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DEPENDENCE UPON GOD

BY
REV. CHAS. H. BASCOM
Rector St. Paul's Episcopal Church

Psalm cxvii.5. "Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help." The true meaning of happiness is largely misunderstood, because the true significance of life is misunderstood. The Psalmist pronounces a certain class to be happy—those who have the God of Jacob for their help. It is worth our while to note this commentary of a later age upon the story of Jacob. Religion, I take it, is the recognition or conviction of the relationship of God to man. Religion which thus begins with the recognition of that relationship leads on to something more inspiring and higher still. It leads on to the enjoyment of that relationship; and the whole story of the progress of religious thought and religious experience will, I think, confirm this view.

Now the value of the story of Jacob lies, I think, in this, that it illustrates the relationship of God to man, and it shows the experience of that relationship as it moves from stage to stage. I am not surprised, if we realize how very great a factor God's help was in Jacob's life, that after generations should say "Happy is the man that hath the God of Jacob for his help." No doubt there were men who had considered the story that Jacob was put before them as one occupying a privilege and enviable position, and who would be ready to echo the words "That is man is happy whom God will treat as He did Jacob." But few facts are clearer than this, viz. that the most splendid of truths can be misused and mis-applied, and even so distorted that their true meaning and value are wholly lost. I think I should like you, in the first place, to notice how the very simple truth of God's help may be misused as to lead practically to one of the lower forms of scepticism.

Let me ask you to picture to yourselves a very case: we may suppose a young man starting with the natural hopes and ambitions of life. Such an one as we here imagine sets forth with high spirit and expectations ambition: he earnestly desires to win some success and achieve something great in life before he dies. He looks around the world, and he sees that a great deal of success is due to the influence of those who move along the higher ranges of life and by their patronage lift those who are below in to a more successful position in order that he may achieve the success he desires. But we know perfectly well that a man who relies on human patronage is always liable to disappointment, and on his failure to break out in passionate discontent. Realizing this, what is it that men must be inclined to say but, "Put not your trust in princes nor in any child of man." Instances rise to our memory: Wolsey bewailing the vanity of earthly confidence is shown us by Shakespeare; Dr. Johnson writes his stinging words of reproach to his tax-by patron. Thousands have learned the lesson: Vain is the help of man. We can understand the man disappointed in human patronage saying, "I will take myself to God"

and thousands have indulged in what they flatter themselves is a religious thought, when they said "God is the best patron." Such people can cite examples of encouragement. They will call to mind Moses, saved in his infancy and reaching at last a place of unique influence; Joseph sold to be a bond servant and brought at length to be ruler of Egypt; David taken from the sheepfolds and made king over Israel. In all these instances it was divine care, not human patronage which wrought the success. Is it not better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. He who relies upon human favors and influence may meet constant disappointment, and the total result of his life instead of success is soften failure. God is the patron after all.

Now, if you will consider for a moment I think you will see in the whole significance of the attitude of men the weakness which may lurk in this kind of trust in God: it lies in the fact that the trust is vitiated by a mistaken view of life. We may measure life wrongly or rightly. What is the measure by which we measure life? Are you going to measure it by material prosperity, by the riches, by the comfort, by the luxuries and pleasures we can enjoy? Is there one of you who, in your serious moments, really measures life in this way? But, nevertheless at other times we do so. It is a fact that we measure it, and we may note the scepticism to which we have thought the Psalmist in Psalms xxxvii and lxxvii were tempted arose out of this false measure of life. They measured life by material prosperity; their complaint was "I do see the ungodly is such prosperity?" and therefore they rushed to the conclusion. My endeavor to be good is profitless. "I have cleansed my hands in vain."

Now the story of Jacob is the answer to that mistaken view. If you will trace again, the different stages in that history, I think you will see that the whole narrative is constantly leading up to this, that the true measure of life's value is not in material prosperity. Jacob had God for his help. (1) God was in his life as a Providence. As the young man he goes out from his home, and at Beth-el he meets with the assurance of the protection of God's superintending Providence. This Providence is with him in his struggles against all the devices of Laban; he is successful, and at the end of twenty years becomes a rich and prosperous man. The Provi-

dence of God we see was with him in the dread crisis of his life, when Esau with his armed men, threatened his fortune and his home. We might ask: "Has there ever been a story written in which Providential care is more evident?" Reading it we may say: "Happy is the man who hath the God of Jacob for his help." But (2) we must see that God was in Jacob's life not merely as Providential care, but in the form of trouble.

No story probably is so full of trouble and sorrow as that which tells of the trials which befell Jacob. From the time that he went forth as a young man sorrow followed him, and it was with him at the very close. The man who had looked forward above all things to a quiet and happy home in the very spot that he loved, consecrated by the memories that were still dear to him, was obliged to end his days in exile. But the God who had been with him in providence and in trouble was (3) the God who educated him. But with all God's goodness and with the success which he attained Jacob was still a worldly man. He was still than a man whose heart is like the soil choked up with weeds. What would the wise farmer do with the land that is thus choked? Will he leave the soil as it is or will he root up the weeds and plough it up that it might be fruitful? We see that this is what God did to transform the soil of Jacob's heart into such a quality that it bore the fruit evident to us. God was against him that He might be for him. He wrought for his education in character and in righteousness.

We are apt to look upon God as one who will change His law and order just to fit His convenience, but believe me, whatever an earthly parent may do, God is wiser and more loving. But God does not let us off, and God did not let Jacob off. The retribution of Jacob's dastardly action followed him step by step. He could not escape the past, and in the hour of his prosperity the terror of it was with him. God allowed him to meet the consequence of his wrong-doing. The Almighty will never accept our bargains, but God's sincerity towards us in every aspect of life can never change. He does so with the tenderness of one who is strengthening and encouraging us and giving us strength to face truth and courage to bear the righteous penalty of wrong-doing. There is in this, therefore, not only an education in righteousness, but an education in character. Jacob, the man who relied upon his own craft, and who wanted to be a providence to himself is seen no longer seeking for flocks and herds, not bargaining for food and raiment, but for something deeper and more precious. We see him translated from a lower level of life to a higher. It is the education of God elevating the mind to nobler

desire than that in which it hungers and thirsts after the things of this life. In such a desire is elevation of thought and elevation of character. There is elevation of ideal, for now Jacob seeks to know God himself; he relates that religion consists in the conviction of our relationship to God. There is elevation of character. If you will turn to the last scenes in Jacob's life you will be touched by the change which has come upon his disposition. The crafty self-seeking man is no longer there. He is an old man now, surrounded by children and grandchildren. What are the characteristics which he shows? He is old, but we can see in him one who can grow old gracefully. There is none of the waspishness of temperament which deplores a past time as far better than the present. He has a tender sympathy and interest with the rising generation. How is it that so many as they grow old become the praisers of past times and are ready to disparage the age which is coming on and depress the spirit of the young. There is nothing of that in Jacob. All his horizon is widening before him. Although the old man knows that death is at hand his heart is young enough to enter with spirit into the thought of the future. He is alive to the meaning of life: looking back upon his life he regards it with a kind pathos which must touch us. "Few and evil have been the days of my life," he says, but not with resentment or pessimistic meaning, for he speaks also of the God who delivered him from evil. He realizes further that this life is not a complete thing. There is something yet to come; and he can wait with patience for it, and he cries, "I have waited for thy salvation, O God."

What story is instructive with more moral teaching? The crafty Jacob, we see became the true Israelite. What is taught in his story was taught to the whole of the people of Israel. Moral laws do not die with any single man or with any single story of man. The God of Jacob was the God who had led the people through the great and terrible wilderness. What for? "To humble and to prove him and to find out his nature—to know what was in his heart"; but never to forsake him, "to do him good in the latter end."

And surely from this story of this character development this lesson remains: Do not measure life by the wrong standard. The things which come to us in the form of pleasure, luxuries, riches or comfort—desirable thought they be—they are not life. They may be means of life, they may be very agreeable, but they are not life. A man's life does not consist in the abundance of things which he possesses. It is much more important for us to be good than to be rich. For whatever you may now possess, there will come a time in the

end when these things must drop from your grasp, and you will stand where righteousness, purity and love are the realities. The moral of it all is simple enough. Turn from the thought of the things which must remain. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Then at the end this witness of faith will be yours: as it has been that of God's children. I had to struggle, but I never was left alone in my struggles. God stood beside me at all times. He taught me, He tried, He trained me. He led me to seek the highest. I have seen his face and entered into His peace.

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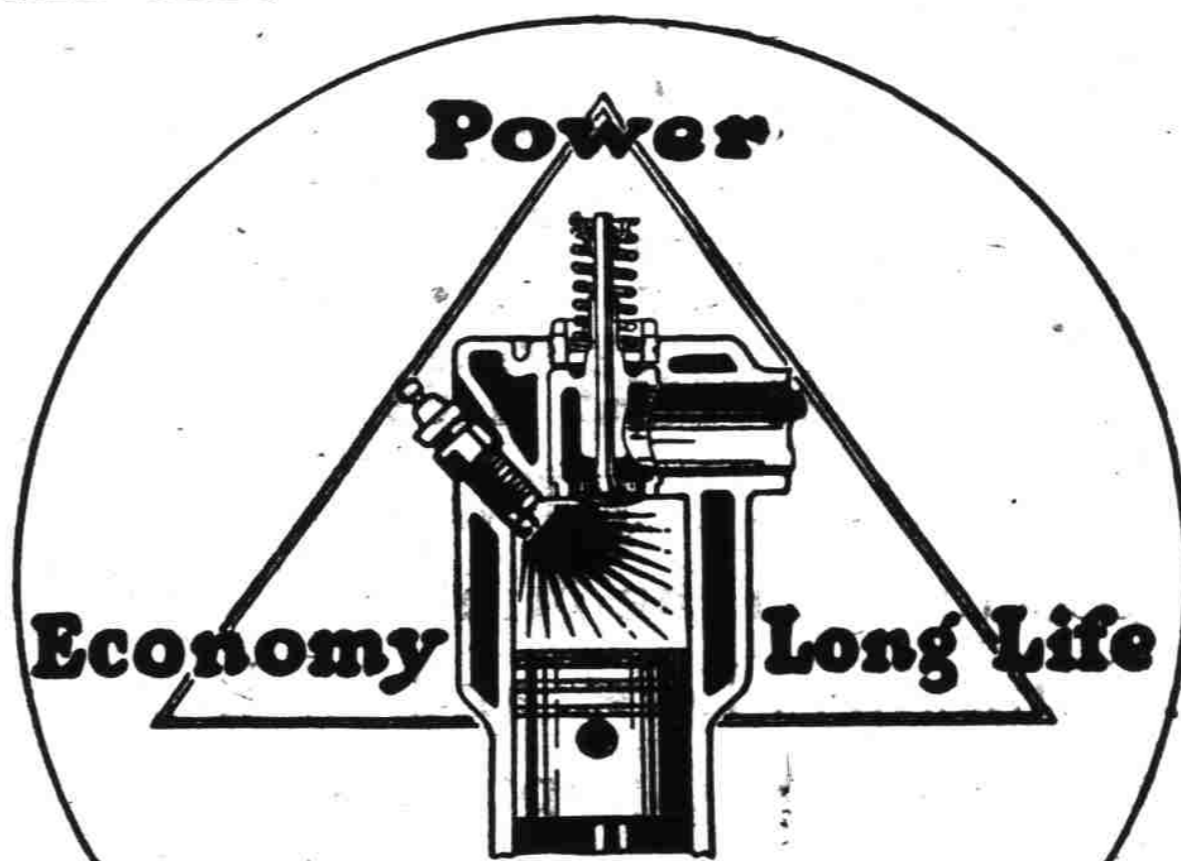
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