

JACOB WORSHIPPING ON HIS STAFF

NO. 1401

BY C.H. SPURGEON,
AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph,
and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.”
Hebrews 11:21.*

“When he was dying.” Death is a thorough test of faith. Beneath the touch of the skeleton finger shams dissolve into thin air and only truth remains unless, indeed, a strong delusion has been given—and then the spectacle of a presumptuous sinner passing away in his iniquities is one which might make angels weep. It is hard, very hard, to maintain a lie in the presence of the last solemnities. The end of life is usually the close of self-deception. There is a mimic faith, a false assurance, which lasts under all ordinary heats of trial, but this evaporates when the fires of death surround it.

Certain men are at peace and quiet in their conscience. They stifle convictions, refuse to allow such a thing as self-examination—they count an honest self-suspicion to be a temptation of the devil and boast of their unbroken tranquility of mind. They go on from day to day with perfect confidence, but we would not be of their order. Their eyes are closed, their ears are dull of hearing and their heart has grossly waxen. A siren song forever enchants them with delight, but also entices them to destruction! Terrible will be their awakening when they lie dying—as a dream, their false peace will vanish and real terrors will come upon them.

That expression, “When he was dying,” reminds me of many deathbeds, but I shall not speak of them now, for I desire each one of you to rehearse the scene of your own departure, for soon a tale will be told of everyone commencing with, “When he was dying.” I want each one to project his mind a little forward to the time when he must gather up his feet in the bed, pronounce his last farewell and yield up the ghost. Before your actual departure, probably, there may be allotted to you, unless you are carried away with a sudden stroke, a little time in which it shall be said, “He was dying.” Perhaps it is a desirable thing to occupy some weeks in departure, till the mind seems to have passed through the gate and to be already in Glory, while yet the body lingers here. But as we have had no experience, we are scarcely able to form a judgment.

The text tells us that the Patriarch’s faith was firm while he was dying, so that he poured forth no complaints, but plentiful benedictions as he blessed both the sons of Joseph. May your faith and mine, also, be such that whenever we shall be dying it will perform some illustrious exploit that the Grace of God may be admired in us. Paul does not say anything about Jacob’s *life*, but selects the death scene. There were many instances of faith in Jacob’s life story, but you remember that in the Epistle to the Hebrews Paul is walking through the histories and plucking a flower here and a flower there. He even complains that time fails him in doing that, so fertile is the garden of faith!

I do not doubt, however, that he gathered the best out of each biography and, perhaps, the finest thing in Jacob’s life was the close of it. He was more royal between the curtains of his bed than at the door of his tent—greater in the hour of his weakness than in the day of his power. The old man of 147 might have been willing to depart through infirmities of age, but yet he had much to keep him below and make him wish to live as long as possible. After a very troublous life he had enjoyed 17 years of remarkable comfort, so much so, that had it been ourselves, we should probably have begun to strike our roots into the soil of Goshen and dread the bare thought of removal.

Yet there sits the venerable Patriarch with his hands on his staff, ready to go, seeking no delay, but rather waiting for the salvation of God. After all his tossing to and fro, when he had been so long a pilgrim, it must have been a pleasant thing for him to have settled down in a fat land with his sons and grandsons—and great-grandsons—all around him! They were all comfortably provided for with Joseph at the head of the whole country—prime minister of Egypt—reflecting honor upon his old father and taking care that none of the family needed anything. The last course of Jacob’s feast of life was by far the sweetest and the old man might have been loathe to retire from so dainty a table!

The children of Israel were a sort of foreign aristocracy in the land and against them a dog would not dare to move its tongue lest the renowned Joseph should put forth his hand. That 17 years must have been bright and full of rest for the old man. But sense has not killed his faith! Luxury has not destroyed his spirituality! His heart is still in the tents where he had dwelt as a sojourner with God. You can see that not even one single rootlet of his soul has taken hold upon Egypt—his first anxiety is to take care that not even his *bones* shall lie in Goshen—but that his body shall be taken out of the country as a reminder to his family that they are not Egyptians and cannot be made into subjects of Pharaoh—and that Canaan is their possession to which they must go.

By his dying charge to bury him in Machpelah, he practically teaches his descendants that they must set loose of all the good land which they possessed in Goshen, for their inheritance did not lie on the banks of the Nile, but on the other side of the desert in Canaan—and they must be on tiptoe to journey there. The blessing which he gave to the sons of Joseph was but an utterance of his firm faith in the Covenant which gave the land to him and to his seed. It was confirmed by that faith of his which let go the present and grasped the future, renounced the temporal and seized the eternal, refusing the treasures of Egypt and clinging to the Covenant of God.

First, then, his blessing. He blessed the two sons of Joseph. Will you have patience with me while I try to show that his blessing the sons of Joseph was an act of faith? First, only by faith could the old man really give a blessing to anyone. Look at him. He is too feeble to leave his bed. When he sits up, supported by pillows, at what is called the bed-head, he calls for his trusty staff that he may lean upon it while he raises himself up a little to be in a position to stretch out his hands and to use his voice. He has no strength and his eyes are dim so that he cannot see which is Ephraim and which is Manasseh.

He is failing in most of his faculties—in every way you can see that he is a worn-out old man who can do nothing for the children whom he loves. If he is able to bestow a blessing, it cannot be by the power of nature—and yet he can and does bless them—and therefore we feel sure that there must be an inner man within that feeble old Jacob! There must be a spiritual Israel hidden away in him, an Israel who, by prevailing with God as a prince, has obtained a blessing and is able to dispense it to others. And so there is—and at half a glance we see it! He rises to the dignity of a king, a Prophet and a priest when he begins to pronounce a blessing upon his two grandchildren!

He believed that God spoke by him and he believed that God would justify every word that he was uttering. He believed in the God that hears prayer. His benediction *was* a prayer and as he pronounced blessings upon his grandsons he felt that every word he was speaking was a petition which the Lord was answering. They were blessed and they should be blessed—and he discerned it by faith. Thus we see he was manifesting his faith in offering believing prayer and in uttering a confident benediction. Whether we live, or whether we die, let us have faith in God! Whenever we preach or teach the Gospel, let us have faith, for without faith we shall labor in vain. Whenever you distribute religious books or visit the sick, do so in faith, for faith is the lifeblood of all our service!

If only by faith can a dying Jacob bless his descendants, so only by faith can we bless the sons of men. Have faith in God and the instruction which you give shall really edify—the prayers you offer shall bring down showers of mercy—and your endeavors for your sons and daughters shall be prospered. God will bless what is done in faith! But if we believe not, our work will not be established. Faith is the backbone and marrow of the Christian's power to do good. We are weak as water till we enter into union with God by faith—and then we are omnipotent! We can do nothing for our fellow men by way of promoting their spiritual and eternal interests if we walk according to the sight of our eyes. But when we get into the power of God and grasp His promise by a daring confidence, then it is that we obtain the power to bless!

You will notice, also, that not only the power to bless came to him by faith, but the blessings which he allotted to his grandsons were his upon the same tenure. His legacies were all blessings which he possessed only by faith. He gave to Ephraim and Manasseh a portion each—but where and what? Did he fetch out a bag from an iron safe and say, “Here, young men, I give you the same portion of ready money as I give my sons”? No, there does not seem to have been a solitary shekel in the case. Did he call for the map of the family estates and say, “I give over to you, my boys, my freehold lands in such-and-such parish and my farms in such-and-such a manor”? No, no, he gave them no portion in Goshen, but each had a lot in Canaan.

Did that belong to him? Yes, in one sense, but not in another. God had promised it to him, but he had not yet a foot of land in it. The Canaanites were swarming in the land. They were dwelling in cities walled up to Heaven and held the country by the right of *possession* which is nine points of the law. But the good old man talks about Canaan as if it were all his own and he foresees the tribes growing into nations as much as if they were already in actual possession of the country! He had, as a matter of fact, neither house nor ground in Palestine and yet he counts it *all* his own since a faithful God had promised it to his fathers! God had said to Abraham, “Lift up, now, your eyes and behold to the east and to the west, to the north and to the south. All this will I give you.”

And Jacob realizes that gift of God as being a charter and title-deed of possession! And he acts upon it while he says, “This is for Ephraim. This is for Manasseh.” The sneering infidel standing by would have said, “Hear how the old man dotes and maunders, giving away what he has not!” Faith is the substance of things hoped for and she deals seriously and in a business manner with that which she makes real to herself! Blind Reason may ridicule, but Faith is justified of all her children. Beloved, in this manner Believers bless the sons of men, namely, by faith. We pray for them and we tell them of good things yet to come, not to be seen of the eyes, or to be perceived by the senses, but inconceivably good things laid up by God for them that love Him—which shall be the portion of our children and our friends if they believe in the living God.

By faith we believe in things not as yet seen. We confess that, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we are strangers here and we are journeying towards a place of which God has spoken of to us—“A city which has foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God.” We have learned to talk about the crown which the Lord has laid up for us and not for us, only, but for all them that love His appearing! And we delight to tell others how to win this crown. We point them to the narrow gate and to the narrow way—neither of which they can see—and to the *end* of that narrow road, even to the hilltops crowned with the Celestial City where the pilgrims of the Lord shall dwell forever and enjoy an eternal reward!

Faith is needed to enable us to point men to the invisible and eternal! And if we cannot do this, how can we bless them? We must believe for those we love and have hope for them—and thus shall we have power with God for them—and shall bless them. Oh, you worldly fathers, you may give your sons what heritage you can and divide among your daughters what wealth you please, but as for us, our longing is to see our children and our children’s children blessed with the riches which come from above! If they win a share in the land on the other side of Jordan, as yet unseen, and have a portion now in Christ Jesus, we shall be glad—ininitely more glad than if they were the richest among mankind! Our legacies to our sons are the blessings of Divine Grace and our dowries to our daughters are the promises of the Lord.

It is well worthy of our notice that the venerable Patriarch Jacob, in his benediction, particularly mentioned the Covenant. His faith, like the faith of most of God’s people, made the Covenant its pavilion of delightful abode, its tower of defense and its armory for war! No sweeter word was on his tongue than the Covenant and no richer consolation sustained his heart. He said to Joseph, “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me. He said to me, Behold I will make you fruitful and multiply you.” His confidence rested in the promise of the Lord and in the Divine fidelity—that was the fountain Truth of God from which he drew the inspiration which led him to bless his grandchildren.

And, also, notice how he dwells upon the name of his father Abraham and of his father Isaac with whom the Covenant had been established—the memories of covenant love are precious and every confirmatory token is treasured up and dwelt upon. Dying men do not talk nonsense. They get to something solid and the Everlasting Covenant made with their fathers and confirmed in their own persons has been one of the grand things about which dying saints have been known to deliver their souls. Remember how David said, “Although my house is not so with God, yet has He made with me an Everlasting Covenant, ordered in all things and sure.” While we are sitting here we can talk about the matter coolly. But when death dew lies cold upon our brow, the pulse is failing and the throat is gradually choking up, it will be blessed to fix our eyes upon the faithful Promiser and to feel a calm within our soul which even death pangs cannot disturb! We can then exclaim, “I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him until that day.”

I want to call your attention to one point which I think extraordinarily illustrates the faith of Jacob. In distributing to these two grandchildren his blessings as to the future, he takes them right away from Joseph and says, “As Simeon and Reuben, shall they be mine.” Do you know who those two young gentlemen were? Think awhile and you will see that

they were very different in rank, station, parentage and prospects from any of the sons of Jacob! Jacob's sons had been brought up as laboring men without knowledge of polite society or learned arts. They were country men, mere Bedouins—wandering shepherds and nothing else!

But these two young gentlemen were descended from a princess and had, no doubt, been liberally educated. Pharaoh had given to Joseph a daughter of Potipherah, priest of On, and the priests of Egypt were the highest class of all—the nobility of the land! Joseph himself was Prime Minister and these were partakers of his lofty rank. The sons of Reuben and Simeon were *nobodies* in the polite circles of Egypt—very good, decent people—farmers and grazers, but not at all of the high class of the Right Honorable Lord Manasseh and the Honorable Ephraim! Indeed, every shepherd was an abomination to the Egyptians and, therefore, inadmissible to Egypt's nobility! Manasseh and Ephraim were of a superior caste and gentlemen of position and fortune.

But Jacob showed his faith by ignoring worldly advantages for his grandsons. He says to Joseph, "They are not to be yours. I do not know them as Egyptians—I forget all about their mother's rank and family. The boys have attractive prospects before them. They can be made priests of the idol temple and rise to high dignity among the Egyptians. But all that glitter we reject for them and, in token thereof, I adopt them as my own sons. They are mine—as Simeon and Reuben they shall be mine. For all the gold of Egypt you would not have one of them serve an idol, for I know that you are true to your father's God and your father's faith." And so He takes the boys right away, you see, from all their brilliant opportunities, and bestows upon them that which, to the carnal mind, appears to be an estate in dreamland, a chateau in Spain—something intangible and unmarketable!

This was a deed of faith and blessed are they who can imitate it, choosing rather the reproach of Christ for their sons than all the treasures of Egypt! The joy of it is that these lads accepted the exchange and let the golden possessions of Egypt go, like Moses after them. May our heirs and successors be of the same mind and may the Lord say of them, "Out of Egypt have I called My Son." And again, "When Ephraim was a child then I loved him and called My Son out of Egypt." This is how faith leads Believers to bless their children. We are of the same mind as Jacob in this matter. We would sooner bury our little ones than that they should live to become among the richest and most famous of men—and yet not know or serve their father's God! Better that we laid them quietly in such ground as our Christian Brethren permit us to use as a sepulcher for our unbaptized babes. Better that they were safely housed at God's right hand than that they should grow up to plunge into dissipation or to follow false doctrine and perish out of Christ!

We have not done yet, for we notice that Jacob showed his faith by blessing Joseph's sons in God's order. He placed Ephraim before Manasseh. It was not according to the rule of nature, but he felt the impulse upon him and his faith would not resist the Divine guidance. Blind as he was, he would not yield to the dictation of his son, but crossed his hands to obey the Divine monition. Faith resolves to do the right thing in the right way. Some persons' faith leads them to do the right thing the wrong way, but mature faith follows the order which God prescribes. If God will have Ephraim first, faith does not quarrel with His decree. We may wish to see a favorite child blessed more than another, but Nature must forego her choice, for the Lord must do what seems good to Him. Faith prefers Divine Grace to talent and piety to cleverness. She lays her right hand where God lays it and not where beauty of person or quickness of intellect would suggest. Our best child is that which *God* calls best—Faith corrects Reason and accepts the Divine verdict.

Notice that he manifested his faith by his distinct reference to redemption. He alone who has faith will pray for the redemption of his children, especially when they exhibit no signs of being in bondage but are hopeful and amiable. The good old man prayed, "The Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads." Let your faith bring down upon your children a share in redemption's blessings, for they need to be redeemed even as others. If they are washed in the blood of Jesus. If they are reconciled to God by the blood of His Son. If they have access to God by the blood of Atonement, you may die well satisfied—for what is to harm them when once the Angel that redeemed you has also redeemed them? From sin, from Satan, from death, from Hell, from self—"from all evil"—does our Redeemer set us free! And this is the greatest of all benedictions which we can pronounce upon our dearest children.

Jacob showed his faith by his assurance that God would be present with his seed. How cheering is the old man's dying expression, made not only to his boys, but concerning all his family! He said, "Now I die, but God will be with you." It is very different from the complaints of certain good old ministers when they are dying. They seem to say, "When I die, the light of Israel will be quenched! I shall die and the people will desert the Truth of God. When I am gone, the standard-bearer will have fallen and the watchman on the walls will be dead." Many, in dying, are afraid for the chariot of Israel and the horsemen

thereof and, sometimes, we who are in good health talk very much in the same fashion as though we were wonderfully essential to the progress of God's cause!

I have known some of our Church members speak in that manner and inquire—"What should we do if Mr. So-and-So were dead? If our pastor were gone, what would the Church do?" I will tell you what you will do without us—I will put the case as though I were myself to die—"Now I die, but God will be with you." Whoever passes away, the Lord will abide with His people and the Church will be secure. The grand old cause does not depend on one or two of us! God forbid! The Truth of God was mighty in the land before the best man living was born—and the Truth of God will not be buried with him, but in its own immortal youth will still be powerful! Yes, and fresh advocates will arise more full of life and vigor than we are! And greater victories will be won! It is grand to say with Jacob, "Now I die, but God will be with you." Such language honors God and bespeaks a mind greatly trustful and completely delivered from the self-conceit which dreams itself important, if not *necessary*, to the cause of God.

We are told, next, that the old man "worshiped"—worshiped by faith. Very briefly let me tell you what worship I think he rendered. First, while he was dying he offered the worship of *gratitude*. How pleasing is the incident recorded in the 10th and 11th verses—"Now the eyes of Israel were dim for age, so that he could not see. And Joseph brought his two sons near unto him and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said unto Joseph, I had not thought to see your face and, lo, God has showed me, also, your seed." Ah, yes, we shall often have to say, "O Lord, I had not thought that You would do as much as this, but you have gone far beyond what I asked or even thought."

I hope that this will be among our dying speeches and confessions—that the half was never told us, that our good Lord kept the best wine till the last and that the end of the feast on earth—being but the beginning of the eternal feast in Heaven was the crown of all! Let us declare concerning our Lord that we found Him better and better and better and better, even till we entered into His rest! He has been, at first, better than our fears, then better than our hopes and finally better than our desires! Did Jacob not also offer the worship of testimony when he acknowledged God's goodness to him all his life? He says, "The God that fed me all my life long," thus acknowledging that he had been always dependent but always supplied.

He had been a shepherd and he uses a word, here, which means, "the God that shepherded me—who was a Shepherd to me all my life long." It was a testimony to the care and tenderness of Jehovah. Yes, and I hope we, also, shall finish life by magnifying the goodness of the Lord. Be this our witness, "He fed me all my life long. I was in straits, sometimes, and I wondered from where the next bit of bread would come—but if He did not send a raven, or if He did not find a widow woman to provide for me—yet somehow or other He did feed me all my life long. He worked in His own wise ways so that I never lacked, for the Lord was my Shepherd all my life long."

Notice, too, how reverently He worships the Covenant Messenger with the adoration of reverent love. He speaks of "the Angel who redeemed me from all evil." He thinks of the Angel that wrestled with him and the Angel that appeared to him when he fell asleep at Bethel. This is the Angel, not an ordinary angel, but the true Archangel—Jesus Christ—the Messenger of the Covenant whom we delight in. It is He that has delivered us from all evil by His redeeming blood, for no other being could have accomplished a redemption so complete. Do you remember when He came to you, personally, and wrestled with you and tore away your self-righteousness and made you limp on your thigh? This, it may be, was your first introduction to Him. You saw Him by night and thought Him, at the first, to be your enemy rather than your friend.

Do you remember when He took your strength away from you and then at last saved you, because in utter weakness you were about to fall to the ground? You laid hold of Him and said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me," and so you won a blessing from Him. You had thought, before that time, that you had strength in yourself. But now you realize that you were weakness, itself, and that only as you became consciously weak would you become actually strong. You learned to look out of self to Him and do you not bless Him for having taught you such a lesson? Will you not, when you come to die, bless Him for what He did for you, then, and all your life? O my Brothers and Sisters, we owe all things to the redeeming Angel of the Covenant! The evils which He has warded off from us were terrible beyond conception! And the blessings He has brought us are rich beyond imagination! Thus you have had a picture of the old man blessing, by faith, and worshipping by faith—faith was the mainspring of the two actions—their essence, their spirit and their crown.

The last matter for us to speak upon is his attitude. He "worshiped leaning upon the top of his staff." The Romanists have made fine mischief out of this text, for they have read it, "He worshiped the top of his staff." Their notion has been, I suppose, that there was a pretty little god carved on the top—an image of a saint or a cross, or some other symbol—and that he held up that symbol and so worshiped the top of his staff! We know that he did no such thing, for there is no trace in Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob of *anything* like the worship of images! Though teraph worship lingered in their families, it was not with their

consent. They were not perfect men, but they were perfectly clear from idolatry and never worshiped an image. No, no, no—they worshiped only God! Jacob worshiped on the top of his staff—*leaning* on it—supporting himself upon it.

In Genesis you read that he “bowed himself upon the bed’s head.” It is a very curious thing that the word for bed and the word for staff in the Hebrew are so exceedingly like each other that unless the little points had been used, which I suppose were not used at all in the olden times, it would be difficult to tell whether the word is, “bed,” or “staff.” I do not, however, think either Moses or Paul can be wrong! Jacob strengthened himself and sat upon the bed and he *leaned* upon his staff, too. It is very easy to realize a position in which both descriptions would be equally true. He could sit upon the bed and lean on the top of his staff at the same time. But why did he lean on his staff? I think besides the natural need which he had of it, because of his being old, he did it emblematically. Do you not remember his saying, “With my staff I crossed this Jordan”?

I believe he kept that staff throughout life as a memorial. It was a favorite staff of his which he took with him on his first journey and he leaned upon it as he took his last. “With my staff I crossed this Jordan,” he had said before, and now with that same staff in hand he crosses the *spiritual* Jordan! That staff was his life companion, the witness with himself of the goodness of the Lord, even as some of us may have an old Bible, or a knife, or a chair which are connected with memorable events of our lives. But what did that staff indicate? Let us hear what Jacob said at another time. When he stood before Pharaoh he exclaimed, “Few and evil have been the days of my pilgrimage.” What made him use that word “pilgrimage”? Why, because upon his mind there was always the idea of his being a pilgrim! He had been literally so during the early part of his life, wandering here and there.

And now, though he has been 17 years in Goshen, he keeps the old staff and he leans on it to show that he had always been a pilgrim and a sojourner like his fathers and that he still was! While he leans on that staff, he talks to Joseph and he says, “Do not let my bones lie here. I have come here in the Providence of God, but I do not belong here. This staff indicates that I am only a sojourner and need to be gone. I am in Egypt, but I am not of it. Take my bones away. Do not let them lie here, for if they do, my sons and daughters will mingle with the Egyptians and that must not be, for we are a distinct nation. God has chosen us for Himself and we must keep separate. To make my children see this, lo, here I die with my pilgrim staff in my hand.”

Now, Christian Brothers and Sisters, I want you to live in the same spirit, feeling that this is not your rest nor your native country. There is nothing here that is worthy of you. Your home is yonder, on the other side the desert, where God has mapped out your portion. Christ has gone to prepare your place and it would ill become you to have no desires for it. The longer you live, the more let this thought grow upon you—“Give me my staff. I must be gone. Poor world, you are no rest for me. I am not of your children. I am an alien and a stranger. My citizenship is in Heaven. I take my share in Egypt’s politics and Egypt’s labor, yes, and in Egypt’s griefs, but I am no Egyptian, I am a stranger bound for another land.” Worship on the top of your staff and sing—

*“A scrip on my back, and a staff in my hand,
I march on in haste through an enemy’s land.
There is nothing on earth which can tempt me to stay,
My staff is the emblem of ‘up and away.’”*

Singular enough is it that each descendant of Jacob came to worship on the top of his staff at last, for on the paschal supper night, when the blood was sprinkled on the lintel and the side posts, they each one ate the lamb with their loins girt and with a staff in his hand! The supper was a festival of worship and they ate it, each one leaning on his staff, as those that were in haste to leave home for a pilgrimage through the wilderness! My dear Hearers, this advice does not apply to *all* of you, for you are not all Jacobs, nor do you belong to the believing seed. I cannot bid you take your staff, for if you were to take your staff and start off, where would you go? You have no portion in the next world, no promised land, no Canaan flowing with milk and honey.

Where will you go? You must be banished from the Presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power! Alas for you! You cannot worship, for you know not God! You cannot bless others, for you have not been blessed yourselves! May the Lord bring you to His dear Son, Jesus Christ, and lead you to put your trust in Him—and then I shall hope that being saved you will by faith imitate Jacob and both bless men, worship God and wait with your staff in your hand, ready to journey to the eternal rest!

Adapted from *The C.H. Spurgeon Collection*, Ages Software, 1.800.297.4307.