

Patriarchal Faith

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The patriarchs had come forth from the place of nature or of the flesh, in the faith of a promised inheritance in the land of Canaan. And what is to be noticed in the strength and victory of their faith is this — they cling to that promise, in spite of two very severe trials of it: that is, in the face of the poverty and sorrow and disappointment which they constantly experienced in the place of the promise; and also in spite of the desirableness and attractions and advantages which they enjoyed outside of it.

This is much to be observed; and it may be encouragement to us in such a time as the present.

There was a famine in Canaan in the days of Abraham, and again in the days of Isaac, and again in the days of Jacob. Abraham, moreover, witnessed in that land the abominations of Sodom, and the common strife and contention of the potsherders of the earth. Isaac is forced from one spot of it to another by the injurious treatment of the natives of that land. Jacob is forced out of it by the threats of his brother Esau. And further, it was the scene of humbling and of discipline to each of them in their day, by reason of their own evil ways in the sight of the Lord.

Such was Canaan to the patriarchs. They were, I may say, dishonoured and disappointed, and well nigh heart-broken in that land of promise. But that which lay outside it was altogether different. It was just as attractive to them as Canaan had been trying and humbling.

Egypt, for instance, enriches Abraham when Canaan had left him at death's door; and to Jacob the same Egypt had become the scene and the occasion of all that heart or flesh could have desired; for he came to the end of a weary pilgrimage in that land. He had known plenty of sorrow in Canaan, both before he left it for Padan-aram, and after he returned; but Egypt at last made up to him, and much more, for all his losses and sorrows. By royal grant he received the fairest and richest portion of it. He was honoured and cherished there, and saw his family in increasing prosperity around him. The desires of his heart seemed all to get their answer there. And, to crown all, Egypt restored to him what the wild beasts of Canaan had robbed him of Joseph, whom he thought some beast in the promised land had torn to pieces, was alive in Egypt, and the second man in the kingdom.

Here was Egyptian flattery and fascination indeed, and that too, in full contrast with all that Canaan had been to him. At evening-time there was light; but it was an evening in Egypt. His eye might well have desired the lengthening and lingering of such a sunset; and his heart might have been tempted to contrast with it the clouds of his morning and his noon-day in Canaan. But faith is called a conqueror. It tries many a question with nature; and in some of the saints it gets many a fair and brilliant victory. And so was it here with Jacob, though it may be humbling to one's own heart to trace it. For we have here before us a beautiful witness that, in spite of all this, Canaan and not Egypt was the patriarch's object.

This is the victory that overcame Egypt then, and overcomes the world to this hour. No recollections of sorrows or disappointments in Canaan, no present possession of honours and wealth in Egypt, moved him — The promise of God ruled in his heart. Of Canaan as promised of God he spoke; in Canaan he hoped; in the place of his present prosperity he was a stranger, and thought of home only in the degraded and impoverished land he had left behind him. It was in Canaan he would be buried. It was there he was in spirit when he blessed his children; and it was there he gave the double portion to his adopted firstborn.

There is something very fine in this; and for us something significant and seasonable. For I may surely say of the present time through which we are passing, there is the poor Canaan and the wealthy and important Egypt. That which, like Canaan to the patriarchs, connects itself with God in the thoughts of faith is in a small and enfeebled state, while the world around is growing in its proper greatness and strength and dignity every hour.

It may be hard to learn this lesson which Jacob practised. We may see it on the page of his history, without finding it on any corresponding one of our own.

Joseph, however, after Jacob, illustrates this same power of faith. Egypt had received him, when Canaan had cast him out. Out of the one land he had been sold as a bond-slave; in the other he had been seated on the second seat in the kingdom. But withal (for faith is "the victory that overcometh the world"), Egypt never became Canaan to Joseph. The promise of God lived in Joseph's heart, as it had lived in Jacob's. Disappointments and sorrows in Canaan, flatteries and successes and honours in Egypt wrought not their natural results in that heart, because it was thus the seat of the promise of God. This was in the vigorous words of the apostle (in the patriarchal form which such energy would take) "a laying hold of eternal life" — which some of us know so little of.

But I must observe something further. It is felt by us to be a serious and hazardous thing at times, to let the world know that we have learnt this lesson — that poor Canaan is better than wealthy Egypt. We fully understand that men cannot lightly have the good thing they are nourishing and improving thus slighted. It is a reproach on themselves, when the world is undervalued.

There was a moment in Joseph's history, as I judge, when he felt this, when he had this experience of which I speak.

Jacob, his father, when dying, had made him swear that he would bury him in the land of Canaan. When Joseph comes to act upon his oath, he seems to me to feel this, that he was about to venture on a serious and hazardous matter. He evidently sets himself as before a business which had its special difficulties. He was high at court, as we may say; for, as we read, the physicians, the court physicians, were his servants (Gen. 1. 2). And we know the resources of the kingdom, the strength and wealth of the realm of Egypt, were at that moment under his hand. But still he hesitates about the matter of burying his father in Canaan, and gets the help and intercession of Pharaoh's near kindred.

Why all this? Was it not a small thing for so great a man to do? Yes; but a request to be buried in Canaan was, in some sense, putting a reproach upon Egypt. It seemed to say, after all, the Canaan of degradation and poverty was better than the Egypt of honour and wealth — that the gleanings of such an Ephraim were better than the vintage of such an Abi-ezer.

This was the language of Jacob's request; and Joseph felt it be a serious thing to convey such language to the ear of Pharaoh. But he did. Faith again triumphed; and after this manner is he a witness to us, that we should let the world distinctly learn from us, that, with all its advance and promise, it is nothing to us, while Christ's thing, though in weakness, is our object.