

Jacob and the Law of Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

The law of life in Christ Jesus is the principle of spiritual growth and maturity, which is achieved through successive steps of obedience to God's will, and is characterized by subjection to God's will and service to the Church.

Scripture: Genesis 28:16, Genesis 29:15, Genesis 31:13, Genesis 35:1, Matthew 20:28, Galatians 4:19, Ephesians 5:25, Colossians 1:24, Hebrews 10:25

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Church Service"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks preaches on the life of Jacob, highlighting the three key aspects: the birthright, Bethel or the House of God, and service, all interconnected as phases of one thing. Jacob's active nature and perception of Divine things led him to understand the value of the birthright and the significance of the House of God. The sermon emphasizes the importance of subjection as the first law of service, showing that all service to God must be consciously related to His Church, the Body of Christ. True service, like Jacob's pursuit of Rachel, can never be satisfied with anything less than that which is wholly of the Spirit, emphasizing the need for spiritual fruit born out of God's intervention.

Transcript

Reading: Gen. 28:16-17,19; Gen. 31:13; 35:1,6-7; 29:15-18; Col. 1:24.

We come now to the sixth of these operations of the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, and we are brought to Jacob. We come to see the working of the law of life in another and still more advanced aspect; for you will have recognized that each of these steps is in advance of the other. We are moving forward, we are reaching unto God's end, we have the goal in view. Fullness of life is before us, and we reach the fullness by these successive steps, each of which brings us nearer the end and, with itself, increases the fullness. So we have to see what this further advance in the matter of life is as represented by Jacob.

There are three things which stand out more clearly than others in the case of Jacob. The first is the birthright, the second is Bethel or the House of God, and the third is service. These three are really one in essence, or three phases of one thing. The birthright is the blessing; the chief blessing, the highest blessing, the first blessing. The House of God, or, using the New Testament designation, the Church of God, is that which takes the supreme blessing, and that blessing means pre-eminence. You notice how it worked out with Jacob, what the birthright meant to him. It was not only that he got a form of words from his father which represented a blessing, not only that he got certain things, but that blessing brought him

into the first place, so that the elder served the younger; it gave him pre-eminence. The House of God, the Church, which is Christ's Body, is elected to that. "Jacob have I chosen"; "Jacob have I loved". The service is ever related to the House of God. We have, then, three aspects of one thing.

The Foundation of Service

Now we are going to begin with the third aspect. I suppose, when we contemplate Jacob, the thing about him which strikes us very forcibly is his intensely active nature; active in mind, in brain, in wit; active in will, active in transaction, in execution; active as one ever alert, ever on the move, ever watching for an opportunity, an occasion. His life is indeed a life of activity, and withal he has his eye upon high things; yes, upon Divine things. If this were not so, then we could find no saving feature in Jacob. It was his perception of the transcendent value of Divine things which gave him his place and upon which God was able to work, in so far as there is anything in a man which forms the basis of Divine activity. That birthright - he understood the nature of it, the range of it. He knew what it meant, he knew whither it would lead him. He had a sense of the value of Divine things which his brother, Esau, did not possess. When he came to Bethel and had his dream and awoke in the morning, he did not merely say, Well, I have been dreaming. He said, "Surely God is in this place.... How awful is this place"; and he turned a dream into a very practical expression and set up a pillar and anointed it and called the name of that place Bethel, the House of God.

If you move on with Jacob, despite all that you may deplore, you will find that the big steps in his life are all marked by some perception of Divine things, some spiritual discernment. He is in heart in the right direction. His thoughts were right; the trouble was with his mind and his will. The end was a right one, but the way by which he sought to reach it was all wrong. If you analyse Jacob in this way, you will not be long before you arrive at his signification in this matter of life and death. You will remember that, although he had secured the title to the blessing by his wit, by his cunning - yes, but do not overlook the fact of his spiritual perception - he never came into the blessing until that which he had employed to secure the title to it had been thoroughly dealt with and brought to an end. It is one thing to be in the way of the blessing, to have a heart in the direction of God's purpose and highest will, but, between the perception of its value and our stepping into the way of it, and our reaching it, there may be a great deal to be got rid of. We may discover that there has to be a great working of death before there can be the life which is bound up with that which we have seen. We have seen, we have reached out for it, we have striven after it, we have laid ourselves out with all our human resources to achieve it; but we never do. Something has to be done in us before we come to that which in itself is God's will for us, and it is the "Jacob" in us that has to be dealt with, so that we come to the "Israel" position. That self-energy, that wit, that self-resource in relation to Divine things has to be slain, and we have to come to the place where it is perfectly clear to us, where we know it as we know nothing else, that God's end is reached by God's strength alone, that the resources for the accomplishment of Divine purposes are not in us, but only in Him.

Now, then, you can see what arises at once as the operation of the law of life, the first law of service, for it is that which the activity and the energy of Jacob represents; work, service, doing, and all with Divine things in view. The first law of service is subjection. If anything is patent in the case of Jacob, it is this. On the one hand, he is the man who stands out more than any other as the man of action, the man of activity and the man of service. He served Laban for two periods of seven years. It took quite a bit out of his life, that service. He is a man who is ever doing, active from the beginning of his story. Yet, as clear, as obvious as that is the other thing, that subjection was the lesson Jacob had to learn. That is as simple to grasp as anything in the Bible. The great crisis of his life upon which everything turned as to Divine

purposes was that hour in which he came finally to take his place of subjection under the touch of the finger of God, and it was not until that had happened that he could go back and dwell at Bethel.

Service Inseparable from the House of God

You see, these two things went together. The Lord said, "Arise and go to Bethel and dwell there". Jacob had never been able to dwell in Bethel. He had made a fleeting visit to Bethel and Bethel had become an established fact. Bethel was there, the House of God was there, but Jacob could not dwell there; because no one can dwell in the House of God until they have come to the place of subjection. So he went on to learn the lesson which is basic to the House of God, and then God said, "Arise and go to Bethel and dwell there". He had to meet that crisis, where self-strength was exhausted and broken and he was weak; but where God became his strength - a prince with God. It was thus he was rendered suitable for God's House. You see how all of a piece this is. The House of God is the object and sphere of Divine service.

Now, if ever I have said a thing which is true, that is such a thing. I am going to challenge you on that: I defy you to show me and prove from the Scriptures that there is any service to God which is not related to His House. All service to God is bound up with, and inseparable from, His House. The Old Testament is full of it; the New Testament is emphatic. The Church, which is Christ's Body, is the object and sphere of all the service of God's people and there is no service apart therefrom. Oh, that the Lord's people had kept the object of service in view. They have so much service which is not consciously related to the House of God. You may be called to serve the Lord especially along the line of soul-winning, but you must remember that such service relates to the House of God. If you make it something in itself, you are going to dwarf it, to limit it, and to deprive it of all that it is intended to come to. Oh the tragedy of great evangelistic efforts that do not issue in the full purpose of God! Souls are saved and left; and they are put into Gospel missions, which are in no sense local churches as seen in the New Testament, and after twenty or thirty, or even fifty years in these Gospel missions, you will find these saints knowing nothing more than that they are saved. They were saved so many years ago and beyond that point they have not progressed an inch. There are multitudes of these missions all over the world. They are delightful; you meet saved souls rejoicing in salvation: but there is a tragedy. "Oh, I was saved under Moody all those years ago, and I am still rejoicing in the Lord today." That is typical of the position of many and, when that testimony has been given, it represents all that these can say. It is very good, of course, to know the Lord as your Saviour and to be rejoicing in salvation; I am taking nothing from that. But that is something which has been made an end in itself; it has never gone further. Why is this? Because the Church was never brought into view. I am not speaking now of "going to church," of congregations in certain places called "churches". You know of what I am speaking, of God's full thought about the House of God, the Church, which is the Body of Christ, with all that means as revealed especially through Paul, the great unveiled mystery of Christ's spiritual Body and its eternal destiny in the purposes of God. All service, in God's thought, must be consciously related to the Church, to the House of God.

You may be used and blessed in just moving round comforting and cheering saints and doing all sorts of kindly things for the Lord's children. Are you quite sure that is leading to real spiritual increase, the increase of Christ, leading on to God's end. It may be a help, it may be a blessing, but what about the real building up of the House of God? In our comforting, consoling, helping ministry, we have to be able to impart spiritual increase, not just to help lame dogs over stiles. There has to be a goal to which it is all moving, namely, the House of God.

Whatever may be the form of ministry or of service, all service, from God's standpoint, is related to the House of God, and that is what is made so clear in the case of Jacob. What is service, after all? A little child, in all good intention, all innocence, may do lots of things to help mother, and mother of course is very patient, mother does not punish the child. She knows quite well the child means well, and really means to help: but poor mother! At times you hear mother saying, "Of course, she means to help me, but she little knows how much work she makes for me, what a lot I have to clear up after her, and really how little help it is after all." That is all right for children. When we really consider the question of service, how do we resolve it? Surely we would say that service in truth, in reality, is that which realizes the end we have in view, and we say to all those who so contribute, Now you are really helping, now we are getting somewhere!

What has God in view? Upon what is His heart set? It is His Church. The Lord Jesus loved the Church and gave Himself up for her. That is why we have read the passage about Rachel, and we will come again to that in a minute. It is real service to secure the Church. Yes, the Church is His Body, and real service to God is that which secures the Church and secures God's full thought in the Church. That is true service to God; not a hundred and one other things unrelated and nice and good and kind, but never really reaching God's end, not really serving the purpose of His heart. So far as God is concerned, it is in that way that life operates.

The law of the Spirit of life operates when we come actively into line with God's end, God's purpose, God's thoughts, and they are all concerning His Church. You see, we saw Abraham's faith issuing in sonship in Isaac, and now in Jacob sonship is taken up and carried on, and in Jacob we see the true spirit of sonship in service which can never be truly satisfied with less than a Church after the Spirit.

The Lesson of Leah and Rachel

Now, that brings us to Leah and Rachel. Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and then Laban deceived him and gave him Leah. Leah was not the object of Jacob's heart, and he could not be satisfied with Leah. He might have been. There were pleasant things about Leah. Leah was tender of eye. Evidently it was something calculated in a certain realm to appeal to a gentleman! something attractive about her: and there were other things too. Leah, without any difficulty, provided Jacob with a family, and Rachel was unable to do that. Jacob might have said, Well, Leah is not so bad: Leah is not what I wanted, but there are good things about Leah; I will settle down and be satisfied. But no, Leah was not the object of his spirit, his heart, his inner man, and he could not be content with anything less than that, and he said, "I will serve thee yet another seven years for Rachel". He doubled his labour and went the second mile in order to have a wife after his spirit.

Now, the spirit of sonship, true sonship, can never be satisfied with anything less than that which is of the Spirit - of the heart, of course, in the type, Jacob; but speaking in New Testament language, after the Spirit. Leah might have been, for Jacob, a wife after the soul, after nature, but Rachel was something more than that, as she proved to be. Oh, I think there is a wonderful lesson bound up with Rachel and Leah. The true service of sonship will stop short at nothing less than that which is wholly of the Spirit.

The Lord Jesus, the true Son and Servant of Jehovah, in whom is the true spirit of sonship, and in whom is the true spirit of the servant, can never be satisfied with a Church that is merely outward and formal and natural, however many good points there may be in it. When He looked at the seven churches in Asia, He was able to say, as Jacob could have said of Leah, Yes, some very good points, some very nice things.

But, like Jacob, He further said, in effect, I cannot be satisfied with that: that does not answer to My heart, that is not after My Spirit; it is not for that that I have laboured and travailed. It is something more that I need really to satisfy my deepest and innermost sense of what is adequate, what is right, what is according to God's thought. Thus the good has to be subordinated for the best. The spirit of service is always set upon God's full thought as to the Church, the wife, the bride, and can never be satisfied with anything less. Sonship works in that way. I do not know how it comes about other than like that. I am quite sure that if some of us were to have a little conference on this matter, and say, Now, how is it that we came to be so concerned for God's full thought as to the Church? as we talked it over we should have to say, Well, it was not because we heard a series of addresses on the nature of the Church, nor because we found something in the Bible about it, but somehow, somewhere in our hearts there came to life a sense of Divine concern in this matter. It is a thing of the Spirit, and we have had to labour hard amidst much adversity, enough adversity, enough opposition, enough suspicion to have quenched anything less than something begotten of God. Long since we would have abandoned this matter because of the difficulty of the way, had it not been of God in us, had we not realized that we were not holding it but that it was holding us. We had not taken up something, but God had taken us up in this matter, and what could we do? Can we, in view of the cost, the suffering, can we be content with things as they are among the Lord's people? No, a thousand times! We must labour on.

I believe, beloved, that is the spirit of sonship, the spirit of service. The deeper God's work is in us, the more we shall travail for the Church, the less shall we find ourselves able to settle down with any contentment with things as they are amongst the Lord's people. So Rachel was the result of suffering, the suffering of the Spirit.

But then, Rachel could not do what Leah could do. We have said the family, with Leah, was quite a spontaneous, easy thing, but it was far otherwise with Rachel. What a disappointment, after all! Naturally speaking, there was no fruit possible. But oh the wonder of this sovereignty of God! How often the sovereignty of God is represented in the Scriptures by natural things, and this particular thing so frequently. We note it in the case of Sarah, the case of Hannah, and others, and here with Rachel. Well, Rachel does have children eventually, but they are the result of a Divine intervention. They are of God in a special sense, by the act of God. You see how strictly God keeps to His principles; that real service, real sonship service, can never be fruitful out from nature. The natural life can provide no spiritual fruit, no fruit unto God. It is only that which comes out from God which is really spiritual fruit, the fruit of spiritual service. You remember what Paul said in his letter to the Galatians: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). The Galatians were the Lord's children, and Paul might have said, Well, you are the Lord's children, you are saved, it is all right. I am sorry that there are these unhappy things that mar your walk. I would rather they were not there; but still you belong to the Lord and so it is all right. Oh no! That would be too much like Leah, that is too easy. There is need of something more, and for that something more of the Spirit (and that is the key note, as you notice, to the letter to the Galatians) Paul says, "... I am again in travail till Christ be fully formed in you." That is God's thought for His people. So again, we find Paul, this great Israelite in the fullest, highest sense, saying, "I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). That is service, that is sonship, - His sufferings in me for His Church.

A Summary of the Practical Issues

That is the way of life, that is the operation of the law of life. It is simply, and not by any means exhaustively, stated. God's fullness is going to be expressed in the Church, therefore God's satisfaction is

centred in the Church. All real service to God is that which relates to the securing of what is most precious to God, namely, the Church, and all service to God begins with subjection, and subjection is a thing which is seen in the House of God. That is where God establishes the law of subjection. I have to be as subject in the House of God as any other member of the House of God. It is not the subjection of one and another more than of others, but in the House of God we have to find our place in subjection. I can no more act independently as a minister in the House of God than any member of the House of God. We shall find our life as we learn to be subject. In so far as it is not true that we are in subjection in the House of God, we are not in the way of life, we are in the way of death. It is the first law of service.

Herein is the importance of the Church as locally expressed. One of the things for which a local assembly serves God is to be a sphere in which its members can learn to be subject to the Lord. Very often you know that subjection to the Lord in the Church becomes a very practical thing, and a very testing thing.

I have indicated things, that is all. That is the way of life. The blessing is there. Yes, this is the House of God, this is the gate of heaven. "Jacob called the name of the place where God spake with him, Bethel"; because there God revealed Himself unto him. That is life, the gate of heaven where God reveals Himself. The Lord open our understanding.

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