

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HOME AT LAST

Genesis 50

“What is death? oh, what is death?
‘Tis slumber to the weary
‘Tis rest to the forlorn;
‘Tis shelter to the dreary;
‘Tis peace amid the storm;
‘Tis the entrance to our home;
‘Tis the passage to that God
Who bids His children come,
When their weary course is trod.”

- Anonymous

THE end is come at last! And we stand with those stalwart men in that hieroglyph-covered chamber, silent with the hush of death, to see the way-worn pilgrim breathe his last. His life has been a stern fight; his pathway not strewn with roses, but set with flints; few and evil the days of the years of his pilgrimage.

Compared with the brilliant career of Esau, his life might be almost considered a failure estimating it by all human standards of failure and success. But as the scaffold is taken down piece by piece, we catch glimpses of the real manhood which God has been so carefully building up, through long years of pain and sorrow; and as it comes into view, we feel that it is more than enough to justify all. Better a hundredfold to be Israel the Prince, though an exile; than Esau, the founder of a line of dukes. The glory of moral and spiritual rank will glisten when the crowns of earthly splendor shall have moldered into dust; and the name of Israel will be an unfailing inspiration to those who, conscious of untold weakness and unloveableness, shall yet strive to apprehend that for which they were originally apprehended by Christ Jesus.

We, too, if the Lord tarry, shall lie some day in a chamber of death, surrounded by our dear ones. Our spirits must poise themselves for their final flight, and stand waiting at the Beautiful Gate of the temple of life. And as Jacob has taught us how to live, so let him teach us how to die. “Come,” said the dying Havelock to his son, “and see how a Christian can die.” Some such summons calls us now: for even we, living in the noon-tide of the Gospel, may obtain salutary hints for our own death-hour from one who once seemed too mean to teach us anything; but who now, through the stern discipline of the Angel of Love, stands forth to lead faithful souls through the dark gorge of death into the land of the eternal morning.

Before the mind of the dying patriarch three visions seemed to float in that solemn hour. He was thinking of the City of God; and of the gathering of his clan; and of that lone and distant cave in Canaan where his fathers lay, and which he had so often visited.

I. THE CITY OF GOD

We are expressly told in the Epistle to the Hebrews that Jacob was one of those “**who died in faith.**” He was the heir of Promise. The land promised to Abraham and Isaac had not as yet passed into his possession; it was still held by the wandering and settled tribes, who had eyed his journeyings with such evident suspicion. All he had was the assured promise that in the coming days it should be his through his seed. Perhaps, in the dawn of early vigor he may have hoped to live until those fair pasture lands, terraced hills had literally passed into his possession. The learning comes out in the deep-drawn ejaculation, flashing through his dying charge to his sons, “**I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord!**”

But as the years passed on, and clouds closed over this azure aperture of earthly hope, he was compelled to realize that he would never live to be lord of Canaan. Nevertheless, he clung tenaciously to the blessed promise, so often reiterated to Abraham, that the land should become his people’s; and his assurance that God would keep His word flung a radiance, which neither sorrow nor adversity could dim, over his dying moments. Oh, glorious faith! which carries a torch through the long catacombs of sorrow, keeping the heart from fainting, until the welcome dawn of accomplishment grows upon the sight. What cannot faith do for those whom God has taught to trust! “**My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from Him.**”

As it became clear to Jacob that he was not to inherit Canaan, he seems to have fixed his mind with increasing eagerness on Heaven. He felt that if God had not destined for him an earthly resting place, yet He had prepared for him a City. Its foundations had not been laid by man; its walls bore no mark of human workmanship; its atmosphere could not be stained with the smoke or dust of earth. And it was for that glorious city, the city of the saints, that his pilgrim-spirit now yearned. It was the vision of that city which had enabled him to confess to the mighty Pharaoh that he was a pilgrim and a stranger on the earth. And now it was his close proximity to it that stirred his aged spirit, and drew it on with breathless eagerness and rapid steps. The sacred writer employs a beautiful similitude when he says of Jacob and the rest of the patriarchs, that they greeted the promises from afar (Hebrews 11:13).

When the traveler returns from distant lands, and from the summit of some neighboring hill catches the first glimpse of his still distant home, with its spiral column of blue smoke curling up amid the trees, he is disposed to fall upon the greensward, and with outstretched hands thank God and greet his home. “Hail! happy scenes of childhood; and blest abode of manhood’s prime.”

So Jacob, as he neared the City of God, so dear to faithful hearts, approved his kinsmanship with the elect spirits of all ages, by reaching forth towards it his aged, trembling hands. And as God looked down upon that eager attitude of faith, and hope, and desire, He was not ashamed to be called his God.

Modern commentators have wrangled fiercely as to how much or how little of the future life was realized by these ancient saints. Into that controversy I have no desire to enter. But I find a large answer to their questions in the assurance of Scripture, that Jacob and the men of his type desired **“a better country, that is, an heavenly.”**

The future was less indistinct to them than we sometimes suppose. They, too, stood on Pisgah-heights and beheld a Land of Promise: not that on which the veteran law-giver gazed, bounded by the blue waters of the Mediterranean, but that which is never shadowed by night, or swept by wild tempests of wind and rain the true Home of the saints. On such a Pisgah-height Jacob was standing; and as all earthly objects, even the face of Joseph, grew indistinct to his dimming eyes, those rapturous and celestial scenes grew upon his spiritual vision, and beckoned to him.

In what relation do you, my readers, stand to that City of God? Do not imagine that it will gladden your dying gaze, unless it has often been the object of your loving thought in the days of health and vigor. Your citizenship must be in Heaven now, if you would feel attracted to it as your true home at last. Is it so? Do you feel content to live in tents, having no fixed hold upon this fleeting scene; and confessing yourselves pilgrims and strangers on the earth because you are looking for the City? Do you feel the pull of that city, as the sailor does of the anchor, which keeps him from drifting with the tide? Do you anticipate it, like the children in the Children’s Crusade, who asked of every city they entered, “Is this Jerusalem?”

If so, it shall gladden your dying moments. You shall see the holy city descending out of Heaven from God, as a bank seems to approach the nearing vessel. And you shall have the blessedness, assured by the living Saviour to those who wash their robes, of the right to enter in, through the gates, into the City (Revelation 22:14).

II. THE GATHERING OF THE CLAN

“I am to be gathered unto my people.” When the dying Patriarch spoke thus, he meant something more than that his dust should mingle with all that was mortal of his forefathers. He expresses that thought in the following sentence: **“Bury me with my fathers.”** No; he meant something more than this. He surely looked upon the City as the gathering-place of his clan; the metropolis of true and godly hearts; the rendezvous of all who were his people, because they were the people of God. How much truer is this thought of Heaven than that which is entertained by many Christian people!

- “What do you think of the intermediate state?”
- “Shall we be consciously happy from the very moment of death?”
- “Shall we know one another on the other side?”

These are the doleful questions asked on many sides; and they present a melancholy contrast to the words of the dying Jacob, **“I am to be gathered unto my people.”**

What as to the intermediate state? At the best **“we know not what we shall be.”**

We cannot penetrate the veil that only opens wide enough to admit the entering spirit. It is clear that our spirits will not reach their full consummation and bliss till the morning of the resurrection, when body and spirit will be reunited; but it is equally clear that they will not be unconscious, but will enter into the blessed presence of our Lord.

This was taught by Christ Himself, when He quoted the words, "**I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**:" and added the comment, "**He is not the God of the dead; but of the living.**" That grand formula was spoken years after Jacob had fallen asleep; and yet God speaks of Himself as his God: and since He could not be the God of dead mummies only, or of unconscious spirits, Jacob and all the rest must have been living. Yes, they were living then, and are living now, possessed of all the vivid life that made them what they were.

There is no accent of uncertainty in the New Testament. As soon as the tent is taken down, the mansion is entered (II Corinthians 5:2). Absent from the body, the believer is present with the Lord.

"**To die is gain**"; which were an impossibility if the spirit did not have more of Christ than is possible on this side of the Golden City (Philippians 1:21). The dying Stephen went direct into the hands of his Lord (Acts 7:59).

Do not puzzle over useless questionings: be content to know that death is not a state, but an act; not a resting-place, but a transition; a passage, a birth, a crossing the Bridge of Sighs from the prison to the palace.

"Death is another life. We bow our heads
At going out, we think; and enter straight
Another golden chamber of the King's,
Larger than this we leave, and lovelier."

What as to the recognition of the departed? It would not have been an object of anticipation to Jacob to be gathered to his people, if he would not know them when he reached their blest society. When the Jew thought of the unseen world, he expected to meet the saints, of whom he had been wont to hear from childhood, and especially Abraham.

Was not the Jew wiser than most Christians? What! has the body powers of recognition, and the spirit none? Shall love, which has molded the life, range through eternity unable to find the twin-spirit with which it had become entwined? Can that be a Father's home, where the brothers and sisters do not know each other?

But these questions have always been solved, to me at least, by a careful study of the facts of our Lord's resurrection-body the model to the likeness of which we are to be conformed (Philippians 3:21). Those who knew Him before His death, recognized Him after. His very voice had in it intonations familiar to those who loved Him (John 20:16). His mannerisms were identical; and sufficient to identify Him to the two disciples with whom He sat (Luke 24:31). And as it was with Him, so shall it be with us and our beloved.

We shall be gathered to our people. Death will not usher us into a chill, unfriendly circle; but into a great gathering of loving and sympathizing friends, who shall give us a choral welcome as we enter into the eternal, everlasting kingdom of our Lord (II Peter 1:11).

Throughout the ages the elect souls of our race have been gathering there. Are they our people? Can we claim kinship with them? There is but one bond, as we are taught in Hebrews 11. That bond is not of dispensation; or of knowledge; or of exploits: but of faith such faith as may exist in a beggar or a king, in a child or a philosopher. It is independent of age, or sect, or knowledge, or work. But, wherever it is found, it designates the owner to be one of those who can claim kinship with the saintly inhabitants of the City of God. The test-question of qualification for the franchise of the New Jerusalem is: **“Dost thou believe in the name of the only-begotten Son of God?”**

III. THE CAVE OF MACHPELAH

“Bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite.” For seventeen years he had lived in Egypt, surrounded by all the comforts that Joseph’s filial love could devise, and his munificence execute. He must have become familiar with Egypt’s splendid temples and obelisks and pyramids, with which that cave could not for one moment be compared. But he would not rest in any of them. He must be laid where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and the faithful Leah awaited resurrection.

This was something more than the natural sentiment which impels us to request burial in some quiet spot in God’s acre, where our family name is inscribed on many of the gravestones around. He felt that Machpelah’s cave was the first outpost in the land which was one day to belong to his people; and he wanted, so far as he might, to be there with them, and to share in the land of promise.

The last word was spoken, the last commission given, and he knew the end was come. “He gathered up his feet into the bed; “ i.e., he met death quietly, calmly, manfully. He was not dragged away as a criminal; he went to meet it with complacency and with joy. The servant might have a grim face and a sable suit; but he had come to take him home. He quietly breathed out his spirit, and was gathered unto his people. And at that moment sorrow and sighing, which had been his close companions in life, fled away forever. How calm and noble that face looked, fixed in the marble of death! The Jacob-look had vanished from it; and it was stamped with the smile with which the royal Israel-spirit had molded it in its outward passage.

“So, pilgrim, now thy brows are cold,
We see thee what thou art; and know
Thy likeness to the wise below,
Thy kindred to the great of old.”

What wonder, then, that Joseph fell upon his father’s face, and wept upon him, and kissed him! He had borne the strain as long as he could; and now nature must vent herself in manly, filial grief.

The body was carefully embalmed. No time, or pains, or cost, were spared. Egypt herself mourned for him for seventy days. And then one of the most splendid funeral processions that ever gathered to lay saint, or sage, or hero to his rest, carried that precious casket in solemn pomp from Egypt up to Canaan. The chivalry of Egypt, its statesmen and counsellors, its princes and priests, joined with the shepherds of Goshen in accompanying the cortege.

And the signs of mourning were so great as to impress the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites.

The stone was rolled away, and the remains laid on their appointed niche; and in all probability they are there, in a state of perfect preservation, unto this day. Many a storm has swept over them Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Grecian, Roman, Saracenic, and Mohammedan. But nought has disturbed their quiet rest; and they hold the land in fee, till God shall fulfil, in all its magnificence, the promise which He made and has never recalled that He would give the land to Jacob's seed for an everlasting inheritance.

So rest thee, ISRAEL THE PRINCE!

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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