



### The Twenty-third Century of His-Story: Jacob the Weary Pilgrim

The twenty-third century of history begins with a rather lonely and depressing scene. Jacob is on a journey. He is alone, leaving his home and family. He is fleeing the wrath of his brother, Esau, and heading toward the land and the family of his uncle Laban, where his mother grew up. Outwardly, it would appear that his life and future did improve very much. One hundred years later the scene is strikingly similar. The century will come to a close with Jacob again on the move and rather uncertain about the future. At that time he will no longer be alone, but will be leaving the promised land of Canaan with wagon loads of belongings and seventy souls to live in Egypt. From an outward and earthly point of view, Jacob's life was a series of disappointments and a failure to thrive.

When he gets to Egypt, Joseph introduces him to Pharaoh, and in this meeting we see a striking display of the antithesis between the church and the world. The tired patriarch Jacob and the enthusiastic young Pharaoh stand face to face; the life of the church and the life of the world stand face to face. They try to communicate, but it really is not possible. The difference between the two goes far deeper than language or culture – it's as if they are from two different worlds. Pharaoh comes in the flush of an astounding victory over famine, having averted national disaster, now as an exceedingly powerful man. He comes filled with positive ambition and a zest for life. We read that Jacob blessed the king, but this can be nothing more than him giving honor to the king with a greeting and farewell. He finds no reason or direction from God to pronounce a true spiritual blessing of God's favor upon him. Pharaoh is apparently impressed with the great age of Jacob, and asks about it. Jacob answers with a brief but very revealing commentary on his life: "The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage" (Gen. 47:9) The pomp, zest for earthly life, and ambitions for power hold no interest for Jacob, and the king doesn't really know what to say in

response to Jacob's seemingly gloomy words. Pilgrimage? Perhaps this old man can at last settle down in the pasture lands of Egypt. Pharaoh does what he can as far as providing earthly comforts and offers him good pasture land for his cattle.

These words of Jacob are not words of bitter resentment for the difficult life that he has lived, but rather those of a pilgrim speaking to a prosperous citizen of this earth who really can never understand or appreciate what he is hearing. What else would we expect from a man who has grown in faith and understands clearly what the life of a spiritual pilgrim entails? God says of Jacob and the rest of the patriarchs, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" (Heb. 11:13–16). God's people are pilgrims. Though Satan at times can distract and dazzle us with the wonderful things in this life, the child of God comes to realize he is a pilgrim in this earthly life. God is pleased to give us life for awhile in a place that is not home, so that we grow and are prepared for eternal life with God. God often has a very busy schedule of hardships for the short life of his saints as he reveals to them through these trials the depth of their sins and miseries and also the wonder of his love and grace in Christ. Jacob was no exception, and serves as a pattern and example for our lives.

The word that Jacob uses to describe his life and that of his fathers is "pilgrimage." In contrast to Pharaoh and the people within his kingdom, who were applying all their resources to the building up of a mighty nation able to satisfy earthly needs and desires, Jacob had spent his life wrestling with family problems, and finally after wrestling with the angel of Jehovah (Hosea 12:3–4), coming to see the foolishness of trusting physical strength and earthly wisdom. Through the trials and struggles of life in this earth, God brought Jacob into covenant fellowship with himself. Having tasted life as a citizen of heaven in fellowship with God, the glories and ambitions of Pharaoh hold not the least bit of attraction. Jacob is interested in Pharaoh only insofar as to see how God has used him to bring Joseph into a position of bringing his family into Egypt.

Leaving the promised land and moving to Egypt did not seem to fit with the promise of God, but God did tell Abraham earlier that this would happen. Over two hundred years earlier, when Abram had fallen into a deep sleep and "an horror of great darkness came over him," God

spoke of his covenant to Abram with the words, “Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full” (Genesis 15:13–16). The Amorites were descendents of Ham’s son Canaan. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been living among them and could see the growth and development in their iniquity while waiting for God to give them this promised land. The land itself was only a picture of heaven, and the life of Jacob in Canaan and now in Egypt were pictures of the church as she waits for the reality of heavenly life. Pharaoh was completely blind to the spiritual reality of Jacob’s life, and spoke to him as a mere curiosity. The two of them standing there face to face were of entirely different kingdoms. Jacob was only passing through and looking more and more forward the closer he got to his destination: perfect covenant life with God in heaven.

The land that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were traveling toward was heaven, and not simply a settled life in the land of Canaan. It is true that God spoke to them all of the promise of obtaining the land of Canaan, and eventually the children of Israel obtained the land and even established a mighty kingdom there. But even for the people of God who lived in peace under their own vine at the peak of Solomon’s glory, it was obvious that Canaan was only a picture of the heavenly kingdom. Sin had not been conquered. The picture quickly disintegrated as God again directed his people to the reality. The word of God in Hebrews 11 makes clear that Jacob understood that his destination was not merely an earthly kingdom in Canaan. In the same way we need to understand that the church on this earth and the gathering of the church into the kingdom of God is not the ultimate goal and destination. We do not yet live in the new heavens and the new earth, as many today seem to imagine. We are still pilgrims just like Jacob, and the way we live our life must show it.

Jacob’s life was difficult and full of trials. Homer Hoeksema gives this summary of his life’s events:

He had been born at a disadvantage regarding that which he cherished most: the promise. He had been struggling long years with his wicked brother Esau, who despised the birthright. He had been compelled to become an exile, without possessions except for his staff. He had been in servitude to his crafty uncle for a score of years. He had been cheated out of the wife he loved and was compelled to marry the woman he did not love. His beloved Rachel had died in childbirth. He had been constantly harassed with family troubles of the worst nature. He had seen the wickedness of his sons: of Judah, of Reuben, of Simeon and Levi. He had bemoaned for years the

loss of his most beloved son. Now he was compelled to leave the land of promise and to move to a strange land once more. Indeed, to the flesh the way had been evil. ... But now bring in the pilgrim's viewpoint. Then not the way, but the goal is the main thing. With respect to the way, the sole question is not, "Was the way smooth or rough?" Rather, in evaluating the way, the sole question is this: "What was its direction and whither did it lead me?" All of life must be judged in the light of this question. (*Unfolding Covenant History* 3:186-7)

Jacob's direction in life was toward closer fellowship with God, trusting in God's sovereign control, and the honor and glory of his name. From an outward perspective, even we in the church might be inclined to judge his life as a disaster. Suppose Jacob and his family attended your church. He sits there, an old man with a family history of gross sins among his children, and never really settled and established. But we may not be respecters of persons. Jacob is very aware of his weakness and the power of sin, and he has grown very close to God in his covenant fellowship as he waits to enter his heavenly home.

The pilgrim never really feels at home in life as long as he is a pilgrim here on this earth. It's not that he doesn't appreciate the wonders and beauty of this world or that he is dissatisfied with what God has created, but he recognizes that this world has been corrupted by sin and that God has established it as preparation for covenant life with him in the new heavens and the new earth. Our young people who attend Christian colleges are bombarded with the message that this present earth is our home, and that it is our business actively to engage and transform the world in preparation for Christ's return to rule. This world has too much to offer and the colleges don't like pessimistic pilgrim talk. If God has infused this world with a grace common to all, how dare we disparage it with the tunnel vision of a pilgrim? God's word makes it clear that Jacob was a pilgrim even as he walked the land of Canaan, and not only while in Egypt. God makes it clear that the saints all view this present earth as a preparation for the new heavens and the new earth. Who are we to reply to God with our own vision and wisdom? On the other hand, if our young people go to secular universities, they are tempted with the glories and power of man, as Jacob saw in Egypt. Either way, we must remember that we are pilgrims and desire a better country, that is, an heavenly.

Let's keep in mind that one characteristic of this period of history for the church is that of learning and waiting. She has already learned that God will choose by his sovereign good pleasure who will be saved. She has learned that man will not need to earn salvation in any way by his own works. She is aware that salvation will be deliverance from the bondage of sin, and

that God will send one, born of a woman, to do the work of saving the church. She is also aware that the nations of the earth have disappeared off into the horizon to fill and populate the earth, but that the church will one day be gathered from each of these nations. Today we live in the last day, but we are not in heaven yet. We still live as pilgrims and have the same attitude toward this world as Jacob did.