

Sermon I

"The Faith of Joseph on his Deathbed"

by

Henry Melvill

***"By faith Joseph, when he died,
made mention of the departing of the children of Israel,
and gave commandment concerning his bones."***

Hebrews 11:22

We now speak of Joseph's giving "commandment concerning his bones;" and this is far too memorable a circumstance to be passed over without special comment. We must refer to the Book of Genesis in order to see what the commandment was. There you read, *"And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from hence."* The oath was remembered and kept, for it is expressly recorded in the account of the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, *"And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him."* Neither were these bones neglected in the wilderness. They must have been religiously preserved during all the wanderings of the people, for you read in the Book of Joshua, *"And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem."*

It appears from these historical notices, when joined with the reference made by St. Paul in our text, that great importance is attached by inspired writers to the fact of Joseph's giving commandment concerning his bones. And the fact certainly deserves to be carefully pondered, though you may have been used to pass it over with but little attention. It would seem that Joseph was never buried in Egypt, for after mentioning the oath which he took of his brethren, the Book of Genesis concludes with saying, *"So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt."*

When you connect this statement with his dying injunction, and with the fact that though the Israelites were thrust out in haste from the land they carried with them the remains of the patriarch, you can hardly doubt that the body of Joseph, when embalmed, was kept unburied among his people, and that its being so kept was included in his parting injunction. And this is

the more remarkable inasmuch as no reason can be given why Joseph, had he wished it, might not at once have been buried in Canaan.

When one reads of his giving commandment concerning his bones, the obvious feeling is that Joseph, with that desire which seems instinctive to man (the desire that our dust should mingle with that of those we have loved and lost), would give directions for his being laid in the grave with his father and mother. But had this been all, why then was not his body at once carried into Canaan? When Jacob died, *"all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, and all the house of Joseph, and his brethren, and his father's house,"* went up and interred him, according to his wish, *"in the cave of the field of Machpelah."* So vast was the funeral pomp that *"when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning in the floor of Atad, they said, 'This is a grievous mourning to the Egyptians;' wherefore the name of it was called Abel-mizraim, which is beyond Jordan."* Surely, if such were the interment of Jacob, then that of Joseph would not have been less honored had he commanded his brethren in the same manner as he had been commanded by his father, that is, *"In my grave which I have dug for me in the land of Canaan, there shall you bury me."* We may not doubt that the Egyptians would not only have permitted the funeral but would have graced his obsequies with all that could give splendor to death.

It follows, therefore, that it was not merely interment in Canaan which Joseph desired, but it was expressly his wish that the interment should be deferred until the children of Israel departed from Egypt, and that then should his bones be carried up to the land which had been promised to Abraham. In short, the "commandment concerning his bones," which St. Paul adduces in proof of Joseph's faith, would seem to have been a commandment that his bones should lie unburied while the Israelites were in Egypt and be buried when they took possession of Canaan.

But what was there in this which specially proved faith? What evidence does the commandment which Joseph gave concerning his bones add to that furnished by the mention which he made "of the departing of the children of Israel?" Here is a point worthy of all your attention, though there will be no great difficulty in finding a satisfactory answer.

Why, think ye, did Joseph wish to lie unburied in the midst of his people unless it was to ensure that his bones might perpetually preach to them this lesson: that Egypt was not to be their home but must be abandoned for Canaan. With his dying breath he labored to enforce the lesson that they

were to be in expectation of departing from the country which had received and sustained them, knowing that after his death his brethren and children would be likely to forget it. But how shall he accomplish this? What means were in his power of continuing to preach this great truth after he had died? Just this: let his bones lie unburied as they await being carried up to Canaan, for this will not only be an abiding memento to the Israelites but a standing reminder that sooner or later the Lord will effect their removal and transplant them to the land which He promised to their fathers.

You cannot fail to agree that it is a strong evidence of a man's belief in a tenet when he not only proclaims it while he lives but labors to bring it to pass after death. Joseph was probably aware that there would be long years of woe and oppression to pass over Israel before there would come that visitation of the Lord which his dying words affirmed. And during this dreary period it would seem to the Israelites as though they were forgotten of their God, as though his promise had come utterly to an end, and that they were doomed to remain in the house of bondage forever. And what is more likely than that whatever reminded them of the alleged purpose of God would be treated by them with loathing and scorn, and that whether that man were dead or living who predicted their departure, the mention of his name would excite only hatred and derision. And yet Joseph was not to be moved by such a likelihood. Why not? Because his faith was too strong. He was too confident in God's word to allow his taking into account the possibility of its failure.

And therefore he did not hesitate to convert his bones into a perpetual preacher, or monument, of that word. "I shall not leave you," he seems to say to his weeping kinsmen. "I die, but this worn body has a high duty to accomplish before it may enjoy the slumber of the grave. I leave it to preach to you that God will yet bring you up from Egypt with a mighty hand and a stretched-out arm. You, or your children, may be disposed to insult my remains when oppression grows and deliverance be deferred. But I know how all this will terminate. My eye, over which the film of death is fast gathering, sees a mighty procession marching to the inheritance which God promised to Abraham. And in the midst of this procession shall these bones be triumphantly carried, their office of instruction done, to share with you the land of Canaan."

Oh, who can fail to see that Joseph thus furnished a far stronger proof of trust in God's word than is found in his mere assertion of what that word declared! Who can deny that St. Paul added vastly to the illustration of the power of faith when, after stating that "by faith" Joseph, when he died,

"made mention of the departing of the children of Israel," added, "and gave commandment concerning his bones?"

But we ought not to fail to observe, before we leave the deathbed of Joseph, that the commandment as to his bones may have been designed to intimate, or illustrate, the truth of a resurrection. Why was he unwilling that his bones should rest in Egypt? Unwilling he evidently was, for allowing that their remaining unburied might remind the Israelites of their predicted departure, this is no reason why he should also have given directions for their being carried into Canaan. By remaining unburied he would have shown an anxiety to preach a great fact to his descendants, but by further desiring that he might be buried in the promised land, he evinced a care as to his place of sepulture, or showed that it was not indifferent to him what became of his body.

I cannot but infer from this anxiety of Joseph in regard to his grave that he did not consider the body as a thing to be thrown aside so soon as life was extinct. He felt that his dead body might live to admonish his countrymen, but also that when this purpose was served, it was not to be treated as of no further worth. It matters not whether it arise from a kind of natural instinct or from the immediate suggestion of the Spirit of God, but in all cases care as to what becomes of the body is evidence of a consciousness that the body is not finally to perish at death. The man who shows anxiety as to the treatment of his remains shows something of a believe (whether he confesses it or not) that these remains are reserved for other purposes and scenes.

I can hardly think that Joseph believed that his body would never live again. He would scarcely have provided it a sepulchre in Canaan if he were persuaded that it would be finally destroyed when he died. If that were the case, his bones might as well have rested in Egypt among the idolater and stranger. But on the supposition of a belief, or even the faintest conjecture, of a resurrection, we seem to understand why the dying patriarch longed to sleep in the promised land. "I will not leave," he seems to say, "this body to be disregarded and trampled on, as though it were merely that of an animal whose existence wholly terminates at death. It becomes not man to despise, as though undeserving of a single thought, that which God takes care of and reserves for another life. And though the eye of the Almighty would be on my dust in Egypt as in Canaan, yet would I rather rest with the righteous than with the wicked in the grave; with my fathers and my kinsmen rather than with the foreigner and the enemy. If I am to awaken from long and dark slumber, let those who wake with me be those whom I

have loved, and who are to share with me the unknown existence."

Whatever showed that God willed that the dead body should be cared for, that he would not have it thrown aside as utterly done with, went also to the showing that the body was still to be of use, and that, therefore, its resurrection was designed. Hence it may be that from the deathbed of Joseph sprang, in a measure, that persuasion of a resurrection, which gradually worked itself into the creed of the children of Israel.

It is not a Christian thing to die manifesting indifference as to what is done with the body. That body is redeemed, and every particle of its dust was bought with drops of Christ's precious blood. That body is appointed to a glorious condition, and every particle of corruption shall put on incorruption, and every part mortal shall assume immortality. The Christian knows this. Are you then surprised that when his time to die comes he should have this care for his body, which he is about to leave to the worms? No, he is a believer in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life. This belief prompts his dying words, and it shall be said of him as it was of Joseph, that "by faith," yea, "by faith" he "gave commandment concerning his bones."

Sermon I from *Sermons on Certain of the Less Prominent Facts and Reference in Sacred Story* by Henry Melvill (London: Printed for J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1843). **Note:** This sermon has been condensed, and liberty has been taken for some light editing. Also, punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, and long paragraphs have been divided.