

CHAPTER 68

THE FAITH OF JACOB

(~~8121~~ HEBREWS 11:21)

It has been well said that

“Though the grace of faith is of universal use throughout our whole lives, yet it is especially so when we come to die. Faith has its great work to do at the last, to help believers to finish well, to die to the Lord, so as to honor Him, by patience, hope, and joy, so as to leave a witness behind them of the truth of God’s Word and the excellency of His ways, for the conviction and establishment of all that attend them in their dying moments” (Matthew Henry).

God is greatly glorified when His people leave this world with their flag flying at full mast: when the spirit triumphs over the flesh, when the world is consciously and gladly left behind for Heaven. For this *faith* must be in exercise.

It is not without good reason, we may be sure, that in the description which the Holy Spirit has given us of the life of faith in Hebrews 11, He has furnished us with no less than three examples — and these in successive verses — of the actings of faith in the final crisis and conflict. We believe that, among other reasons, God would hereby assure His trembling and doubting children, that He who has begun a good work in them, will most certainly sustain and complete the same; that He who has in His sovereignty committed this precious grace to their hearts, will not suffer it to languish when its support is most sorely needed; that He who has enabled His people to exercise faith during the vigor of life, will not withdraw His quickening power during the weakness of death.

As the writer grows older, he is saddened by discovering how very little is now being given out, either orally or in written ministry, for the instruction and comfort of God’s people concerning the dying of Christians. The devil is not inactive in seeking to strike terror into the hearts of God’s people, and knowing this, it is the bounden duty of Christ’s servants to expose the

groundlessness and hollowness of Satan's lies. Not a few have been deterred from so doing by heeding the mistaken notion that, for a Christian to think of and prepare for death is dishonoring to Christ, and inconsistent with the "imminency" of His coming. But such a notion is refuted in our present passage. Let it be carefully considered that, when in ^{<S120>}Hebrews 12:1 the Holy Spirit bids us "run with patience the race that is set before us," He bases that exhortation on the fact that we are "compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses," the reference being unto the men of God who are before in ^{<S100>}Hebrews 11, who all "*died in faith*" (verse 13).

A God-given and a God-sustained faith is not only sufficient to enable the feeblest saint to overcome the solicitations of the flesh, the attractions of the world, and the temptations of Satan, but it is also able to give him a triumphant passage through death. This is one of the prominent things set forth in this wondrous and blessed chapter. In ^{<S100>}Hebrews 11 the Holy Spirit has set out at length the works, the achievements, the fruits, the glories, of faith, and not the least of them is its power to support the soul, comfort the heart, illumine the understanding, and direct the will, in the last earthly struggle. While ^{<S120>}Hebrews 11:20, 21 and 22 have this in common, yet each contributes its own distinctive feature. In the case of Isaac, we see a dying faith triumphing over the affections of the flesh; in the case of Jacob, dying faith overcoming the interference of man; and in Joseph, scorning the worthless pageantry of the world.

Of old Balaam said,

"Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his" (^{<0230>}Numbers 23:10):

well might he wish to do so. The writer has not a shadow of doubt that every Christian who has, in the main current of his life, walked with God, his last hours on earth (normally speaking, for we consider not here the exceptional cases of those taken Home suddenly) are the brightest and most blissful of all. ^{<2048>}Proverbs 4:18, of itself, is fully sufficient to warrant this thought. The Christian is not always permitted to bear testimony of this so as to be intelligent unto those surrounding him, but even though his poor body be convulsed with pain, and physical unconsciousness set in, yet the soul cutting adrift from its earthly moorings, is then blest with a sight and sense of his precious Redeemer such as he never had before (^{<4075>}Acts 7:55).

“Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace” (~~09737~~ Psalm 37:37).

A peaceful death has concluded the troublous life of many a good man. As the late C. H. Spurgeon said on this verse, “With believers it may rain in the morning, thunder at midday, and pour torrents in the afternoon, but it must clear up ere the sun go down.” Most aptly do his words apply to the case of Jacob. A stormy passage indeed was his, but the waters were smooth as he entered the port. Cloudy and dark were many of the hours of his life, but the sunset bathed it with radiant splendor at its close.

“By faith Jacob when he was a dying” (~~8112~~ Hebrews 11:21).

Ah, but to “die” by faith, we must needs live by faith. And a life of faith is not like the shining of the sun on a calm and clear day, its rays meeting with no resistance from the atmosphere; rather is it more like the sun rising upon a foggy morning, its rays struggling to pierce through and dispel the opposing mists. Jacob walked by faith, but the exercise thereof encountered many a struggle, and had to fight hard for each victory. In spite of all his faults and failings (and each of us is just as full of the same), Jacob dearly prized his interest in the everlasting covenant, trusted in God, and highly esteemed His promises. It is a very faulty and one-sided estimate of his character which fails to take these things into account. The old nature was strong within him; yes, and so too was the new.

Though his infirmities led Jacob to employ unlawful means for the procuring of it, yet his heart *valued* the “birthright,” which profane Esau despised (~~0230~~ Genesis 25). Though he yielded unto the foolish suggestions of his mother to deceive Isaac, yet his faith covetly eyed the promises of God. Though there may have been a measure of fleshly bargaining in his vow, yet Jacob was anxious for the Lord to be his God (~~0281~~ Genesis 28:21). Though he stole away from Laban in fear, when his father-in-law overtook him, he glorified God in the tribute he paid Him (~~0315~~ Genesis 31:53). Though he was terrified at Esau, nevertheless he sought unto the Lord, pleaded His promises (~~0322~~ Genesis 32:12), and obtained an answer of peace. Though later he groveled at the feet of his brother, in the sequel we find him prevailing with God (~~0328~~ Genesis 32:28). Equally with Abraham and Isaac, “by faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tents” (~~8119~~ Hebrews 11:9).

But it was during the closing days of his life that Jacob's faith shone most brightly. When giving permission for Benjamin to accompany his other sons on their second trip to Egypt, he said "God Almighty (or "God the Sufficient One") give you mercy before the man" (^{<0434>}Genesis 43:14). This was the title under which the Lord had blessed Abraham (^{<0170>}Genesis 17:1), as it was also the one Isaac employed when he blessed Jacob (^{<0283>}Genesis 28:3): thus in using it here, we see how Jacob rested on the covenant promise. Arriving in Egypt, the aged patriarch was presented unto its mighty monarch. Blessed is it to see how he conducted himself: instead of cringing before the ruler of the greatest empire of the old world, we are told that "Jacob blessed Pharaoh" (^{<0470>}Genesis 47:7); with becoming dignity he conducted himself as a child of the King of kings (^{<0870>}Hebrews 7:7), and carried himself as became an ambassador of the Most High.

"By faith Jacob when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph." This takes us back to what is recorded in ^{<0480>}Genesis 48. What is found there is quite distinct from what is said in the next chapter, where Jacob is seen as God's prophet announcing the future of all his twelve sons. But here he is concerned only with Joseph and his two sons. Before considering the particular detail which our text treats of, let us note the sentence which immediately precedes it. "And he blessed Joseph" (^{<0485>}Genesis 48:15): in this we may admire the overruling hand of God, and also find here the key to what follows.

In ^{<0517>}Deuteronomy 21:17 we read,

"But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the first-born, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his."

It was the right of the firstborn to have a double portion, and this is exactly what we find Jacob bestowing upon Joseph, for both Ephraim and Manasseh were allotted a distinct tribal part and place in the promised inheritance. This, by right, belonged unto Joseph, though the Devil had tried to cheat him out of it, using Laban to deceive Jacob by substituting Leah in Rebekah's place, and Joseph was *her* firstborn; and now by the providence of God the primogeniture is restored to him. So too God permitted Reuben to sin so that the way might be open for this:

“Now the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel, (for he was the firstborn) but, forasmuch as he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph” (~~380~~ 1 Chronicles 5:1).

Earlier in this interview, Jacob had said,

“And now thy two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, which were born unto thee in the land of Egypt, before I came unto thee into Egypt, *are mine*” (~~0485~~ Genesis 48:5).

Those two sons of Joseph had been borne to him by an Egyptian wife, and in a foreign land, but now they were to be adopted and incorporated into the body of the holy seed. For note, when Jacob blessed them he said,

“The Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac” (verse 16).

By that blessing he sought to draw their hearts away from Egypt and their kinsfolk there, that they might be annexed to the church and share with the people of God.

“By faith Jacob when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph.” In this case the R.V. is more accurate: “blessed *each* of the sons of Joseph,” for their blessing was not collective, but a distinctive and discriminating one. In fact the leading feature of the dying Jacob’s faith is most particularly to be seen at this very point. When Joseph brought his two sons before their grandfather to receive his patriarchal blessing, he placed Manasseh the elder, to his right hand, and Ephraim the younger to his left. His object in this was that Manasseh might receive the first and superior portion. Right there it was that the faith of Jacob was most tested. At this time Joseph was governor over all Egypt, and second only to Pharaoh himself in authority and power; moreover he was Jacob’s favorite son, yet the dying patriarch had now to withstand him.

“And Israel stretched out his right hand, and laid it upon Ephraim’s head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh’s head, guiding his hands wittingly; for Manasseh was the firstborn” (~~0484~~ Genesis 48:14).

Herein we behold *the manner in* which the blessing was bestowed. Once more the younger, by the appointment of God, was preferred before the elder, for the Lord distributes His favors as He pleases, saying

“Is it not lawful for Me to do what I will with Mine own?”
(~~4015~~ Matthew 20:15).

Unto the high sovereignty of God Jacob here submissively bowed. It was not a thing of chance that he crossed his hands, for the Hebrew of “guiding his hands wittingly” is “made his hands to understand.” It was the understanding of faith, for his physical eyes were too dim to see what he was doing — true faith is ever opposed to sight! Note how the Holy Spirit emphasizes the fact that it was “Isaac” (and not “Jacob”) who did this.

“And he blessed Joseph, and said, God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk” (~~01815~~ Genesis 48:15).

Very blessed is this. Despite his physical decay, there was no abatement of his spiritual strength: notwithstanding the weakness of old age, he abode firm in faith and in the vigorous exercise of it. Here in the verse before us, we behold Jacob recognizing and asserting the covenant which Jehovah had made with his fathers. This is the very life of faith: to lay hold of, draw strength from, and walk in the light of the everlasting covenant, for it is the foundation of all our blessings, the charter of our inheritance, the guaranty of our eternal glory and bliss. He who keeps it in view will have a happy deathbed, a peaceful end, (and a God-honoring exit from this world of sin and suffering.

“The God which fed me all my life long unto this day”
(~~01815~~ Genesis 48:15).

As Jacob had made a solemn acknowledgment of the spiritual blessing which he had received by virtue of the everlasting covenant, so he also owned the temporal mercies of which he had been the favored recipient. “It was a work of faith to retain a precious thankful remembrance of Divine providence in a constant provision of all needful temporal supplies, from first to last, during the whole course of his life” (John Owen). As it is an act of faith to cordially consent unto the dealings of God with us in a providential way, so it is a fruit of faith to make a confession by the mouth concerning Him. Note: God is honored before those attending Him when a dying saint bears testimony unto His faithfulness in having supplied all his need.

“The Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads”
 (<04816>Genesis 48:16).

“He reflects on all the hazards, trials and evils that befell him, and the exercise of his faith in them all. Now all his dangers were past, all his evils conquered, all his fears removed, he retains by faith a sense of the goodness and kindness of God in rescuing him out of them all” (John Owen).

“Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee” (<0882>Deuteronomy 8:2):

as the children of Israel were called upon to do this at the close of their wilderness journey, so we cannot be more profitably employed in the closing hours of our earthly pilgrimage than by recalling and reviewing that grace which delivered us from so many dangers known and unknown.

“And let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth” (<04816>Genesis 48:16).

Jacob was not ambitious for a continuance of their present greatness in Egypt, but desired for them the blessings of the covenant. Joseph could have left to his sons a rich patrimony in Egypt, but he brought them to Jacob to receive his benediction. Ah, the baubles of this world are nothing in comparison with the blessings of Zion: see <0908>Psalm 128:5; 134:3; 133:3. The spiritual blessings of the Redeemer far exceed in value the temporal mercies of the Creator: it was the former which Joseph coveted for his sons, and which Jacob now prophetically bestowed.

“And when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; and he held up his father’s hand to remove it from Ephraim’s head unto Manasseh’s head. And Joseph said unto his father, not so, my father; for this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon *his* head” (<04817>Genesis 48:17, 18).

Here we see the will of man asserting itself, which, when left to itself, is ever opposed to God. Joseph had *his* wishes concerning the matter, and did not hesitate to express them; though, be it noted unto his credit, he meekly acquiesced at the finish.

“And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it”
 (<04819>Genesis 48:19).

It was at *this* point that Jacob’s faith shone most brightly; the repeated “I know it” marks the great strength of his faith. He had “heard” from God (<45017>Romans 10:17), he believed God, he submitted to God. Jacob was no more to be influenced by “the will of man” here, than in the preceding verse Isaac was by “the will of the flesh”; faith overcame both. Learn, my reader, that sometimes faith has to cross the wish and will of a loved one!

Plainly it was “by faith” that the dying Israel blessed each of the sons of Joseph. Certainly it was not by sight.

“To ‘sight’ what could be more unlikely than that these two young Egyptian princes, for such they were, should ever forsake Egypt, the land of their birth, and migrate into Canaan? What more improbable than that they should ‘each’ become a separate tribe? What more un-looked for, than that, of these two, the younger should be exalted above the elder, both in importance and number?” (E.W.B.)

“He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations” (<04819>Genesis 48:19).

Not only does God make a great difference between the elect and the reprobate, but He does not deal alike with His own children, neither in temporals nor spirituals. There are some of His favored people to whom God manifests Himself more familiarly, grants them more liberal supplies of His grace, and more plentiful comforts -- there was a specially favored three among the twelve apostles. Some Christians have more opportunities to glorify God than others, higher privileges of service, greater abilities and gifts -- the “talents” were not distributed equally: one had five, another three, another one. But let us not murmur: all have more than they can improve.

“And worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff”
 (<81121>Hebrews 11:21).

There is some room for question as to what incident the apostle is here referring to. Some think that (like Moses did “exceeding fear and quake”:
 <81221>Hebrews 12:21) it is entirely a N.T. revelation; others (the writer

included) regard it as alluding to what is recorded in ^{<0473>}Genesis 47:31. The only difficulty in connection with this view is, that here we read Jacob “worshipped upon the top of his staff,” there that “he bowed himself upon the bed’s head.” Concerning this variation we agree with Owen that “he did *both*, namely, bow towards the head of the bed, and at the same time lean on his staff, as we are assured by comparing the Divine writers together.”

The occasion of Jacob’s “worship” was as follows:

“And the time drew nigh that Israel must die: And he called his son Joseph, and said unto him, If now I have found grace in thy sight, put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not, I pray thee, in Egypt: But I will lie with my fathers, and thou shalt carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their burying-place. And he said, I will do as thou hast said” (^{<0472>}Genesis 47:29, 30).

It was far more than a sentimental whim which moved the patriarch to desire that his body be interred in the holy land: it was the working of faith, a blessed exhibition of his confidence in God.

It was not the pomp and pageantry of his burial which concerned Jacob, but *the place* of it which he was so solicitous about. Not in Egypt among idolators, must his bones be laid to rest, for with them he cared not to have any fellowship in life; and now he desired no proximity unto them in death — he would show that God’s people are a *separated* people. No, it was in the burying-place of his fathers he wished to be laid.

First, to show forth his union with Abraham and Isaac in the covenant.

Second, to express his faith in the promises of God, which concerned Canaan, and not Egypt.

Third, to draw off the minds of his descendants from a continuance in Egypt: setting before them an example that *they* should think of returning to the promised land at the proper time, and thereby confirming them in the belief of possessing it.

Fourth, to signify he would go before them, and, as it were, take possession of the land on their behalf.

Fifth, to intimate that Canaan was a type of Heaven, the “Better Country” (^{<8116>}Hebrews 11:16), the eternal Resting-place of all the people of God.

The asking of Joseph to place his hand under his thigh, was a gesture in swearing (^{<0240>}Genesis 24:2, 3), as the raising of the hand now is with us. It was not that Jacob doubted his son’s veracity, but it signified the eagerness of his entreaty, and the intensity of his mind about the matter: what an important thing it was to him. No doubt it was also designed to forestall any objection which Pharaoh might make after his death: see Gen. 50:5, 6. Jacob was in bed at the time, but gathering together his little remaining strength, he raised himself to sit upright, and then bowing his body, and so that it might be supported, he leaned upon his staff, worshipping God.

The Holy Spirit’s mention here of Jacob’s reverent gesture in worshipping God, intimates to us that it well becomes a worshipper of the Most High to manifest the inward devotion of the soul by a fitting posture of the body. God has redeemed both, and He is to be honored by both: ^{<4063>}1 Corinthians 6:20. Shall we serve God with that which costs us nothing? Sitting or lying at prayer savors more of sloth and carelessness, than of reverence and zeal. Carnal men, in pursuit of their fleshly lusts, can weary and waste the body; shall Christians shelter behind every inconvenience and excuse? Christ exposed His body to the utmost suffering, shall not His love constrain us to deny selfish ease and sloth!

Having secured the promise from Joseph that his will should be carried out, Jacob bowed before God in worship, for now he realized the Lord was making good the promise recorded in ^{<0440>}Genesis 46:4. In his great weakness he had bowed toward his bed’s head so as to adore God, completing now his representation of reverence and faith by leaning upon the top of his staff. In that emblematic action he signified his complete dependence upon God, testified to his condition as a pilgrim in the earth, and emphasized his weariness of the world and his readiness to part from it. He praised God for all He had done for him, and for the approaching prospect of everlasting bliss. Blessed is it to find that the Holy Spirit’s final word about Jacob in Scripture (^{<8121>}Hebrews 11:21) depicts him in the act of *worship!*