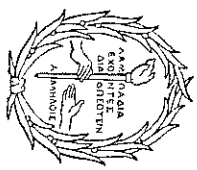

IF I HAD ONLY ONE SERMON TO PREACH

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Sermons by Twenty English Ministers

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THE PERSISTENT PURPOSE

BY THE REV. H. WHEELER ROBINSON, D.D.

"I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."—Gen. xxxii. 26.

THIS is one of the many arresting sayings in which the Bible is so rich—sayings that write themselves for ever on the heart of mankind, and may become the guiding principle, the final epitome, of a human life. The saying is a paradox, for it defies reason by treating an obvious enemy as a disguised friend; but in this apparent inconsistency it ranks with other memorable paradoxes of the Bible. The helpless and agonised father, appealing to Jesus for the restoration of his son, cried, "I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." Simon Peter, at once attracted and repelled by the discovery of the unsuspected majesty of his teacher-friend, instinctively prays, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." There is a paradox even on the lips of the Lord, in that perplexing cry of the Cross, which appeals to the very Father who seems to have withdrawn from His Son, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

The unforgettable cry of Jacob has a not less memorable setting. Who has not dwelt imaginatively on the familiar story of Jacob's wrestling? We think of the dark torrent rushing through the ravine, and the dangerous ford by which Jacob's company have crossed. We see this man of mingled purposes lingering behind, as though reluctant to meet again the brother he wronged so many years before. Then, in the darkness of the

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night, there comes the lonely struggle with the stranger, that desperate encounter for very life, the straining muscles of the locked combatants, the agonised effort, and the grim discovery by Jacob that the stranger is stronger than he. It is a defeated man who somehow penetrates to the hope of a friend behind the fact of a foe, and appeals to a hidden power and will to save and not to destroy: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." What is the real meaning of a story so impressive and so suggestive as this?

The early stories of a nation's origins are its unconscious art. They are not history in any scientific sense, though they may indirectly provide the materials for history. They paint a picture in words—a memorable picture, or they would not be told and retold by successive generations, long before they are written down. They are continually reshaped in their details and modified in their applications, though the nucleus of the story remains. They gather and enshrine the thoughts of one generation after another. Sometimes the beginning may be in a myth or legend far removed from the later application, for the mind of man must always have something to work on, something to assimilate and transform into its higher meanings. So it seems to be with the story of Jacob's wrestling with the stranger, in the darkness of the night by the ford of Jabbok. Perhaps it was once the story of the strife of man against nature, the struggle with the river-god who was angry with those who dared to cross his stream. At that stage it portrayed the struggle of man with the grim realities of his world, man trying to win a precarious footing against the rush of the torrent, at the peril of his life. But then it was taken up and

transformed by the religion of Israel, whose God was behind and above nature. He was at first an unknown God; only by slow degrees and the ventures of faith did men come to know the wealth of compassion, the will to save and bless, which lay hidden in His heart. In that experience of Him, extending over many centuries, the essential quality of the discoverer was persistence—the will to be blessed. So we find a later prophet of Israel appealing to this very story to rebuke his own generation for their slackness: "Jacob strove with God: yea, he strove with the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him. . . . Therefore turn thou to thy God: keep mercy and judgment, and wait on thy God continually."

One of the first discoveries we make in the great adventure of life is of *life's inevitabilities*. As soon as the little child begins to assert himself, he must learn that there is a world of objects round him which do not yield to his will. The hot jug on which he puts his hand, burns him; the cat he teases, scratches him; the moon for which he cries, does not come down to him from the sky. Unless he is to be that unhappy thing, a spoilt child, he will also discover a world of boys and girls, men and women, who do not always give way to him, whose wills must often assert themselves over his. When he is old enough to form his ambitions and plan his career, he is apt to forget the lessons he has learnt in other realms, and to ignore the inevitabilities of life, its stern and relentless limits, until in splendid disregard of these he bruises his shins against them. Life is a bigger and more brutal thing than we thought, and it seems strangely regardless of our own desires. We are like an artist, learning to work on some material

that seems to forbid his purpose, till he has found out how to shape that purpose to the inevitabilities of his material, and make the marble yield the living form. Many a homely proverb, many a saying of the wise, teach us these stern laws of life, which reflect and continue nature's sequence of cause and effect. We learn that bad work will follow us as long as we live, that every debt we incur must sooner or later be paid, that the lost opportunity never recurs, that the past is irrevocable. We learn that unless we give we can never get (in any sense that makes things really ours), that skill must be purchased by effort and discipline, that without loving we cannot win love, or keep it when won. All these things are as necessary a part of our education as man's struggle for existence, or the child's encounter with the physical world around him. In both worlds, the world of things and the world of persons, we come to know ourselves only through knowing that which is not ourselves, that which refuses to be shaped and moulded at our mere wish. These are the realities of life, and until we learn them there is no reality in our religion. We do not really cry to God for help, we do not really pray, until we find something against which we are powerless, something from which we seek to be delivered, and from which we cannot save ourselves. The spiritual agonies through which a man must sooner or later go, if he does not drug himself by work or pleasure into unconsciousness of the real meaning of life, are the birth-hours of true and genuine religion. The ancient world saw its terrors gathered up into the forms of demons and evil spirits, and cried for deliverance from these. The modern world has brushed these forms of thought aside, but

there still remains the sense of life's inevitabilities from which they sprang. There is still the handicap of some physical weakness that robs us of the prize of life when it seemed within our grasp; there is still the consciousness of the divided heart, the grip of some evil passion that will not let us go, or the scars of the old sin that will not be forgotten; there is still the great mystery of death. The proudest of us lives to learn that he is beaten and humiliated by something that is greater than himself, and unless he did learn it, he would remain an untaught fool, though all the intellectual wisdom of the ages were his.

The faith that gives the victory over these inevitabilities of life is that which sees them transformed by *God's initiatives*, that approach of God to man in and through all these things which gives to them a changed meaning. This does not mean an evasion of them, a mere flight from them. A good deal of what passes for religion is a running away from facts. These things are facts, and the only way in which their inevitability can be overcome is by changing their meaning. The Cross of Christ is the greatest example of this. In itself, it meant the inevitable end of a dreamer beating against the bars of the stern facts of life—for how could the lonely prophet of Nazareth hope to escape the cowardice, the selfishness, the prejudice, the spiritual blindness, which crucified Him? Yet the Cross of Christ was transformed by a new meaning when men saw it in the light of a victorious purpose, crowned by God, when they saw it as the measure of the world in which they lived, and of the love of God which was seeking to save that world. The Cross is a transformed inevitability. In such transformation of meaning we

have the new fact, as real as the old, and more powerful. It is there we must look chiefly for God's approach, not through the chinks and crannies left between the facts, not in what has been called a piecemeal supernaturalism, but in the spiritual power to recognise God Himself under His disguise, and to call the old enemy a new friend. The old truth remains: God does not upset His laws at our whim, though all that we yet know of those laws, in nature or grace, cannot exhaust them, or limit the scope of His working. But the knowledge of His purpose to use them for our good and not for our hurt, the discovery that after all He does mean to bless and not to curse, the vision of the whole struggle of life as a necessary preparation for the fuller knowledge—all this takes the poison from the sting of death itself, and gives a present victory over life. The proof must be in the new consciousness of the life so achieved. God's greatest work is from within, rather than without, for this personal experience is the realm of His Holy Spirit. When the unbeliever tauntingly asked what God had done for Stephen, in letting him be stoned to death, the just reply was: "This is what God did for him: He gave him the power to say, 'Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.'"

The power of the Spirit of God to transform the meaning of life for us comes through God's own initiative. We love, because He first loved us. It is in and through the grace of Jesus Christ that we discover the God who has come out to meet us, sinners as we are, not in wrath but in holy love. A prophet pictures Israel's God as coming forth from Zion across the wilderness to seek His people, saying, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn

thee." This is a prophecy of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and of the revelation of the Father in the Gospel and Cross of Jesus Christ. Phillips Brooks put the emphasis in the right place when he answered the question as to what had been the secret of his life by saying, "Less and less, I think, grows the consciousness of seeking God. Greater and greater grows the certainty that He is seeking us and giving Himself to us to the complete measure of our present capacity." Through the discovery of Him who has come out to meet us, we gain the new confidence that plucks victory from defeat, and share the new spirit that transforms life and life's inevitabilities. Those only are "saved" men who share the Spirit of Christ through the grace of Christ, men who no longer fear what life can do to them, because all things are theirs, and they are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

But the power of God's initiatives to transform the meaning of life's inevitabilities is conditioned by *man's persistencies*. If it is in the spirit of man that the victory has to be won, that spirit must be made God's. Now, it is our very nature that we cannot be made good or brought into fellowship with God against our desire. God's need of us cannot become effective until we are conscious of our need of Him. That is His own law—the law He has laid down in making man in His own image. But our need of Him must not be the passing wish of a moment, a sentimental longing, the base expedient of insincerity or cowardice. It must be a persistent purpose that learns to cry, out of the darkness and the apparent defeat, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." Try to take that as a bit of prosaic logic, and you make nonsense of it. How can man

constrain God? How can man win his best victory by defeat? Yet that paradox is true of the highest and deepest things—that they pass beyond our reasonings, and prove themselves by our experience of them. It is enough that we have caught a glimpse of something beyond the appearance of things, a glimpse that comes and goes, perhaps, and leaves us desperately wondering whether we have seen anything at all—and yet a glimpse that gives us the courage and hope to go on, and teaches us to see the truth of the saying, " 'Tisn't life that matters. 'Tis the courage you bring to it.'"¹ There are times when a man's best wisdom, all that he has learnt from life, seems to be gathered up in two words, "Go on." We could not justify it by any argument, and yet, deep down in our hearts, we know it is the one thing to do, and we know that our manhood is tested by this one thing—our persistency in the hopeless thing for which we have once dared to hope. It may be the struggle to achieve some visible success that is worth while, some dream of our youth at which others have laughed or shrugged their shoulders. It may be the loathing of our worst selves, and the determination that no retrospect of failures, however long, shall rob us of the will to go on with the attempt. It may be for our very faith in God that we fight, as when Job cries to a God behind God, a God whose purpose is just and loving behind the God whom life's inevitabilities present as unjust and cruel. Whatever the struggle be, the one thing needful is the persistency that refuses to acknowledge defeat. It may show itself in those who seem to be hopelessly beaten, by the way in which

¹ The opening words and keynote of Hugh Walpole's novel *Fortitude*.
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they cling to "some rag of honour" until the end; it may find its utterance in some last appeal from the cross to the Cross. But it is always the condition of blessing, and of the final discovery of God's will to bless, that we should ourselves persist in the struggle to win the blessing that never can be won by our own effort alone.

If these things are true—and who can deny them?—it would seem that the supreme witness that we belong to God is in our persistent purpose not to let Him go; and this is true, if we rightly understand what we are saying. It does not mean that we find assurance in our unaided effort, or even in the moral strength by which we do go on. On the contrary, it is just the fear that we shall soon let go that makes us afraid. The truth is rather that in this close and desperate grip on God we discover the yet closer grip of God on us. We shall not let Him go—because He will not let us go. He has us in His power; He has taught us our weakness; and now He will show us His strength. The proof of all this is not in any text of Scripture, though the promises of Scripture may point the way; not in any testimony of other men, though we may learn from them what and where to seek. The proof must come new and clear to our own hearts in this inner consciousness of a struggle with God Himself. We thought it was a struggle with an enemy, we find that an unknown friend is holding us. The persistency of our own purpose is, indeed, a frail and unsafe thing; but what if it is the witness of His Spirit in us, the proof of His purpose? This is where the innermost transformation of the Spirit is wrought—when He convinces us that within our wavering, despairing purpose there is God's own

purpose concealed. Then we see that His grace is perfected in our weakness. We learn the truth which underlies the testimony of Israel's prophets, and indeed of all who witness for God—that ours is somehow God's, and therefore God's is ours. This is where all the great and ultimate problems of theology and philosophy are brought to a focus, in the final contact of the human spirit and the divine. With those problems, however, we are not here concerned. Our concern is with the need of the heart in all men—the need to find from life, in spite of all its constraints and sorrows, something that will make it well worth while, for ourselves and for others, something which is, in the old-fashioned phrase, “blessing.” Let every one take courage to go on, for if his heart cries to God, “I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me,” it is God who utters that cry in him, and that cry is the proof that he *will* be blessed.