

Watchman Nee:

The lessons taught to us from the life of Jacob concern the Holy Spirit's discipline of the Christian. It is this that makes room in our lives for Christ to reveal Himself. This discipline is concerned not with our old man and his sinfulness but with our natural strength, the strength of self. Before we are saved they are as one, and we cannot distinguish between them; but in the Christian they are clearly distinguished in Scripture.

At his creation in the Garden of Eden, Adam had by nature a distinct self-conscious personality, but he had no sin, no 'old man'. He possessed free will, which made it possible for him to act on his own account, so that self was already there but not sin.

Natural strength is what we receive from the hand of God as Creator. Spiritual strength is what we receive from God in grace. At our birth we receive wisdom, skill, intellect, eloquence, feelings, consciousness, and all these go to make up our personality as man-apart from sin. But after Adam's fall he changed. Sin had come in and taken control of him. Now not only was he a natural man: the 'old man' also was there in him, under the dominion of sin, loving to sin. Before he sinned Adam was a natural man. After he sinned he was the old man.

We must be cautious about drawing parallels between ourselves and the Lord Jesus in His incarnation, but we can say with assurance that He had no old man, because He was free from sin. Nevertheless He had a self; He possessed natural strength. Yet not once, in the smallest degree, did He ever abuse it. That is the difference. It is not that He did not possess personality and individualism-everyone must have these but that He did not choose to live by Himself. 'I can of myself do nothing' (John 5. 30). This was His estimate of the worthlessness of natural human effort apart from God. We can understand therefore why He went on to say of our spiritual fruitfulness: 'Apart from me ye can do nothing' (15. 5).

Unlike Him, we ourselves possess an old man, sold under sin. It is he that must be put out of the way, and as we saw, God has already done this on the Cross in Christ. But that is only the beginning of God's problem with us, for there is still our natural man to be dealt with. We not only sin in the sight of God; we do a whole lot of things with the best intention of pleasing God that are mistimed and misdirected and fail altogether to satisfy Him. Take the man who is always indiscriminately broadcasting all he knows about spiritual things. That is not the old man but the natural man at work. To speak of spiritual things is not sin, but the natural man is doing it out of his own zeal and not because the Lord wants it.

The natural life is just that, doing what we want and not what God wants. We may do many quite good things, building quite an impressive edifice on the foundation that is Jesus Christ. Nevertheless God calls them wood, hay and stubble (I Corinthians 3. 12). Such materials are not refuse but represent things done by man. True, the man is doing God's work of building; yet the work is judged. It is not a question of whether the workmanship is good or bad, but of who is doing the work.

The difference between the natural man and the old man is a basic one. God has given us His Son. When we enter into Him and He into us, what happens? One day we receive Him as our Saviour and Lord, and quickly discover that our old man was dealt with once and for all in His Cross (Romans 6. 6). God made no effort to patch him up or improve him, but crucified him outright in Christ, finishing him for good. Therein the question of sin was settled. To know this is of the greatest importance. In God's eyes the old man had to die. Then our eyes are opened and the truth dawns on us that he is already dead in Christ; and that Christ Himself is our new life, indwelling, empowering, becoming to us everything. This is a tremendous discovery.

But along with this new life indwelling, there remains within us the natural man, the good, honest, worthy human nature that wants to please God. It is this that God encounters in Jacob.

God's dealings with Jacob as a man concern the question of his fulfilling the divine will. Jacob was interested in this above all, not in sinning. He knew that God had said of himself and his brother, 'the elder shall serve the younger' (Genesis 25. 23). Accordingly he set himself to achieve this. He used human means to reach the divine end, for he was set on spiritual things and on fulfilling God's will. He only made the fundamental mistake of setting about it in his own way.

God not only hates man's sin; He has no room for the natural man. Not merely did our Lord Jesus never sin; He never depended upon Himself to do good-indeed to do anything at all. God's dealings with our natural man are designed to bring us to the place that Christ Himself chose to take. By nature we are so strong, so able to think and plan and do, and God must bring us to the place of weakness, the place where we cannot think or plan or

do apart from Him.

As we have just said, nothing is ever done to the old man; he died in Christ. Something, however, is done to the natural man. He is not patched up, it is true; he is weakened. He is progressively incapacitated. Step by step the Spirit weakens our natural life until at length, by a last drastic divine touch, we are as dead before Him. But for what? To show us what? To lead us whither?

We saw that 'I in Christ' leads to 'Christ in me', the outward fact leading to an inward fact, both of them accomplished acts of God. In the same way the progressive discipline of the Spirit through outward circumstances leads to a formation of Christ within us by the Spirit (Galatians 4. 19) so that we live a life that is in a new sense derived from Him.

In the figure of Isaac we have Christ imparted to us so that, in the words of Galatians 2. 20, it is 'no longer I, but Christ liveth in me'. In the figure of Jacob we have Christ being wrought in us, so that 'that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God'. It is the Holy Spirit's work to form Christ in us in this latter way. God deals with the natural man that Christ may be inwrought in us, so that we manifest the fruit of the Spirit (5. 22).

Hebrews 12. 5-11 speaks of the loving chastening of the Lord. God, who is the Father of our spirits, deals with us as sons; and He does so to our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Thus is clearly different from I Corinthians I. 30, where it is made plain that Christ is holiness. Here in Hebrews 12, through trial and suffering, I come to be a partaker of His holiness. Thus is something constructive. Something is being wrought in me. Grievous suffering is yielding peaceable fruit-fruit that is produced by the Spirit of God, effortlessly.

What do I mean by that? Let us take the example we have used already. Our human nature delights to expose its spiritual experiences. We prattle on about what the Lord has taught us of deliverance from sin (I am not here referring to witness, that is a different matter) and then the thing we claimed had been finally dealt with in us happens again! We are shattered. And this recurs-until spontaneously we learn not to prattle any more. We do not decide not to talk; we just don't talk. We have learned through suffering.

Here, in this small lesson, we have a tiny particle of what is meant by the term 'Christ inwrought'. In this small degree of self-restraint the character of Christ has become in practice ours. The Spirit is developing in us a new character.

The items listed in Galatians 5. 22-23 under the heading of 'the fruit of the Spirit' are not virtues that the Spirit gives us; they are the natural, spontaneous fruit of the new character. The good tree is bearing good fruit, just as when a peach and a pear tree are planted side by side in the same kind of soil and given the same care and water and nourishment and sunshine, but each of them bears its own distinctive fruit. These outward things are absorbed by each, and by each they are changed into their own fruit. Just so the sunshine of Christ's own life is transmuted in us into something that is recognizably our own.

What God wants today is first that we should know Christ as our life, and in addition, that the Spirit should work Christ into us, to become our characters. Few enough of us know what is meant by the impartation of Christ. Fewer still, alas, know the formation of Christ by the Spirit. Yet this is the whole object of God's dealing with us by chastening.

When we meet some aged saint who has gone through long years of discipline and perhaps suffering under the hand of God, we encounter a depth of spiritual measure, a Christ-likeness, which displays how really and deeply Christ has been wrought into them. ('This is something the young lack, for of course such formation takes time.) Not only their life but the warp and woof of their character becomes Christ. It is, we may say, the Spirit's manufacture.

Some of us are naturally so capable, able to do anything. Others of us are impetuous, ready at once to act for God, impatient of delay. Peter was one such. God did not improve him but touched and weakened him, and then worked Christ into him. So, later on, we encounter in Peter not only a new life but a new man. Paul, too, was one who had had Christ wrought into him through the testings of time. 'I have learned,' says he, 'in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content' (Philippians 4. 11), and the context refers to physical want. Through such experience, which took time, there was a progressive but a quite definite change in his character. And this is what we ourselves need: not only exchanged lives, where it is no longer I but Christ, but changed lives. Of course we cannot have the second without the first, but God does indeed want the second; He does want a real transformation in us.

There was a real transformation in Paul, not just a doctrinal one. In 1 Corinthians 7 there are some verses where Paul speaks for himself, expressing a purely personal opinion. 'But this I say by way of permission, not of commandment' (7. 6). 'But to the rest say I, not the Lord' (7. 12). Who dares to speak like that? Yet God puts it into His Word. 'But I give my judgement, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful' (7. 25). There has been the formation of Christ in him, and what such a one says is valuable in the sight of God, even though it be his own words. Paul was a vessel for God's words, for he could also say 'I give charge, yea not I, but the Lord' (7. 10), but in these other instances he speaks on the ground of God's dealing with him and his oneness of heart with God, and thus God can confirm it. Only one who has known the formation of the Spirit can say, as Paul does, 'be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ' (1 Corinthians 11:1). If another man said this we should regard him as dangerously proud, but we are forced to acknowledge the power of God in those in whom the Spirit has wrought His formative work.

And this formative work is basic to Christianity. The command of Jesus in Matthew 28. 19 is: 'Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations.' The believer receives salvation, but this is not enough, this is not the end. The disciple learns, and his life is worked upon by training and discipline. This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

This matter of the quality of life is expressed in figurative language at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the Bible. In Genesis 2: 12 we read, 'The gold of that land is good; there is bdellium and the onyx stone.' In 1 Corinthians 3. 12 Paul tells us 'if any man buildeth on the foundation gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble; each man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it is revealed in fire'. And in Revelation 21. 19-21 we read that 'the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all manner of precious stones; . . . and the twelve gates were twelve pearls; . . . and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass.'

God's purpose for mankind is not just gold but precious stones. Gold surely represents that which is of God, which proceeds from the Father. Silver stands for the redemption that is in Christ, His free gift of grace. Precious stones are the work of the Spirit. Stones are not elements they are compounds. They are formed through fire, then cut. This is a figure of the Spirit's discipline; through much suffering, difficulty, sorrow, through stress of circumstances, we are made into gem-stones. In the new Jerusalem there is no mention of silver at all; all has become precious stones.

God is looking for a vessel for the meeting of His need and the carrying out of His wondrous purpose. Such a vessel must know the God of Abraham, that all is from Him alone gold. It must know the God of Isaac, that all is His gift in Christ-silver. It must know too the God of Jacob, the Spirit's dealing with the natural man that works Christ into the being -precious stones.