foolish I am to act so toward my Lord." He who has been with us hitherto, never changes; what he has done once he will do again. Is his arm shortened, or his eye blinded, or his heart turned to stone? Nay; then, surely, we ought to have learned by experience to trust in God, even as Jacob ought to have learned from his experience, so fresh in his memory, and trusted in the Lord concerning Esau as he had delivered him from the wrath of Laban.

Another thing that tended to make Jacob's fear inexcusable was that, just before the angels of God had met him. The chapter from which our text is taken tells us, in its opening verse, that "Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him." Messengers from the eternal throne came to salute God's favorite; and, I suppose, to escort him back to the land that was given to his fathers by a covenant that could not be broken. The patriarch was attended, before and behind, or on the right and on the left, by two companies of angels, yet he says, "I fear Esau." Even in the society of those who must have borne a perfume of heaven upon their wings — standing in the midst of immortal spirits whose faces must have reflected the glory of their Lord and Master, Jacob says, "I fear Esau." Again I ask, "Did you ever know anybody act in such a way?" "I never saw any angels." No, but you have, by faith, seen the angel of the covenant, the Lord Jesus Christ, and you have had most intimate intercourse with him. At his table, how often has he revealed himself to us in the breaking of bread! And in the reading and hearing of his Word how often has he been set before us as our Heavenly Bridegroom, the Beloved of our souls! And, sometimes, when we have been quite alone, the bright light of his presence has surprised us, and our hearts have burned within us while he has communed with us. Well, then, it has been very shameful on our part if, afterwards, we have feared Esau, or have been afraid of some anticipated trouble, or fearful because of bodily pain, or perhaps put out of temper by some trifling matter in the household which should have been altogether beneath our notice as companions of the Lord of the angels. The Lord have mercy upon his servants, and forgive our unbelieving fear, for which we will not pretend to make any excuse!

Note concerning Jacob's fear, that it probably arose out of the recollections of his old sins. Old sins, like old sores, are very apt to break out again. The very mention of the name of Esau brought up before his mind the day when his mother cooked the "two good kids of the goats," and took his brother's goodly raiment, and put it on Jacob, and put the skins of the kids upon his hands and neck, that he might deceive his father into the belief that he was his "very son Esau." Jacob remembered all that, and felt that Esau had good reasons to be angry, for he had supplanted him twice, and done him grievous wrong. He was afraid of Esau on the principle that "conscience makes cowards of us all." A sin may be for-

given by God; yet, for all that, its sting may be felt by you fifty years afterwards; just as, perhaps, some of you may have had a bone broken in your boyhood, and had it very well set, sometimes, before bad weather, you feel a twinge that reminds you that that bone was once broken. Thus it was with Jacob; that old bone began to creak and to threaten that bad weather was coming on. If he had dealt fairly and justly with Esau, and left the Lord to settle that matter of the birthright as he had always intended to give it — if he had left God to arrange everything in his own way, and had not been so over-wise, like his clever, scheming mother, he would not have been so afraid to meet Esau as he now was.

There is this which is commendable to be said about Jacob's fear — it led him to prayer. What was he doing when he said of his brother Esau, "I fear him?" O brethren and sisters, if you ever say the same thing, mind that you get to the same place where Jacob was, and say it, as he said it, to his God. It is ill to say it at all; but if it is to be said, it is well to say it to the Lord. Go to him with whatever troubles you have, and unburden your souls at the mercy-seat. If there be any suspicion of mistrust in your mind or heart, dark and black though the thought may be, yet go and tell him all. He knows all about it, for he reads your heart; yet go to him, and ask him to cleanse it all away. To go and tell our doubts to our fellow-creatures is like spreading an infectious disease; it does not often bring us any comfort, but it frequently causes others to have more distrust who have quite enough of their own before. We ought not to be slack in prayer, for we are really enough to tell our neighbors all our trials and troubles, though they cannot help us.

Note, also, that Jacob's fear led him to take a review of his life. That was a good thing. "I am not worthy," said he to the Lord, "of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands." It is a blessed thing, sometimes, to look back upon our past history, in order to revive our confidence in God at the present time. It never does to rely only upon the past, and to say, "God favored me at such-and-such a time, and, therefore, I am his." No, you need present mercy; as you cannot live on the meat you ate long ago, so you can not exist on past mercy alone; yet, as I have before reminded you, you may have seen how the bargemen on the canal push backward to send the boat forward, and you may push backward with your experience in order to send the boat of your life forward in new confidence in God.

I do not speak for myself alone when I say that, if we review our lives from the first day until now, we shall be again surprised at the wonderful kindness of the Lord toward us.

Beloved friends, think of the places from which the Lord brought some of you. It is not so very long ago since you were living in sin — perhaps in the worst forms of sin — without hope and without God in the world. Had you died as you then were, where would you have been? Yet now you are numbered among the Lord's children, and you have enjoyed much of his love, and been highly favored by him. I charge you, by the abounding mercy which you have received, let these present fears, that now molest you, be driven from your bosom.

II. But I must not say any more about Jacob's fear, or I shall have no time for speaking about his faith. Yet I have really been speaking about it while I have been talking concerning his fear.

First, Jacob's faith was based upon God's promise. He mentioned his fear of Esau, and then he turned to the Lord, saying, "Thou saidst, I will surely do thee good." Oh, what a hold he had of God! "Thou saidst." Thou canst not lie, and "thou saidst, I will surely do thee good." Thou canst not go back from thy word, and "thou saidst, I will surely do thee good." He seems to hold God to it as men hold their fellow-men to a promise which they have given. There is nothing that he can see in which he can trust. God seems to be doing nothing — to be quite still; yet Jacob reminds him of his promise. "Thou saidst." The promise is sufficient for Jacob without any act or deed as yet. "Thou saidst, thou saidst, I will surely do thee good."

I must also remind you that this was what Jacob said when he began to pray. If you turn to his prayer, you will see that he began by saying, "O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord who saidst unto me," and so on; that is the beginning of his prayer, and the finishing of it is, "And thou saidst." That should always be both the beginning and the ending of prayer. You must never go beyond God's promises. If he has said anything, that is enough for you; but do not expect that your whims and fancies will be indulged. You must begin your prayer by saying to God, "Thou saidst," and when you do that, the weakest saint or sinner may plead so as to prevail. You can never get a stronger plea than the Lord's own promise. You can never strike a blow that will more effectually clinch the nail than this, "Thou saidst, Thou saidst." O brethren, I scarcely know how to put this matter before you as I ought; because if God says a thing, who is there among us who shall dare to give to him the lie? If it was an old promise, even in the oldest book in the Old Testament, yet there is no such thing as time with God; one day with him is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day; and the promise is just as good as if he had made it at this very moment. If you could hear God speak now, you would not doubt him, would you? Well, but did he at any time utter this promise? Then it standeth fast forever, for he has never spoken in secret so as to change what he has said in public. Every promise of God is sure to all those who put their trust in him. Jacob's faith rested, in its beginning and ending, upon the promise of God; this was the basis of it, and this alone. Can you say that this is the foundation for all your confidence for time and for eternity? If you can, is it not a basis worth resting upon? Is there any supposable weight which this rock cannot sustain? Is there any imaginable trouble which may not be endured while God's great solemn promise stands forever fast?

The Lord bless you, dear friends, and especially bless any of you who have not yet believed in his son, Jesus Christ! Oh, that they could see the sinfulness of doubting the great God, and Jesus Christ, his Son. Oh, that they would trust him, just as they are! They would never have to lament doing so; but, throughout eternity, they would have to bless the Lord who taught them this sweet way of simple dependence upon the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ.