

HOW TO DIE

"By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff." (Hebrews 11:21)

Jacob may not be the best example in the Hall of Faith as to how to live the perfect life of faith. However, he shows us the strength of faith at the time of death.

"By faith Jacob"

In mentioning Jacob the Holy Spirit selects a small fragment of this man's life with which to illustrate his faith in God. As with all the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, not all that transpired in their lives is recorded. We could say that Hebrews eleven is the chapter of "Honorable Mentions." Just to be mentioned is an honor!

Although Jacob was in many ways the most illustrious of the Patriarchs, and the one who received from God the name "Israel", he was, in some respects, the least attractive representative of one of God's heroes of faith. Jacob was inconsistent in his walk with God, and perhaps, more than the other Patriarchs, shows that God is a God of grace.

Jacob was an up and down individual. Sometimes he walked by faith and sometimes he walked by sight – just like us. In spite of Jacob's failings the principle of faith was constantly at work in His life. Faith is essential to our salvation and spiritual progress even if it be but a "mustard seed" faith. (Matthew 17:20) At no time in Jacob's life was this more evident than at the end of his life.

"When he was a dying"

The threat of death has a powerful way of clarifying the mind. To the sensitive soul the incidental fades into insignificance, the essential looms large; the temporal is less important, the eternal all important.

The valley of death is a crucible that tests faith. The process of dying brings an awareness that only truth matters unless the dying one has been greatly deluded. In the face of death self-deception is forced to face the stark reality of eternity; false faith is shorn of its hypocrisy; self-righteousness will not suffice; good deeds seem so puny; self-confidence fades; the biggest, the boldest, the brightest fade as a leaf and only divine certainties bring peace.

Jacob shows us how to die. "When he was dying" he was not in a panic; "When he was dying" he was prepared; "when he was dying" his was the posture of peacefulness. Why? His trust was in the living God.

"blessed both the sons of Joseph"

Perhaps, the finest thing in Jacob's life was the way he ended it. This old man of one hundred and forty-seven years had one last blessing to give and he gave it to his grandsons. His son Joseph, prime minister of Egypt, needed nothing. The young generation needed the faith of their grandfather to carry them out of Egypt and back to the land of promise. Ephraim and Manasseh's inheritance was not along the banks of the Nile in Egypt but along the Jordan in Canaan.

Never would the sons of Joseph forget the day when their half-blind, aged grandfather Jacob embraced them, kissed them, placed his gnarled hands upon their young heads and uttered the patriarchal blessing. (Genesis 48:10,20)

Faith leads believers to bless their children by the words of their mouths, the witness of their lives and the works of their hands. Truly blessed are children who have such a faith heritage.

"and worshipped"

How was he spending the last days of his life? In worship! What a way to pass into the presence of Him whom we shall worship throughout all eternity. However, worshipping when dying is usually the activity of those who have made it a practice to worship while living!

Evidently Jacob knew that his days were at an end. Although weak in body he was strong in faith for he died worshipping. If we would be among that great company who see Him face to face and worship Him in Heaven, we must learn to do it right here and now.

At the end he bowed before Him into Whose presence he was shortly to pass, and bowing he worshipped. How beautiful to die while enjoying perfect blissful communion with the Lord! How great to die like Moody and to be able to say in the full confidence of faith: "Earth recedes. Heaven opens before me. If this is death it is sweet. There is no valley here. God is calling me, and I must go. This is my triumph day, my coronation day!"

"leaning upon the top of his staff."

What a serene scene it is - visualize this old man Jacob in the evening of life, silhouetted against a setting sun while leaning on his staff. Do not miss this pen-portrait of the patriarch: "leaning upon the top of his staff."

This is suggestive of human frailty. Weak but walking, bent in body but upright in soul. There is something so natural yet supernatural here; something so earthy yet so heavenly; something so sad yet joyous, for although his sun is about to set it will rise upon yonder shore where there is no night and the Lamb is the light!

I have a favorite walking stick. When I lived outside Atlanta, Georgia, I often walked among trees. In doing so one day I saw a vine entwined around a dogwood tree. The vine had been there for years and had left its imprint deep in the wood of the tree. It was a serpentine indentation and went from the ground up the tree for about four feet. I cut down the tree, removed the vine, peeled off the bark and I have had that walking stick with its natural cork-screw design for over 30 years. I often lean upon my "staff" when walking here in the mountains of Southern California.

Jacob had a favorite staff. In Genesis 32:10 Jacob said, "With my staff I passed over this Jordan." This was the staff he used as he crossed the literal Jordan years past and now he is leaning upon the same staff in preparation to cross the spiritual Jordan of death. This was the staff he used on his first journey and now he is leaning upon it just before he makes his last journey.

That old staff was now scarred, weathered, battered. It was a museum piece. It had been Jacob's constant companion supporting him as he limped through life as a result of the touch of God. (Genesis 32:25, 31) It had steadied him as he walked the rocky barrens and precipitous paths. It had been a tangible helper ready at hand through many dangers, toils and snares.

Now he was about to step into a land free from dangerous terrain for "a highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The Way of Holiness" (Isaiah 35:8). He has gone the last mile of the way. Earthly cares will vex no more nor trials lay him low. Earth is now fading, faith is turning to sight and what a sight! His wooden staff has been laid down for it will not be needed now - he limps no more!

If the Lord Jesus does not come for us in our lifetimes, let us go to Him in similar fashion as did Jacob, confidently leaning, by faith, upon Him Who is the Shepherd with staff Who comforts us (Psalm 23:4); blessing those who are nearest and dearest to us and worshipping the singularly worthy One. (Rev. 4:11) That is the way to die!

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