

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON II.

JACOB AND ESAU.

GEN. xxvii. 35.

And he said. Thy brother came with subtilty, and hath taken away thy blessing.

IN many facts of history recorded by the sacred penman, he merely relates the story, without making any comments upon it. This simplicity of narration is peculiar to the ancient historians. The practice of modern times is different. The historian now commonly conveys his own judgment on that which he records: he intersperses reflections: he displays himself as well as his subject.—This plainness of the ancient writers may be attended either by good or bad consequences. The beneficial consequences are these: that we are led to reason for ourselves, and that we are compelled in so doing to increase the diligence and accuracy of our examination. One of the mischievous consequences (I speak particularly with respect to the sacred writers) is, the danger of approving the actions related of good men, whenever the historian has not marked them with a note of disapprobation. The case adverted to in the text, in which Jacob obtains the “blessing by subtilty” from his father, is of this kind. No censure is passed upon it by Moses; and an inadvertent reader might consider it only in the light of a trick, displaying considerable ingenuity of contrivance and dexterity of execution. But though the sacred writer does not stop to descant on Jacob’s guilt, the subsequent history of Jacob plainly discovers a just Providence punishing his sin, and reads to us a lesson as instructive as though the inspired penman had inscribed in the front of it, “Behold here the baneful effects of fraud!” It may be useful to contemplate the whole story.

We find, in the xxvth of Genesis, that Esau and Jacob were brothers; and that the Lord replied to the inquiries of Rebecca concerning her children, by saying, that they should be the heads of two nations, and that “*the elder should serve the younger*”—Thus was a prophecy delivered, that Esau should serve Jacob; or, at least, that the posterity of Esau should serve that of Jacob. It may please God to foretell future events, but it is not therefore our duty to endeavour by crooked means to bring them to pass. God does not give us prophecy for our rule of conduct. He will accomplish his purposes in his own manner. It may be happy for us that we understand so little of his secret purposes. In this very instance, some knowledge of his intention may possibly have laid the foundation of the fraud of Jacob, and the unhappiness of Rebecca.

As Esau and Jacob grew up, we read, that “Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field; but that Jacob was a plain man” (*i.e.* a quiet, peaceable, domestic man), “dwelling in tents.” “Isaac,” it is said, “loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison,” but Rebecca loved Jacob. The foundations of the most material errors in life are often laid at a very early period. Parents are frequently disappointed in their offspring, and troubled during their lives, through a cause which they little suspect. They complain of their children, when perhaps the fault may be in themselves. They have indulged an early partiality, founded upon no just reasons, which has been productive, on each side, of the worst effects. There is but one true ground of preference with respect to children, to friends, to neighbours, to acquaintance; namely, that of real excellence. But how many false, and frivolous, and artificial distinctions have been introduced by the caprice, the pride, the false taste, of the world. The case of Isaac and Rebecca illustrates this remark. Their own unhappiness and the discord of their children were chiefly referable to a foolish and unfounded partiality in themselves. “Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison;” and Rebecca loved Jacob, because his temper and habits led him to be much with her in the tent. When will men learn to watch their partialities, their prejudices, and their passions? Providence often points out the sin in the punishment, and teaches parents discretion in the management of their children, by setting before their eyes the evil effects which follow from the want of it.

We read, soon after, of Esau’s selling his birthright for a mess of pottage.—It appears from this concise story, that there was no great harmony between the young men; and indeed it could not be expected. Isaac and Rebecca had laid the ground for jealousies and animosities between them. The one was the favourite of the father; the other of the mother. They were thus made rivals, and from rivals became enemies to each other. The profaneness of Esau in selling his birthright, to which was annexed a blessing usually valued at the highest rate, must be admitted. But while we blame Esau, let us give the just share of censure to Jacob, who refused to relieve his brother’s hunger, except at a price as culpable in the one to require as it was in the other to pay. According to the account of the historian, Jacob requires from his brother an oath that he would give up to him his birthright. But had Esau any power to surrender it? And would it be supposed that he who despised his birthright would regard an oath, obtained under such circumstances? Men often call in the sanction of religion to promote their temporal advantages, when real piety would teach them to forego those very advantages; in short, all advantages which are not obtained in a fair and honourable manner.

We come now to the transaction, circumstantially related in the chapter from which my text is taken. Jacob comes with “subtilty,” and obtains the “blessing from Esau.”

“Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see,” being perhaps considerably more than a hundred years old. Uncertain how soon his death might take place, he determines to give his solemn and prophetic blessing to his eldest son. Rebecca hears him express his intention; and now all her feelings for Jacob are called forth. Hitherto, perhaps, her partiality had displayed itself in trifles, though it had produced the most mischievous consequences. Now, however, when a peculiar temptation occurred, she proceeds to sacrifice to it truth, honour, justice, and common honesty. We ought to judge of the evil of our passions not by the effects which they have produced, but rather by those which they *may* produce under circumstances of temptation. The criminality of Rebecca’s partiality, which, perhaps, she had not suspected, now discovered itself. It led her to deceive, to lie, and to defraud. It was obviously her duty to leave to God the performance of his promise. But she considered the hour as come. Isaac would in a few hours give the blessing to Esau, and Jacob be deprived of it. What must she do? Not a moment was to be lost. The design of God to give the superiority to Jacob would, she thought, excuse some degree of fraud. She meant to further the Divine intentions. But we ought to know that the secret, and even the revealed, decrees of the Almighty, make no change in the moral evil of an action. God may as severely punish the man who executes, as the man who opposes, his will, if each is alike acting in his own spirit, and pursuing his own ends.

Rebecca, having formed her plan, communicates it to Jacob. Two reasons might concur in leading him to fall in with it: regard for his mother, and jealousy of Esau, arising out of his father’s partiality. Scruples would indeed obtrude; but interest would plead irresistibly against them. Probably also he might either infer from the prophecy, that God intended for him the blessing, or assume that he was entitled to it by right of purchase. How awfully does interest pervert the judgment, and palliate the worst actions! The scruples of Jacob being obviated, he considered how to carry the deceit into effect. Alas! that so much wickedness should be committed to obtain a blessing! The end was good. Religion itself pointed out its value. But the attainment of a good object, by bad means, must always be extremely sinful.

While Jacob hesitates, Rebecca is not afraid to urge him to the imposture: “Upon me be the curse, my son; only obey my voice.” Oh, what a situation for a mother—for a mother who, it might be hoped, had been a suitable companion for the patriarch Isaac! We see her in circumstances humiliating indeed!—urging her son to an act of fraud upon his father, and perfi-

dy towards his brother, and using her maternal authority to ensure compliance! "Upon me be the curse!" But this would not acquit Jacob: the punishment, as we shall afterwards see, fell with a heavy weight upon both.—Jacob, thus prepared, goes in to Isaac, and practises the lesson which his mother had taught him. But sins are seldom solitary: one transgression naturally begets another: Jacob adds hypocrisy to fraud, and lying to deceit. "How," asked his father, "is it that thou hast found the venison so quickly?" And Jacob said, "Because the Lord thy God brought it to me." Never does iniquity appear more odious than when arrayed in the garb of religion. "And Isaac said unto Jacob, Art thou my son, my very son Esau? And he said, I am."

Thus far all was successful: the deceit and falsehood obtained the blessing. But short is the triumph of the unjust. While the words yet sounded in the ears of Jacob, the fear of the approach of Esau, the dread of his vengeance, the stings of a guilty conscience, the apprehension of the consequences, would present themselves to the troubled mind of Jacob, and teach him the bitterness of his transgression. Esau, indeed, lost the blessing which he had before despised; a proof that the visitation of crimes often sleeps for a time, and that vengeance may awake when the misdeed itself is almost forgotten. Perhaps the remembrance both of the profaneness of Esau, and of the declarations of prophecy, now rushed into the mind of Isaac; and while they pointed out the hand of God, compelled him to say, "I have blessed him; yea, and he shall be blessed."

Let us next contemplate the feelings of Jacob and Rebecca. Their imposture had succeeded; but it was a success which, as we shall see, embittered the whole life, both of Jacob and of his parents. Rebecca, the contriver of the fraud, was deprived of her favourite child, probably for the remainder of her days. He, who should have been the stay and the consolation of her declining years, was a stranger in a distant land, banished from his home by means of an act of sin. How bitter, then, would be the blessing which it cost so much to obtain! How, as he wandered a fugitive from his father's house, would the very object of the fraud seem to be defeated! Instead of the "elder serving the younger," Jacob was a poor and banished stranger, in continual terror of his brother.

Nor did the evil terminate here. The hatred of Esau for Jacob naturally increased to the highest pitch. He determined even upon his murder. Hence arose new alarms to Jacob. In all places, and at every moment, he feared to encounter Esau. The value of that prosperity was unfelt which it was doubtful whether he should live to enjoy. At every step, the retributive justice of Providence pursued him. First, he who had imposed upon his father was himself imposed upon by his uncle in the circumstances of his marriage. Next, the continual jealousies and hatred between his wives, Leah and Ra-

chel, must have reminded him of his own want of brotherly affection. His sin also was visited upon him in his own family. Continual feuds prevailed amongst his children; and he who was most beloved by the father was most hated by the rest. At length, he was the dupe of an imposture, more successful even than that by which he had deceived his father. Joseph, his beloved son, was sold by his brethren, and stated to be slain. In a word, the rest of the life of Jacob was signalized by scenes of domestic trouble and vexation, which had their origin either in the unhappy step we are considering or in kindred evils. At the close of his life, he justly said, "Few and evil have been my days." And he might have added, "I am a melancholy example of deviating from the path of simplicity and virtue."

Some important reflections upon this story naturally suggest themselves, which think it right to state.

1. First, the history furnishes a lesson to parents.—Let them guard against partiality towards their children. Let them know no other preference than that which arises from superior excellence. God has made them equally the guardians of all their children; and they who mismanage an important trust, and neglect a serious duty, must expect to suffer for it.

2. Let it, secondly, be a lesson to children to beware of mutual unkindness.—Esau was, indeed, "profane;" but this was no excuse for the unkindness of his brother. The peace of Isaac's family was destroyed by the abuse of affection, and by the spirit of rivalry. Many children, instead of trusting to Providence as to the affection of their parents, and calmly and kindly discharging their duty, indulge a mean and selfish disposition. They regard their brothers and sisters with jealousy and hatred; "My brother," they say, "is more a favourite than!!" How frequently does this vile selfishness poison every source of domestic enjoyment, and diffuse misery in a widely-extended circle!

3. Let us learn from this story, not to make the supposed designs of God the rule of our conduct: I say, "supposed designs for, in our case, they can be only supposed. It was wrong in Rebecca and in Jacob to draw out even the revealed purposes of God into a rule of action; when, to forward this, they were obliged to deviate from the path of integrity. It is happy for us, that the course of duty is clearly pointed out: we should follow what is just, and fair, and honourable, and leave the consequences to God. It is interest which blinds our eyes. Instead of inquiring what is right, we are too apt to ask what is most for our interest. This sophistry generally leads both to error and sin.

4. We are thus brought to a fourth observation; namely, that the way to success is often not that which appears the shortest, and even the surest: and that success, in some instances, is rather a curse than a blessing. Had

Jacob permitted God to accomplish his declaration by the means appointed; had his own conduct to his brother been, as it should have been, kind and affectionate; we cannot doubt that the history of Jacob would have been very different. His life might then have been as remarkable for happiness and peace, as it is for calamity and disquietude. The true source of prosperity is the blessing of God; and he often regulates the dispensations of his providence according to our estimate of his favour. There are circumstances in the life of every man which may corroborate this truth. A man is exposed to temptation: some great advantage offers itself: a little art or deceit in supplanting another is thought indispensable: excuses are not wanting to justify the act. But what, in general, is the result? That success is more to be deprecated than failure. When will men reflect, that “God reigns, and that they can obtain nothing without him?” that if he withhold his favour, the gourd will wither, the fair prospect vanish, and success itself prove our ruin?

5. Let us learn, lastly, that our disappointments and punishments may be our blessings.—Jacob obtained, in the end, a blessing; but a blessing very different from that which he expected. He never himself ruled over Esau; though his posterity ruled over that of Esau; But another blessing followed, which, though little desired or anticipated, was the only substantial blessing; that of being long and severely chastised, and thus deeply humbled for his crime. Had not God been so gracious to him, he might have prospered here, and inherited an everlasting curse in the world to come. I therefore regard the series of calamities which followed Jacob through life, as proofs of the Divine mercy towards him. God thus chastened him, as a wise father chastises his son to bring him to repentance. Happy the man who, when thus chastened, returns to God, discovers that in “judgment he remembers mercy,” obeys the impulse of a Father’s hand, and is purified by those fires of affliction which consume and destroy the hardened and impenitent!