

The Pilgrim Fathers

Hebrews 11: 13-16.

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from **Miscellaneous Papers**

(R. L. Allan)

What is declared in these verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews of the fathers in the book of Genesis, is beautifully exhibited, and thereby fully verified by their histories. I feel anxious to consider this a little carefully, the Lord leading the heart (as through circumstances I trust He graciously has done lately) a little more vividly beyond the grave.

1. "These all died in faith." The history strikingly illustrates this. They valued their dead bodies and the burying places which held them. While they lived, they were content to sojourn in Canaan without having so much as to set their foot on. But "they died in faith." The promise of God had made over that land, that very land, to them, though they themselves were to be gathered to their fathers (Gen. 15); and this was the warrant for their dying in faith, in the sure and certain hope of a resurrection unto the enjoyment of it. They would link their dead, though not their living, bodies with that land. Their care in securing the field of Ephron, the cave of Machpelah, for a burying-place, tells us this; and so the jealousy with which those of them who died in Egypt secured the carriage of their bones over to the promised land. All this verifies that "they died in faith." Whether their bodies lay in Machpelah or Sychem mattered not, for their bones would, in either case, be equally linked with the promised land. Stephen tells us that all the fathers were animated with this same faith. (Acts 7: 13) And I quite agree with those who say that this solves that difficult verse. (Acts 7: 16) Stephen shortly tells us that all were carried over from Egypt to Canaan, but whether to the ground which Abraham bought of Ephron, or that which Jacob bought of Hamor, it mattered not, for both equally linked their hopes with the promised inheritance. By faith they "gave commandment concerning their bones." (Heb. 11: 22)

2. "They saw the promises afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them."

As they died in faith of the promises, so did they live in the full persuasion of them, though still distant. Their history, in like manner, gives beautiful witness of this.

Abraham lived in tents with Isaac, and Jacob. That was so indeed. But, then, they were heirs together of the promise. Of this they were, in the midst of their pilgrim-days, fully persuaded. And, therefore, on fitting occasions, they can act upon that full persuasion, in a way which nothing but such persuasion can account for, assuming the dignities and places which the promise warranted. Their "name was to be great and the land was to be theirs," and they would, if the moment called them, act in such character without thinking it robbery. See some instances of this.

Abimelech the king of Gerar courts the friendship of Abraham. Abraham at once allows the veil to drop, and puts off the pilgrim-girdle that hid or bound up his royal apparel, and takes headship of the Philistine king. (Gen. 21)

Isaac, in his day, does the same. Another Abimelech, king of Gerar, with the high estates of his kingdom, waits on Isaac, and Isaac accepts his person, grants his requests, prepares a feast, and then (instead of being sent away by Abimelech as before, in the day of humiliation) sends Abimelech away as in a day of power and majesty. His state is kingly. The great man of the earth, and the heavenly pilgrim, for a mystic hour have exchanged places; or, if not quite that, the pilgrim has become "king of

kings." (Gen. 26)

And so Jacob. He blesses Pharaoh, taking to him without reserve the place of "the better." For "without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better." The confessed pilgrim assumes, for a moment, a dignity beyond that of the chief man of the earth in that day, the Pharaoh of Egypt. (Gen. 47)

Delightful scriptures, indeed, these are. Without reserve or apology, the heavenly strangers assume the station which will be theirs under promise of God in its season. And such an act tells us that, though as yet they "had not received the promises," yet were they "persuaded of them, and embraced them." They could, in the faith and spirit of their Lord, ascend the mount of transfiguration, on a due occasion.

3. "They confessed that they were strangers and Pilgrims on the earth."

This was literally so, in the progress of their journeys along the stream of time. By word of mouth they declared this of themselves. (Gen. 23: 4; Gen. 28: 4; Gen. 47: 9.)

Their actions, also, were according to this. The moral principles on which they carried themselves spoke the same language.

They lived in tents, signifying plainly that they were not taking up any certain settlement in the earth. They surrendered their rights in the world. Abraham, for instance, gave up the choice of the land to his younger brother, leaving it with him to appoint him whatever portion he pleased. (Gen. 13)

And Isaac does the same. The instance is very striking. The Lord so signally blesses him, there was so much of the divine presence manifestly with him, that his company becomes oppressive to the world, and the men of Gerar require him to withdraw from them. He yields at once. But the blessing follows him. His servants dig a well, and the Lord fills it. And then the uncircumcised seek his wells, and he yields again.

This was a pilgrim's practical life. He would put up with either insult or injury, with an affront to his name, or damage to his estate. This was moral power — the principle of a pilgrim's life. This was conduct becoming his confession, that he was a stranger on the earth. "Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth." It is natural they should. But neither Abraham nor Isaac are potsherds of the earth, but heavenly strangers.

Thus was their confession verified by their ways. They acted, and in their behaviour bore witness that they were pilgrims here.

4. "If they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to return."

The history very largely warrants this thought concerning the pilgrim fathers; a thought which tells us that their sense of strangership on earth did not arise from regrets, but from hopes. They were dissatisfied with the *present* thing, not because of that which was *past* but of that which was *to come*. The scene around was a wilderness by reason of the power over them of the scene before and not of that behind them.

They might easily have retraced the road to Padan-aram — Eliezer did so. They had not forgotten the way, for he did not mistake a step nor had to enquire it. And as easy would it have been for Abraham or for Isaac to have taken that journey as for Eliezer. But Eliezer went there only to do a certain business and to return. In a moral sense, his visit to the land from whence his master, Abraham,

had come out, was no return to it. He did not linger there beyond the term of the appointed service. "Send me away unto my master," was his word then, and no entreaties or kindnesses could change it. (Gen. 24)

And Rebecca's mind was the same. "I will go" was her immediate decision, when the matter was referred to her. All this being according to the purposes and thoughts of the great patriarch himself. For on sending Eliezer away, he had taken an oath of him that he would, on no pretence whatever, take his son back to that land of his kindred. Let consequences be what they may, that was never to be done.

Jacob, too, however to appearance it may be otherwise, acts exactly in the same spirit and on the same principles. His wrong way brings him under divine chastening, and he has to seek the distant land of his forefathers. But he is there as an exile rather than as at home. He is there *actually* because of God's discipline, but not there *morally*, because of the desire of his own heart. He remains there, it is true, a far longer time than Eliezer had; as many years, perhaps, as the other had hours. But still, all the time, he is there in the spirit of Eliezer. For, like him, as soon as the business was done, as soon as the purpose or hand of the Lord gives him his dismissal, he leaves it — leaves it, too, I may add, though Laban's contract and God's blessing were making it profitable for him to remain; and though Esau's enmity, he might well judge, awaited him if he dared to return. But so it was. With loss behind and danger before him, he leaves it. Indeed, such had been his purpose throughout, from beginning to end. As he was setting out, he talks, with all desire, of his return. As soon as Joseph is born, his hopes are all alive that the time of his banishment is over. And he remains after that only under God's sanction, and departs as soon as God's word allows him. (Gen. 28: 21; Gen. 30: 25; Gen. 31: 3-13.) All this surely telling us that morally, or in the spirit of his mind, he had no more returned to that land than Abraham or Isaac.

This mind not to go back to the place from which they had been called was, therefore, the mind which strongly impregnated the whole pilgrim family. It was so much the air they breathed, that even the Syrian servant inhaled it, and lived by it, and the elect bride felt the virtue of it at once. The language of their walk concerning their native land, was what ours should be concerning "this present evil world:"

"Twere easy, did we choose,
Again to reach the shore;
But this is what our souls refuse:
We'll never touch it more."