

CHAPTER 69

THE FAITH OF JOSEPH

(~~8122~~ HEBREWS 11:22)

At the early age of seventeen Joseph was carded away into a foreign country, into a heathen land. There he remained for many years surrounded by idolaters, and during all that time he, probably, never came into contact with a single child of God. Moreover, in those days there was no Bible to read, for none of God's Word had then been committed to writing. Yet amid all sorts of temptations and trials, he remained true unto the Lord. Thirteen years in prison did not embitter him; being made lord over Egypt did not spoil him; evil examples all around, did not corrupt him. O the mighty power of Divine grace to *preserve* its favored objects. But let the reader carefully bear in mind that, in his earliest years, Joseph had received a godly training! O how this ought to encourage Christian parents: do your part in faithfully teaching the children, and with God's blessing, it will abide with them, even though they move into a foreign land.

It may strike some of our readers that the apostle made a strange selection here from the remarkable history of Joseph. No reference is given unto his faithfulness to God in declaring what He had made known to him (~~0378~~ Genesis 37:5), his chastity (~~0390~~ Genesis 39:10), his patience under affliction (~~0958~~ Psalm 105:18, 19), his wisdom and prudence (~~0322~~ Genesis 39:22; 47:14), his fear of God (~~0428~~ Genesis 42:18); his compassion (~~0424~~ Genesis 42:24), his overcoming evil with good (~~0450~~ Genesis 45:10), his reverence to his father, and that when he was advanced unto outward dignity above him (~~0482~~ Genesis 48:12), his obedience to his father (~~0431~~ Genesis 47:31); instead, the whole of his memorable life is passed over, and we are introduced to the final scene. But this seeming difficulty is at once removed if we bear in mind the Spirit's scope in this chapter, namely, to encourage the fearful and wavering Hebrews, by bringing before them striking examples of the efficacy and sufficiency of faith to carry its favored possessor safely through every difficulty, and ultimately conduct him into the promised inheritance.

Not only was there a particular reason in the case of those who first received this Epistle, why the Holy Spirit should conduct them unto the expiring moments of Joseph, but there is also a wider purpose why (in this description of the whole Life of Faith) He should do so. Faith is a grace which honours God and stands its possessor in good stead, in death as well as life. The worldling may appear to prosper, and his journey through life seem to be smooth and easy, but how does he fare in the supreme crisis? what support is there for his heart when God calls him to pass out of time into eternity? “For what is the hope of the hypocrite, though he hath gained, when God taketh away his soul?” Ignorance may exclude terror, and *sottishness* may still the conscience; but there can be no true peace, no firm confidence, no triumphant joy for those out of Christ. Only he can die worshipping and glorifying God for His promises who possesses genuine faith.

If the kind providence of God preserves his faculties unto the end, a Christian ought not to be passive in death, and die like a beast. No, this is the last time he can do any thing for God on earth, and therefore he should take a fresh and firm hold of His everlasting covenant, “ordered in all things and sure,” going over in his mind the amazing grace of the Triune God toward him; the Father, in having from the beginning, chosen him unto salvation; the Son for having obeyed, suffered and died in his room and stead; the Holy Spirit for having sought him out when dead in sins, quickened him into newness of life, shed abroad the love of God in his heart, and put a new song in his mouth. He should review the faithfulness and goodness of God toward him all through his pilgrimage. He should rest on the promises, and view the glorious future awaiting him. Thereby, praise and thanksgiving will fill his soul and mouth, and God will be greatly honored before the onlookers.

When faith is active during the dying hours of a saint, not only is his own heart spiritually upheld and comforted, but God is honored and others are confirmed. A carnal man cannot speak well of the world when he comes to pass through the dark valley; no, he dares not commend his worldly life to others. But a godly man can speak well of God, and commend His covenant to others. So it was with Jacob (^{GENESIS}Genesis 48:15, 16). So it was with Joshua:

“Behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth: and ye know in all your hearts and in all your souls, that *not one* thing hath failed

of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof” (^{<0234>}Joshua 23:14).

So was it also with Joseph. He could have left to his sons nobility of blood, a rich patrimony in Egypt, but he brought them to his father to receive his blessing (^{<0482>}Genesis 48:12). And what was that? To invest them with the right of entering into the visible privileges of the covenant. Ah, to Joseph, the riches of Egypt were nothing in comparison with the blessings of Zion. And so again now: when his hours on earth were numbered, Joseph thinks not of the temporal position of honor which he had occupied so long, but was engaged only with the things of God and the promised inheritance. See here the power of a godly example: Joseph had witnessed the last acts of his father, and now he follows in his steps. The good examples of superiors and seniors are of great force unto those who look up to them — how careful they should be, then, of their conduct! Let us seek to emulate that which is praiseworthy in our betters: ^{<3017>}Philippians 3:17; ^{<3837>}Hebrews 13:7.

“By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones” (verse 22).

First, let us observe *the time* when Joseph’s faith was here exercised. It was during his closing hours upon earth. Most of his long life had been spent in Egypt, and during its later stages, had been elevated unto a dizzy height; for as ^{<4470>}Acts 7:10 tells us, he was made “governor” or lord over Egypt, and over all Pharaoh’s house. But neither the honors nor the luxuries which Joseph received while in the land of exile, made that holy man forget the promises of God, nor bound his soul to the earth. His mind was engaged in higher things than the perishing baubles of this world. Learn them, my reader, it is only as our hearts ascend to heaven that we are able to look down with contempt upon that which this world prizes so much.

From the case of Joseph we may see that earthly honor and wealth do not *in themselves* injure: where there is a gracious heart to manage them, they can be employed with advantage and used to God’s glory. Many examples may be cited in proof of this. God has ever had a few of His saints even in Caesar’s “household” (^{<3042>}Philippians 4:22). Material things are God’s gifts, and so must be improved unto His praise. There is as much faith, yea

more, in moderating the affections under a full estate, as there is in depending upon God for supplies when we have nothing. Nevertheless, to learn “*how* to abound” (^{<3042>}Philippians 4:12) is a hard lesson. To keep the mind stayed upon God and the heart from settling down here, calls for much exercise of soul; therefore are we exhorted “if riches increase, set not your hearts upon them” (^{<1920>}Psalm 62:10) — but be thankful for them, and seek to use them unto God’s honor.

No, the poor do not have such temptations to overcome as do the rich. The poor are driven to depend upon God: they have no other alternative save abject despair. But there is more choice to those who have plenty: *their* great danger is to lose sight of the Giver and become immersed in His gifts. Not so with Joseph: to him Egypt was nothing in comparison with Canaan. Then let us seek grace to be of his spirit: true greatness of mind is to count the highest things of earth as nothing when weighed against the things of Heaven. It is a great mercy when the affluence of temporal things does not take the heart off the promises, but for this there has to be a constant crying unto Him to quicken our spiritual sensibilities, keep us in close communication with Himself, wean us from things below.

But neither the riches nor the honors of Egypt could secure Joseph from death, nor did they make him unmindful or afraid of it. The time had arrived when he saw that his end was at hand, and he met it with a confident spirit. And thus it should be with us. But in order to do this we must be all our lifetime preparing for *that* hour. Reader, there can be no dissembling then. Allow me to ask: Is your soul truly yielded up to God? Do you hold this world with a light hand? Are God’s promises your daily food? Life is held by a very uncertain tenure. Unless the Lord returns first, death will be the last great enemy with which you have to contend, and you will need to have on all your armor. If you have not on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation, what will you do in the swellings of Jordan, when Satan is often permitted to make his fiercest attack?

“By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel.” Let us consider next *the strength* of his faith. It will be noted by the careful reader that the margin gives an alternative rendering, namely, “By faith Joseph, when he died, *remembered* the departing of the children of Israel”: the Greek will allow of either translation, and personally we believe that the *fulness* of the Spirit’s words requires that both meanings be kept before us. That which is in view here is very striking and

blessed. The word “remembered” shows that Joseph’s mind was now engaged with the promise which the Lord had made to Abraham, recorded in ^{<0154>}Genesis 15:14-16. The alternative translation “he *made mention of* the departing of the children of Israel,” signifies that Joseph testifies his own faith and hope in the sure words of the living God.

At the end of Joseph’s long and memorable career his thoughts were occupied not so much with what God had wrought for him, but with what He had promised unto His people: in other words, he was dwelling not upon the past, but with that which was yet future. In his heart were the “things hoped for” (^{<0810>}Hebrews 11:1)! More than two hundred years had passed since Jehovah had spoken what is recorded in ^{<0150>}Genesis 15. Part of the prediction which He there made, had been fulfilled; but to carnal reason there seemed very little prospect that the remainder of it would come to pass.

First, God had announced that the seed of Abraham should be “a stranger in the land that is not theirs” (^{<0153>}Genesis 15:13), which had been confirmed when Jacob carried all his household down into Egypt.

Second, God had declared the descendants of Abraham should “serve” the Egyptians and “they shall afflict them four hundred years” (^{<0253>}Exodus 15:13); but to outward sight, *that* now appeared most unlikely. The posterity of the patriarchs had been given favor in Pharaoh’s eyes (^{<0456>}Genesis 45:16-18), the “best” of the land was set apart for their use (^{<0406>}Genesis 47:6), there they “multiplied exceedingly” (^{<0477>}Genesis 47:27), and so great was the respect of the Egyptians that they “mourned” for Jacob seventy days (^{<0503>}Genesis 50:3). Joseph himself was their great benefactor and deliverer from the famine: why, then, should his descendants be hated and oppressed by them? Ah, faith does not reason, but *believes*.

Third, God had declared that He would judge the Egyptians for their afflicting of His people (^{<0254>}Exodus 15:14), which was fulfilled in the awful plagues recorded in the early chapters of Exodus. Finally, God had promised “and afterward shall they come out with great substance... in the fourth generation they shall come hither (into Canaan) again” (^{<0254>}Exodus 15:14, 16). It was unto this that the heart of Joseph was now looking forward, and nothing but *real* spiritual faith could have counted upon the same. If, after his death, the Hebrews (without a leader) were to be sorely afflicted, and that for *a lengthy* season; if they were to be reduced unto

helpless slaves, who could reasonably hope that all this should be followed by their leaving the land of Egypt with “great substance,” and returning to the land of Canaan? Ah, FAITH is fully assured that God’s promises *will be* fulfilled, no matter how long they may be delayed.

Faith is gifted with long-distant sight, and therefore is it able to look beyond all the hills and mountains of difficulty unto the shining horizon of the Divine promises. Consequently, faith is blessed with patience, and calmly awaits the destined hour for God to intervene and act: therefore does it heed that word,

“For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it shall speak, and not lie; though it tarry, wait for it; because it will *surely* come” (^{388B}Habakkuk 2:3).

Though the Hebrews were to lie under Egyptian bondage for a long season, Joseph had not a doubt but that the Lord would, in His appointed time, bring them forth with a high hand. God’s *delays*, dear reader, are not to deny our prayers and mock our hopes, but are for the disciplining of our hearts — to subdue our impatience, which wants things in our *own* way and time; to quicken us to call more earnestly upon Him, and to fit us for receiving His mercies when they are given.

God often defers His help till the very last moment. It was so with Abraham offering up Isaac; only when his son had been bound to the altar, and he had taken the knife into his hand to slay him, did God intervene. It was so with Israel at the Red Sea (^{424B}Exodus 14:13). It was so with the disciples in the storm: “the ship was covered with the waves,” before Christ calmed the sea (^{418B}Matthew 8:24-26). It was so with Peter in prison; only a very few hours before his execution did God free him (^{442B}Acts 12:6-8). So, too, God works in mysterious ways *His* wonders to perform, and often in a manner quite contrary to outward likelihood. The history of Joseph affords a striking example. He was first made a slave in Egypt, and this in order to his being made ruler over it--who would have thought that the prison was the way to the court! So it was with his descendants: when their tale of bricks was doubled and the straw withheld, who would have looked for deliverance! Yes, *God’s* ways are strange to flesh and blood: often He allows error to arise to clear the Truth; bondage often makes way for liberty; persecution and affliction have often proved blessings in disguise.

“And Joseph said unto his brethren, I die; and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (⁽¹⁵¹⁸⁾Genesis 50:24).

How plainly and how blessedly does this bring out the *strength* of Joseph’s faith; There was no hesitancy or doubt: he was fully assured that God cannot lie, and that He would, “*surely*” make good His word. Equally certain is it that God’s promises unto us will be fulfilled: “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (⁽⁸¹⁶⁾Hebrews 13:5). Therefore may the dying saint exclaim

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me” (⁽¹²⁰⁴⁾Psalms 23:4).

So too our faith may look beyond the grave unto the glorious resurrection, and say with David, “my flesh also shall rest *in hope*” (⁽¹⁰⁰⁾Psalms 16:9).

“By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel.” Let us now take note of *the breadth* of his faith. A true Christian is known by his affection for Zion. The cause of Christ upon earth is *dearer* to him than the prosperity or disposition of his personal estate.

“We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” (⁽⁶¹⁴⁾1 John 3:14).

Thus it was with Joseph; before he gave commandment concerning his bones, he was first concerned with the future exodus of Israel and their settlement in Canaan! How different with the empty professor, who is ruled by self-love, and has no heart for the people of God. He may be interested in the progress of *his own* denomination, but he has no concern for the Church at large. Far otherwise is it with the genuine saint:

“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy” (⁽¹⁰⁷⁵⁾Psalms 137:5, 6).

So Joseph, at the very time of his death, was engaged with the future happiness of God’s people.

Beautiful indeed is it to see the dying Joseph unselfishly thinking about the welfare of others. O may God deliver the writer and the reader from a

narrow heart and a contracted spirit. True faith not only desires that it shall be well with our own soul, but with the Church at large. Behold another lovely example of this in the case of the dying daughter-in-law of Eli, the high priest:

“And she said, The glory of God is departed from Israel; for the ark of God is taken” (~~1002~~1 Samuel 4:22)

— not my father-in-law is dead, not my husband has been slain, but “the glory is departed.” But most blessed of all is the case of Him of whom Joseph was here a type. As our precious Savior drew near the Cross, yea, on the very night of His betrayal, it is recorded that

“having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them to the end” (~~4130~~John 13:1).

The interests of God’s people were ever upon His heart.

Let us note how another aspect of the *breadth* of true faith was illustrated by Joseph. Faith not only believes the promises which God has given to His saints individually, but also lays hold of those given to the Church collectively. There have been many seasons when the cause of Christ on earth has languished sorely; when it has been in a low state spiritually; when eminent leaders had been all called home, and when fierce persecution broke out against the little flock which they had left behind. Even so, they still had that sure word,

“Upon this Rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (~~4068~~Matthew 16:18).

In all ages the enemy has sought to destroy the people of God, but the Lord has defeated his designs and rendered his opposition ineffectual. O for a faith to *now* lay hold of this promise,

“When the Enemy shall come in like a flood the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him” (~~2390~~Isaiah 59:19).

“And gave commandment concerning his bones.” The reference here is to what is recorded in ~~01305~~Genesis 50:25,

“And Joseph took an oath saying God will surely visit you, and ye will carry up my bones from hence.”

This brings out another characteristic of his faith: the *public avowal* of it. Joseph's faith was no secret thing, hidden in his own heart, about which others knew nothing. No, though he had occupied for so long an eminent situation, he was not ashamed to now let others know that he found his support and confidence in the promises of God. He had been of great dignity and authority among the Egyptians, and his fame for wisdom and prudence was great among the nations. It was therefore the more necessary for him to *openly renounce* all alliance with them, lest posterity think he had become an Egyptian. Had he liked and loved the Egyptians, he had wanted his tomb among them; but his heart was elsewhere.

“And gave commandment concerning his bones.” This was not a superstitious request, as though it made any difference whether our bodies be deposited in “consecrated” ground or no. Rather it was:

First, to exhibit his belief in the promises of Jehovah; though he could not go in person into the land of Canaan, yet he would have his bones carried thither, and thus symbolically (as it were) take possession of it.

Second, to confirm the hope of his brethren, and thus draw their hearts from the goodly portion in Goshen. He would sharpen the desire of the Nation to earnestly aspire after the promised redemption when he was dead.

Third, to establish a public memorial, by which on all occasions, his posterity might call to mind the truth of the promise.

Proof that this dying request of Joseph's was designed as a *public memorial* is found in noting a significant change between the wording of ^{<01304>}Genesis 50:24 and ^{<01305>}Genesis 50:25. In the former, Joseph “said unto his brethren”; in the latter, he “took an oath of the children of Israel” (cf. ^{<01319>}Exodus 13:19): by the heads of their tribes, he brought the whole people into this engagement — binding on after generations. Thus Joseph established this monument of his being of the favored seed of Abraham. Joseph's requesting his brethren to “take an oath” illustrates the power of example: cf. ^{<01431>}Genesis 47:31! He made reference to his “bones” rather than to his “body,” because he knew another two centuries must yet run their course. The whole transaction was an emblematic pledge of *the communion of saints*. Though the Christian at death be cut off from his loved ones on earth, he is introduced unto the spirits of the just in Heaven.