

Jacob in Egypt

J. G. Bellett.

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(R. L. Allan)

In conflicts, as one has said, not only is Satan defeated, but the tried saint learns fresh secrets about his own feebleness and the resources and grace of God. So, I may add, in the wanderings of the heart, in departure from the power of faith and hope, not only is the soul chastened and exercised, but it learns, to God's glory, that it must come back to that posture in which the Lord first set it.

These thoughts may introduce us to the closing period of Jacob's history.

At the beginning Jacob had a title to the inheritance in the grace and sovereignty of God. "The elder shall serve the younger" had pronounced the decree of God in his favour. The rights of nature in the person of Esau were not allowed to stand in his way. The purpose of the grace of God secured everything to him, his only but all-sufficient title, as it is ours. From simple confidence in this he departed. He sought to get his brother's seal to this title (Gen. 25: 31), and then, in guile, to get his father's also. (Gen. 27)

This was a fraud; and twenty years' exile, endured in the midst of wrongs and oppressions, was the divine discipline.

But this was also "confidence in the flesh." It was Galatianism — a seeking to get our title to blessing, or to birthright, or to inheritance from God, sealed by some other hand than His.

In the end, however, his soul is found in the exercise of the simplest confidence. He is about to die, and the sons of Joseph, which he had by the Egyptian, are brought before him. He at once adopts them. They had no title — at least none to the rights of the firstborn; but Jacob adopts them and puts them in the place of the firstborn, giving them a double portion, treating them as though they had been Reuben and Simeon.

In all this there was the stern refusal to confer with flesh and blood. His own bowels might have pleaded for his own first-born. But no: Reuben must give place to Joseph, who, in his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, shall have one portion above his brethren. Grace shall prevail. Faith shall read its title to birthright, blessing, divine inheritance, and all things, to the full gainsaying of the claims of flesh and blood, or rights of nature.

But further, Manasseh the elder shall yield to Ephraim the younger, as Reuben the firstborn has been made to yield to Joseph the eleventh, and this, too, in despite of the most affecting pleadings and struggles of nature. In the bowels of a father, Joseph contends for the rights of Manasseh. Jacob feels for him in those yearnings. In answer to them he says, "I know it, my son, I know it." But he must pass on till he get beyond, the hearing of the cry of nature, and publish the purpose of God and the title of grace, setting Ephraim above Manasseh. (Gen. 48)

Thus is he brought to occupy the very ground where the hand of God had set him at the beginning, and from which, through confidence in the flesh, he departed. He now learns that those whom God blesses shall be blest, that His grace needs not the help of flesh, nor His promise the seal of man. Nay, but that rather, in spite of flesh, and in independence of man, God will make it good. Had it been needful, to the securing of the divine inheritance to him, to procure his dying father's blessing,

Jacob now sees in his setting Ephraim above Manasseh, in spite of Joseph, that God could and would have brought it about. He had desired Jacob's own seal to his title under God; but now he learns that God can vindicate the title He confers, and make good the undertakings and promises of His grace, in spite, as it were, of even earth and hell, the reluctance of nature, or all the struggles of flesh and blood.

This was a striking witness of his soul recovering its early and right condition. But there are others.

The call of God was to a resurrection-hope, or to an inheritance in the heavenly country. The patriarchs so apprehended it. (Heb. 11: 13-16)

Abraham testified to this hope through his life and ways, failing though he did in some incidental matters, as in the denial of his wife before Pharaoh and Abimelech, and in the taking of Hagar.

So did Isaac, though failing also and betraying the ways of nature.

Jacob, likewise, testified to it, dwelling with Abraham and Isaac, in tents, as heirs of the same promises. (Heb. 11: 9) But he departed more directly from this faith than they had. He built a house at Succoth — he trafficked in land with the Shechemites — he carelessly allowed his sons to join in affinity with the daughters of Canaan: all these things betraying the departure of his heart from the call of God, and the resurrection-hope in which his fathers had walked. The present world, in its possessions, occupations, and alliances, seems to have become an object with him. (Gen. 33: 17-20, Gen. 37)

But in the end we have the witness of a beautiful recovery in his soul in this particular also.

This begins to manifest itself at Beersheba. (Gen. 46: 14) He pauses there, on his journey from Mamre, afraid to approach Egypt, as mindful of Abram in Gen. 12, and of Isaac, in Gen. 26: 2, 3. This was beautiful. It showed the sensitiveness of a freshly quickened soul, of one that was learning the lessons of God under a fresh impression of His Spirit. And the Lord immediately honours this by a visitation of His servant, such as he had not had since the day of Bethel in Gen. 35: 9.

And this recovery of his soul is again manifested when he reaches Egypt, in his fine confession before the king. He talks of his pilgrimage, and yet, in blessing the king, assumes to be the better or superior. (Heb. 7: 7.) And all this tells us that his soul was exactly in the consciousness and element which the call of God had set it in — that he regarded himself as having nothing "in this present evil world" but a stranger's tent and a pilgrim's fare, but that he was anointed of God to a better inheritance than even that of the kings of the earth. (Gen. 47: 7-10.)

This is a beautiful witness of the health of the soul of this pilgrim-father. But the same is still further declared. He lives for seventeen years in Egypt, but there is nothing of building or trafficking there, as before at Succoth and at Shechem. And at last, in his dying hour, with great zeal he testifies his resurrection-hope according to the call of God. He requires a promise from Joseph that he would not bury him in Egypt, but take his body to the burying-place of his fathers in the land of Canaan. He makes him swear to this; and again charges all his sons to do the same with him, describing to them particularly the very spot in Canaan where his bones were to lie, "as in sure and certain hope." (Gen. 48, 49) His whole soul seems engaged in this, that he might tell it out, that all his expectations were linked with the promise of God, with the hope of his fathers, with the objects and inheritance of faith, with the portion to which the call of God summons the soul — the heavenly country beyond the grave.

These are different manifestations of the recovered and healthful condition of the patriarch's soul. I will, however, notice another.

In earlier days he had been careless as to the ways of his children. When Reuben defiled his bed, no grief or shame on his part is recorded. When Levi and Simeon shed the blood of the Shechemites, it is only a sorrow to him, as it endangered him with the people of the land. (Gen. 34, 35) But, at the end, a very different mind expresses itself in him.

In the course of his prophetic words upon his sons, now and again his own heart is allowed to utter itself, and such utterances are full of spiritual affection, expressing, as we may see, a very improved condition of soul. Thus, Reuben's history is, it is most true, drawn by the hand of the Spirit, but in the midst of it the patriarch utters the horror of his own soul over the remembrance of Reuben's iniquity. While awarding their several destinies to Simeon and Levi, his heart in like manner is given space to declare its abhorrence and full rejection of their sin and blood-guiltiness. And so, in earlier days, he had been careless of the apostate ways of his children, marrying the daughters of Canaan; but now, in the course of the same prophetic words, contemplating the apostacy of Dan, in sickness of soul over such a sight, he breathes out a longing after the promise — "I have waited for thy salvation, O Lord." (Gen. 49)

This, among the other witnesses, tells of the recovered, healthful, spiritual condition of the soul of Jacob while in Egypt, or in the closing period of his chequered and eventful life. Breaches which the world or the flesh had made are repaired, and by the hand of his shepherd is he surely led in paths of righteousness.