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Israel, and the Soul of the Church

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If I may step behind the identity of Jacob with Israel,
I should like to tell the story of Esau and Jacob, as
illustrative of the struggle between Israel and the church.

The beginning is indicative of the way.

As Esau was born with the hand of Jacob on his heel,
so the church has dogged Israel from the time of its later birth.

As Jacob sought to steal the inheritance of Esau,
so the church laid claim to the inheritance of Israel in its
own youth.

As Jacob went away to live far from the land of his birth,
so the church departed Israel, and lost touch with its Jewish
roots.

Later, rich and powerful,
yet chastened by a truer knowledge of himself,
Jacob returned to the land
and to a facing of the brother he usurped;

So likewise, the church today is returning to its roots,
sobered by its own post-holocaust awareness of sin,
to face the Jewish people whom it has sought to usurp,
her brothers and sisters in Israel.

That night by the brook Jabbock,
Jacob brought himself to a place where he was alone —
that he might come face to face with God,

that he might be able to face his brother on the morrow,
on the other side of the stream.

And so on that night,
Jacob entered into a struggle with his soul
for a claim to the life promised by God.

The church today is also in a struggle for its soul.
It too must come face to face with God
for it too must face its brothers and sisters in the morning;
it must face Israel on the other side of the stream.

Jacob had to struggle alone
through the long dark hours of that night.
There was much to be wrestled with.
He struggled until he was exhausted,
until morning came.

Still he would not let go.
He would not let go of God,
even when the hand of the Almighty struck him,
to disable him, to deter him.

“Bless me!” “Bless me!”

For my brother is on the other side of the stream.

God gave Jacob a new name on that day, the name of Israel.
And God blessed Jacob,
this patriarch who entered into struggle with God and
humanity, on the dark night of his soul.

The church today is in a struggle for her own soul,
for her own life before God
for her acceptance by her brothers and sisters in Israel.

Such an encounter can never come out of the strength of
the church, but only out of her weakness.

She must have the humility and vulnerability to trust in God.

Are we there yet?

We have come to the brook.

Evening has come and our brother is on the other side.

It is time for us in the church to pray,
for the night is not yet far spent.

We must be more willing to hear and to tell the truth.

We must do our own wrestling with God
for our own soul,

accepting the wounds that bring us to our brother in weakness.

For only here can the church lay hold of its own blessing,
the promise of its own name in Jesus of Nazareth,
its own hope for new life on earth.

In the end the church must seek this one thing,
that, like Jacob before Esau,
she may be found acceptable to her brother.

The time for usurping is in the past.

The church is tired today of being alienated and cut off from
the land.

She comes to Jabbok that she may be reconciled with her
brother;

that we may not be lost to one another;
that we may live together in peace.

Let the church then enter more willingly
into the night of struggle,

as we come ever so much closer to our sisters and brothers.

That we may be transformed;
and see more clearly the face of God.

Then perhaps it will be that God will
bless us when the morning comes.

Perhaps even our brothers and sisters
may accept us and forgive us.

That in the end like Esau and Jacob,
we may come to a time of embracing;

A time for the flowing of tears. Amen.