

CERTAIN SINGULAR SUBJECTS

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A SERMON

BY C. H. SPURGEON,

AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“And I gave unto Isaac Jacob and Esau: and I gave unto Esau Mount Seir,
to possess it; but Jacob and his children went down into Egypt.”*

Joshua 24:4.

THIS passage, though audibly uttered by the mouth of Joshua, is to be regarded as the immediate voice of God. Joshua said unto all the people, “Thus says Jehovah, God of Israel.” Jehovah reminded the tribes, their elders and judges, of all that He had done, and of all that He had been to them. And from this He challenged their allegiance, requiring that they should henceforth be loyal unto their great Benefactor. Addressing them Himself, His argument became all the more impressive. I reverence all Scripture more than tongue can tell, but yet I venerate most of all those portions of the word which are God’s own voice—the thought of Deity interpreted into human speech by Deity itself. The passage now before us, though it reads like a piece of ordinary history, such as might have been composed by a common scribe, has about it a vastness of meaning such as can only be found in the language of the infinite God. When God inspires David, or Isaiah or Paul, He teaches us most graciously, but when He condescends to speak Himself, how shall we sufficiently reverence the word? We have here, not so much a letter dictated by God, as the actual autograph of the great Father. My text is written with the finger of God. A glory blazes along the lines. The letters are all illuminated, the words glow like the sapphire work of heaven’s pavement. Our text has a world of meaning in it. It may, as we notice its plain words and prosaic statements, seem to be a mere common box, but it is in very deed an ark of precious perfumed wood, overlaid with pure gold, and filled with gems and jewels rich and rare. May the Holy Spirit give us eyes with which to perceive the treasures which lie before us in these words—“I gave unto Isaac Jacob and Esau: and I gave unto Esau Mount Seir, to possess it; but Jacob and his children went down into Egypt.”

I. The first thing that I discern here is HISTORY AND THE HAND OF GOD IN IT. See, “*I gave,*” and then again, “*I gave.*” It is not merely that Esau and Jacob were born of Isaac and Rebekah, but the Lord says, “*I gave unto Isaac Jacob and Esau.*” How plainly does this declare that the hand of God is in human history! At first sight history seems a great tangle, a snarl, confusion, but on looking at it more closely we perceive that it is only in appearance a maze, but in fact a marvelous piece of arrangement, exhibiting perfect precision and never-failing accuracy. Our carnal reason sees the wrong side of the carpet, and it appears to be without design or order. But there is another side to history, and looked at from that standpoint it reveals a wonderful pattern of beauty, displaying wisdom and goodness unparalleled. The histories of nations are, from the human side, little more than a narration of the crimes of kings and the follies of their people. And yet, viewed from another quarter, they are the record of the dealings of God with men—the story of love’s labor to reclaim the lost. Look at Calvary’s sacrifice as it rises above all other events, even as this morning I saw the hills and the tops of tall trees standing out above the morning mist. What a sight it is! The cross towering over the ages; looking down on their sins and sorrows! Calvary—what is it? What but the climax of human iniquity, where man became not so much a regicide, though he slew his King, as a Decide, for to the utmost of his power he slew his God! On the cross, human enmity of God reached its most dread extremity. With wicked hands men crucified and slew the Son of God. Yet it is equally true that on Calvary we see more of the goodness, grace, mercy, justice, and long-suffering of God than anywhere else. The cross is at once our crime and our salvation, an exhibition of man’s foulest sin and of God’s richest grace. Calvary is of all spots the blackest and the brightest, the place where hell displayed its most deadly power, and yet the very gate of heaven.

Thus is all human history, according to its measure and proportion, a bitter sweet. Where man's mischief and misery abound, there do God's goodness and grace much more abound.

We see the hand of God in history very strikingly in the raising up of remarkable men at certain special periods. It is true, as the Lord says, "I gave unto Isaac, Jacob and Esau." Children are the gift of God. This is true not only of Isaac but of all mortal men. God gave to a worthy couple, George Washington, to another pair, John Howard, and to a third, George Whitefield. Each of these, in his own special way was a divine gift to men. Children are born with differing talents, and varied capacities, but all about them which will make them blessings is the gift of God. I shall not tarry to mention great men whose names mark epochs in history from which men date an increase of light and happiness, but let no man think of these friends and leaders of mankind without admitting the hand of God in their birth, training, disposition, and ability. The greatest blessing which God ever gave to man was the man Christ Jesus, and under Him, the next best blessings are men. You remember the passage, "When He ascended up on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. And He gave some apostles," and so forth. Ascension gifts are sure to be worthy of the occasion, and therefore eminently precious, and lo! These are all men. Within a man, poor, lowly, humble, and even sinful though that man may be in himself, there may lie concealed an almost infinite blessing from the Most High. Even as within an acorn sleeps a forest, or within a flint lies light for a nation's watch-fires. When the negro slave had borne long years of bondage, and hope of deliverance seemed far away, it was God that gave an Abraham Lincoln, who led the nation onward till, "Emancipation," flamed upon its banners. Long before, when England, free in every corner of it, yet held slaves in its colonies, it was God that gave Wilberforce, and raised him up to plead in Parliament the rights of men, till the command went forth—

*"Thus says Britannia, empress of the sea,
Your chains are broken; Africa, be free!"*

In all such acts of righteousness the coming forth of the man of the hour must be attributed to God's own hand. The men themselves may not know why they have come to power. Of them it might often be said as the Lord said of Cyrus, "I girded you, though you have not known Me." The mighty ones that contend for wrong, bind the chains, and forge the fetters of the oppressed, do not know the champions who are predestined to overturn them, but God knows, and that is enough. Tyrants have always just cause to be afraid, for every birth may produce a deliverer. Somewhere in a hovel there may sleep in a rude cradle the boy who shall shake the throne of evil. As yet it has always happened in due season that Pharaoh has been confronted by Moses, and the princes of Midian by Gideon. For every Sisera there is a Jael, and for every Goliath a David. The upas tree may increase its deadly shadow, but an axe is sharpening for the felling of it. Evil is a gourd, and though a man is but a worm, yet he shall destroy that gourd. God is still working in the fashioning—oh, with what mystery!—of His own instruments. In His book are written the members of men who are yet to be, who are now being fashioned in secret by the hand of God. These shall by-and-by appear, and shall lead on the race to a further unloosing of its bonds. I rejoice in the possibilities which lie in birth. As to the One great Seed of the woman we look for our greatest deliverance, so do we in a lower sense look to her seed for the overthrow of many of the doings of the serpent race. That curse, which made her in sorrow bring forth children, contains enclosed within itself, like a bud in its sheath, the promise of untold benediction. Often at a birth might an age rejoice and sing, "Unto us a child is born: unto us a son is given." Let parents think of this, and dedicate their offspring with many a prayer to the Lord whose gift they are. Let old men think of this, and cry to God to raise up true men to fill the places which they themselves can no longer occupy. Lo! Children are a heritage of the Lord. When our sons are a seed that the Lord has blest, blessed is the man that has his quiver full of them.

Let us bless and praise the Lord, as we look back in history upon God's manifest interference with the course of events by the singular births of men whom He has used to effect His own divine purposes. Nobody denies that the hand of God is in the coming of men for the hour when the hour calls for the men.

So also is the hand of God distinctly to be seen in all great events. If Esau captures Mount Seir, then the setting up of the Edomite dominion, bad as it may have been, is from another point of view a matter in which God's purpose and design are to be noted, for He says—"I gave Esau mount Seir." Brethren, I

believe—and I hope the truth is not too strong for you—that not a tiny bird pecks up a worm from the ground without your Father. A plant does not sprout in the corner behind the wall, and shoot up its flower, and seed, and ripen and decay, apart from the Lord of hosts. Much less does an empire rise, flourish, or decline without divine co-operation. When the withered leaf falls from the sycamore in the autumn time, providence guides the leaf to its place upon the sod. And when the worm uplifts itself to draw that leaf into the tunnel which it has made, the hand of the Lord directs the burial. In everything that happens, be it small or great, the Lord is present and His will is done. It is so in all the plotting and maneuvering of kings and princes and senates, in the stirs of public opinion, in the marching of armies, and in all that transpires among mortal men. Though the iniquity of man is abundantly seen, yet the overruling power of God is never absent. The world is not left to itself, given over to the lord of misrule, but in all events the hand of God may be perceived by all who care to perceive it. I reckon war to be a huge crime on man's side, but when battalions have marched against battalions, the destiny of empires, and possibly of the whole race of man, has turned upon the health of a commander, the clearness of his eye, or the quickness of his messenger. Yes, the turning aside of a bullet, or the fall of a horse, or the breaking of an axle, has become the pivot of history, the turning point of ages, *and there at the center the Lord has been surely ready*. Essential points have been secured beyond question. Perhaps it is more nearly right to say that every turn of history has been essential, and that the whole of it has been in the hands of the Highest. It is singular how God is seen, both in dangers and preservations, in connection with crises of history. Wellington at Waterloo sat on his horse, Copenhagen, all day long. A friend of mine, well known to most of you, said to him, "I suppose your horse must have been very weary." "No," said the duke, "He was so fresh that when I got off from him he threw his heels into the air, and almost struck my temple. I was not in greater danger all through the battle than at that moment." God had preserved the hero all that live-long day, and we little know what had been the result if a chance slug or ball had carried him off. And yet you see when the red mouth of war was growing silent, the Iron Duke was still in jeopardy. Had he been suddenly cut off, our island might have become an insignificant province of a vast Napoleonic empire. But he was immortal till his work was done. Above the awful din of war I hear the voice of God, even out of such an evil, which makes earth for a while like hell, the good Lord of all produces good. Masters of armies reckon their hosts, but the Lord of hosts they forget. They plan and scheme—these masters of men, to whom their people are as so much food for powder—but a higher plan overrides their planning. There is a King of kings, and Lord of lords, and He is no silent spectator of what is done, but stretches out His hand to deliver the nations from the power of evil, so that still by His great power the world moves onward to something better. We think of this poor world with great sadness, when we see all the crime and sin which defile it, and yet we join with Galileo in saying, "It does move though!" Truth makes progress. The right is winning. If we do not see an improvement today, or tomorrow, yet take any 20 years, and you will see that the world is moving—moving on to that grand day when the song shall ascend, "Hallelujah, Hallelujah: for the Lord God omnipotent reigns!" As the Lord's hand was in Esau's possession of Mount Seir, so is it in the settlement of every tribe and people, and it is to be seen by all observant eyes in all the great epochs of the history of man.

Yet please notice that whenever we say this—and I say it pretty plainly—*we never excuse the sin and folly of man*. We speak of predestination and foreknowledge, because we find these truths in Scripture and they seem to us to be facts in the very nature of things. God knows all that happens, otherwise He were no God, but a poor, blind deity. And if He knows that a certain fact will happen, then, it is a fixed and settled thing, depend on that. Nothing happens other than God foreknew would happen, and therefore it is fixed. If I laid aside predestination, yet foreknowledge would be quite enough for me. Something or other is certain to happen, and God knows what that something or other is, and therefore it is fixed, not by blind fate, but still fixed. Yet this fixedness is perfectly consistent with the free agency and responsibility of man. Man thinks, and resolves, and acts as freely, and as much on his own accord, as if there were no foreknowledge and no God. In the book of the unrevealed everything is written, but the mystic roll is laid up in the archives of heaven and no man knows what is written in it. Down below everything happens according to that book. Not a stroke of it is in error, not a mistake is found in a single line, the event happens as it was foreknown. But still, if there were no such book, man would not be more absolutely free than he is now. I can join heartily with the advocate of free agency when he talks of

man's voluntariness in his acts of sin, his willful choice of evil, his rejection of Christ and of His grace. No man can too thoroughly believe in the willful guilt of the wicked, at any rate I will go all lengths in such a belief. I couple with what is called Calvinistic doctrine, the other doctrine of free agency and responsibility, which seems to me to be equally true. And if this is judged to be an inconsistency the remark does not stagger me, for I see no inconsistency, and do not believe that any exists. My God is not a mere omnipotent being, who can rule dead materialism, and compel insensible atoms to do His will, but He can rule free agents, leaving them absolutely free, and yet effecting all His purposes with them. God's eternal purposes are accomplished, and yet men remain responsible free agents both in their beginning and in their ending. Do you say that you do not understand how this can be? Neither do I, but I believe it. There are ten thousand other things in nature and history which are too high for me to understand their "how" and "why," and yet I see them. Can I not also be sure of some matters which I do *not* see? It is not for me to profess to comprehend the nature or the ways of the Infinite. If we could comprehend the Lord, He would not be the infinite God. It is because He is beyond me—infinity beyond such a poor creature as I am—that I all the more reverently adore Him. His nature and His acts are alike veiled in mystery, but alike to be held in reverence.

Have you never heard of the insect philosophers? They were midges so small that a man needed a microscope to see them, but they were very great philosophers for all that, and they set about to describe an elephant. One of them hung upon the gigantic creature's ear, and surveyed a small portion of its area, and his theory was that an elephant was a living wall, almost perpendicular. Another stood upright somewhere on the creature's back, and he stated that the creature was a vast plain. While a third, who was perched upon a hair of the animal, propounded the idea that it was a tall shaft. These midge-philosophers had not eyes large enough to take in a whole elephant, and so each one judged from the tiny morsel of hide which came under his own narrow range of observation. Yet these ephemera were nearer the mark with the elephant than our wise men are with the universe, concerning which their first principles, and theories, and hypotheses have usually been a museum of follies. Yet if philosophers understood the universe, that understanding would not bring their carnal minds within measurable distance of the infinite God. None but the Spirit of God can reveal God to any man, and the man himself must receive a new and spiritual life before he can know what the Spirit teaches. Who, then, among the worldly-wise may dream of understanding God, when even the spiritual rather embrace Him by love than grasp Him by understanding? Let us, therefore, believe what we find to be in God's Word, and what we are taught by His Spirit, though it should be far above our heads. Let us not delay to believe until we can reconcile. Do you not know that in theology—all the false part of theology—the part on which the sects stand and fight each other—consists of suspension bridges made of cobwebs, which are intended to bridge the distance between two awful truths which look as if they were divided from each other? The great rocky truths are in effect accepted by both parties, but the battle waxes hot concerning these cobweb-bridges which were never worth a tithe of the ingenuity which has been wasted upon them. I hold it true that God is in history and in everything, and I read the newspaper that I may see how my heavenly Father governs the world. And this I believe though I most clearly see that men sin willfully, and wickedly, and voluntarily, and that they are guilty free agents in all their wrong-doing. These thoughts come to me when I remember the character of Esau, and yet read the Lord's words, "I gave unto Esau mount Seir to possess it."

To us, dear friends, the hand of God is very visible in our own case. Look at the hand of God that gave to you and to me such *parents* as we have. I mean those of us who have the great delight of having descended from Christian men and women. Had we anything to do with that? And yet the greatest part of a man's future depends upon the parents of whom he is born. No person can deny that our parentage is beyond our own power, and yet to a large extent it colors the whole future of life. Is not the hand of God in it? Why shall one be born of a long succession of drunks and of thieves, and have within himself an insatiable passion born with him to imitate them, while another inherits a sound constitution from his parents, and though he has no tendency to the grace of God, yet he has a tendency to morality, and naturally develops self-restraint and gentle manners? Do we not see the hand of God in the parents that He gave us? I cannot be so blind as to deny my own obligations. I shall forever bless God that I was given to a godly couple whose delight it was to lead me in the ways of God.

And do we not see the hand of God, again, in our *children*? Many of us do. Oh, how some of us bless and praise God that ever such sons fell to our lot! We never think of them without delight, for they are living in the service of the Lord Jesus, spending and being spent in the Divine Master's service. Look at your children as the gifts of God, and if they are not yet all that you could desire, yet still believe that God has given them to you, even as He says, "I gave Isaac, Jacob and Esau." You, dear friends in Christ, united in holy wedlock, may look upon your children as not unclean, but holy, in the sense intended by the apostle when he speaks of the unbelieving wife as sanctified by the believing husband, and adds, "else were your children unclean, but now are they holy." They are not to be viewed as the unhappy fruit of an unhallowed union, but as gifts of God, to be brought up for Him, and trained in His fear. They come not as the result of uncleanness, but as gifts from the Lord, to whom marriage is an honorable estate. It would be a sad thing if the sight of my child made me blush for shame. But it is a joy to look upon him as, like Samuel, asked of God, and given of God. Bring these gifts of God to God, and say, "Here, Lord, are the children whom You have given me. Save them by Your grace, since in love You have given them to me. These dear ones are favors from Yourself, blessings upon which I set great store. O Lord, let Your name be named on them, and let Your grace be glorified in them."

Observe, further, that *the Lord's hand is in all the prosperity which He gives to any*. He says, "I gave unto Esau Mount Seir, to possess it." It is by God's allotment that temporal things fall as they do. Even the ungodly have their portion in this life by divine grant. It is "vain to rise up early, and to sit up late, and to eat the bread of carefulness," if the Lord did not build the house and prosper the labor. It is He that gives you power to get wealth. Our daily bread comes from the granary of Providence. The store most ample, or the measure most scant, must alike be traced to the one all-bountiful hand.

And once more, *God's hand is to be seen in the place in which we live*. If Esau lives in mount Seir, it is because God appoints him to be there, and if Israel goes down to Egypt, it is for the same reason. If you and I move from one place to another, it is sweet to see the cloud moving before us, and to know that the Lord directs our way. "The steps of a good man are ordered of the Lord." But I need not instance cases. The hand of the Lord has been with some of us for good from our cradle even until now. And we believe that He who has led us so far will still lead us, until we arrive at the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

II. Secondly, we have another lesson to learn from our text, and that is upon, BIRTH AND ITS DISAPPOINTMENTS. "*I gave unto Isaac, Jacob and Esau,*" twin children born of godly parents. *In that birth there was joy, but sorrow came by it as well as joy.* What joy there was in Isaac's house that day, for we read that it had been a matter of prayer in the family! See Genesis 25:21. It had been a grief to Isaac that, married at 40 years of age, he had lived twenty years in married life without a child, although he had the promise of a seed. Lo! One day it happened that Esau and Jacob were born. There was joy. Yes, double joy, because two sons had come to build up their father's house. Ah, had they known it, there was grave cause for mingled emotion in that double birth! We read that forty years after Esau married, and he took unto himself two Canaanite wives, "which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah." Yes, we may fondly promise ourselves that children born of godly parents will be an unalloyed comfort to them, and yet it may not be so. Children are certain cares, and doubtful comforts. They may bring to their parents such sorrow that they may be inclined to think the barren happier than the fruitful. Hence it is well for us to leave our hopes of posterity with God, and if we reckon that in a childless house we have missed a great joy, we ought also to reckon that we have missed a mint of trouble by the same fact. Your children are not born in grace, but they are the children of nature, and that being the case, you may have to see in one of them—God grant it may be in no more—an Esau, yes, a profane person, who will sell his birthright, and become an enemy of the people of God. Esau was born of admirable parents, and so an Esau may be found to your boundless grief in your own family. It has been so before with others, and it may be so with you. The lion's whelp has been found in the sheep's fold, the vulture has been hatched in the dove's nest. There was great hope, certainly, of both boys born in Isaac's house, for we look that godly parents should train up their children in the way that they should go, so that when they are old they may not depart from it, therefore both Esau and Jacob were most hopefully started. But Esau was not trainable. He was a wild man, and went his own way, and became a follower of rough sports, "a cunning hunter, a man of the field," and soon he became profane, as often happens to

those whose chief pursuits are sporting. Ah, me! Ah, me! How often the brightest hopes have been blasted, and those who appeared to be floating on the current which flows towards heaven have been drifted back and lost on the forlorn shores of unbelief.

It is a great advantage to you, my dear young friend, to have been born into a Christian family, but I charge you, do not trust in it as though it were in itself a guarantee of salvation. Isaac, the beloved of God, has Esau for a son. Mind that. David had to sorrow over Absalom and Hezekiah over Manasseh. You may be the Esau of your family. Is it so? May God grant that such a dreadful portion may not be chosen by you! Remember that your brother who has lived with you, slept with you, and grown with you side by side, may be gracious, and you may remain ungodly. Is it so now? Oh, that the Holy Spirit may come and work upon you till you and your brother are one in Christ, like James and John, Peter and Andrew. Father, do you find a division in your house? Then pray to God, even as Abraham prayed for Ishmael, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" Pray for your wayward boy. And oh, you that are in the family, and have through divine mercy, become a Jacob and not an Esau, ascribe it to sovereign grace and give God the praise, but forget not your brother! While he lives have hope for him, and see what you can do that he also may rejoice in the Lord. But, ah, if we could read the future when we look at our little children, we should rejoice with trembling! And as we cannot read the future, it is fit that we should pray with earnestness. We have prayer often at dying beds, why have we not more prayer in the chamber of birth? Surely, when an immortal spirit starts upon its endless career, it is well for us to cry to God and ask others to join with us in the loving, earnest prayer that the Holy Spirit may cause the newly-born to be born again as soon as they are able to know Jesus and believe in Him. There stands the fact, in birth there is joy tempered with godly fear, hope mingled with sacred anxiety, and high advantage which may yet most sadly end in deepened responsibility and increased sin.

III. Thirdly, and very briefly, we have next to view **WORLDLINGS AND THEIR POSSESSIONS.** "*I gave unto Esau Mount Seir, to possess it.*" That is to say, Esau, as compared with Jacob, appeared to have the best of it, for he had "Mount Seir, to possess it," but poor Jacob had not a foot of land that he could call his own except the family sepulcher at Machipelah, in which afterwards he slept the sleep of the righteous.

Why does God so often give possessions to ungodly men? Why do they flourish? Why do they have their portion in this life? Is it not, first, because *God thinks little of these things*, and therefore gives them to those of whom He thinks little? "Why," said Luther, in his day, "the whole Turkish empire is but a basket of husks that God gives to the hogs, and therefore He hands it over to the unbelievers." So, often, wealth and riches are but so much wash, which the great Husbandman gives to the swine on His estate. Something infinitely better is reserved for the Lord's own family. The rich blessing of true grace He reserves for His children and heirs. It shows how little God thinks of kingdoms, and empires, and great riches, for He leaves these full often to the worst of men. How few saints have ever worn crown or coronet! A holy man once said that the kings who have gone to heaven might almost be counted on your fingers. See what small account the Lord makes of the world's best store.

Do you wish that ungodly men should have less? For my part, I am reconciled to their present prosperity, for *it is all they will ever have*. Poor souls; let them have as much of it as they may *here*, they will have nothing hereafter. Besides, they have no God, and having no God, it would take a great many fortunes to make a godless man's portion worth a straw. If the graceless could gain all worlds, what use would they be to them when they come to die? Their own souls lost, and no comfort in Christ, and no joy in the Spirit, what have they gained after all? Let the worldlings have the husks. Let none of us ever cry, "I gladly would fill my belly with the husks that the swine eat." Let those have the treasures of this present evil world that have nothing else. Never quarrel with the Lord for saying, "I gave unto Esau Mount Seir, to possess it."

Besides, these comforts may lead them to reflect upon God's bounty to them, and at any rate they *ought to move them to repentance*. It is my earnest hope that many an ungodly man, whom God has highly favored in the things of this life, may be influenced by the Spirit of God to say, "Why should I continue to rebel against God who has been so kind to me? He has prospered me, and taken care of me. Why should I not turn to Him, and become His servant?" At any rate, gratitude for mercies received should produce repentance for sins committed. Worldly goods have no necessary connection with un-

godliness. There is no infection in harvest stores, nor iniquity in the wealth which comes of commerce. In themselves gold and silver are harmless metals. There have been men who have enjoyed the abundance of this world, and yet have inherited the world to come. Not many great men after the flesh are chosen, but there is a great difference between “not *many*,” and “not *any*.” Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus, and the women who ministered unto Christ of their substance, had a fair measure of the comforts of this life, and used them for their Lord. It was not Solomon’s wealth that brought him down so low. His unrestrained passions were his ruin, or else might he have held all his treasures and held his God too. Pray, therefore, that the rich may be brought to Christ. Why should not that fish be taken which has the silver shekel in its mouth? Why may not Matthew, the publican, be called from the receipt of custom? Is there not yet another Zacchaeus to be renewed by grace? May not their indebtedness to God be used as a plea with the wealthy to give themselves to Him who has already given them so much? It was no fault in Jonah that he felt pleasure under the shade of his gourd. The fault lay in making a god of that gourd. There is no evil in having goods, but there is great evil in making those goods our chief good. Yet, brethren, so it is, that the men of this world usually have the most of it. I do not say the best of it. It is and always will be a mystery, as long as the world stands, that the wicked often flourish and the righteous suffer. Read the Book of Job, read the thirty-seventh Psalm, read the seventy-third Psalm, and see how holy men and wise men have been perplexed and troubled by the method of the divine providence. To see wickedness on a throne and righteousness in a dungeon, pride enshrined in honor, and holiness rolled in the kennel, is a serious trial of our confidence in God, and yet there are weighty reasons why it should be so for a while. Not without wisdom does the Lord say, “I gave to Esau Mount Seir, to possess it.”

IV. Now comes the fourth point and a great mystery too. Here are THE CHOSEN OF GOD AND THEIR TRIALS. “I gave unto Esau Mount Seir, to possess it; *but Jacob and his children went down into Egypt.*” That is their portion. They must go down into Egypt because of famine. And they must suffer there under a tyrant’s iron rod, so that they may become familiar with the drudgery of slaves. They must be strangers in a strange land, and be sorely bruised beneath the foot of the oppressor. The escutcheon of their nation was to be “a smoking furnace and a burning lamp.” Moses saw Israel as well as God when he beheld a bush burning with fire but not consumed. Is not this a strange thing? To him whom God loves best He allots the hardest conditions. Esau’s sons are dukes, but Jacob’s seed are drudges. Esau reigns, but Israel serves. Esau set his nest on high, but Israel crouched by the reeds of the river. The worldling would read the Scripture as if it said, “As many as I love, I caress and pamper,” but the Lord speaks not so. His Words are, “As many as I love I rebuke and chasten.” “Whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges”—those are very hard words—“scourges every son whom He receives.” To carnal reason this seems strange. Faith alone can explain it.

But Israel and his children went down into Egypt, first, for their *preservation*. So God brings His people into trial often to preserve them from the world and its evil influences, from themselves and their natural pride, from Satan and his puffing up. By sorrow and adversity the children of God are driven to their knees, brought near to their great Father, and kept in fellowship with Him. Sanctified afflictions are spiritual promotions. The salt and bitterness of sorrow often preserve men from the gall and bitterness of sin.

They went down into Egypt, next, for their *improvement*, for the family of Jacob was in a mournful condition, and by no means fit to be used of the Lord. The story of Jacob’s family is a strangely sad one. Perhaps Scripture does not contain a more mournful page. The evil influence of polygamy is clearly seen, blended within the errors of Laban’s house, and envenomed by the foul example of the Canaanites among whom they sojourned. It was time that they should shift their quarters, they were neither getting good nor doing good. It looked as if the patriarch would beget an ignorant, quarrelsome, vicious race, and so they were sent down into Egypt that trouble might teach them better manners. God often thrusts His people into adversity that He may improve them, awaken them, instruct them, and ennoble them. See to it, brethren, that the Lord’s design be fulfilled in you to the fullest. May the anvil and the file, the crucible and the flame, work in you a clearance of dross and rust, and make you pure and bright.

They also went down into Egypt for their *education*. The chosen seed needed teaching. They were getting to be rustic, not to say barbarous, in their manners, acquirements and knowledge were scant

among them. They must go down into the seat of ancient learning to acquire arts and sciences, and civilization. In Egypt a race, which otherwise had been a mob, must be consolidated into a nation. A band of willful men must be trained to discipline and obedience. The Lord said, “Out of Egypt have I called My son,” because Egypt was his school of learning, his drill ground of discipline. We are ignorant, rebellious, and willful till the Lord trains us. “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept Your Word.” The Lord teaches us on the blackboard of adversity, and we are often rapped over the knuckles by the stern Master. It is wonderful what we learn when we are taken among the thorns. I hardly think that I have learned anything except in affliction. At least I know this—I owe more to the hammer, and the anvil, and the file, and the furnace, than I do to all the green meadows and flowing brooks and singing birds that I have ever seen or heard. I fear that I have learned little beyond that which has been whipped into me. And though I am not fonder of the rod than you are, I confess that such sweet fruit grows on the bitter branch of trial that I would fear to be long without it. I would rather weep within the Lord’s chosen than laugh within the reprobate. By unhallowed mirth fools grow more foolish, but by sanctified trials wise men become yet wiser. For future usefulness it is well that we have present sorrow, and like Jacob, go down into Egypt.

And they went down to Egypt again, that *God might display His great power in them*. I would not care to be Esau on Mount Seir when once I see Pharaoh’s hosts drowned, and Israel marching through the depths of the sea, and when I hear the song of the Israelite maidens, and the shouts of the men, “Sing you to Jehovah, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider has He thrown into the sea.” It is worth while to go down into Egypt to come out of it with a high hand and an outstretched arm. Oh, the glory of the Lord in His redeemed. Oh, the lofty destiny of the tried people of God! Oh, the sublimity of their lives, even now! There is God in them. There is God about them. He heads the van, and brings up the rear. They are as signs and wonders in their generations. He has blessed them, yes, and they shall be blessed. It matters little that Esau has Mount Seir for a possession, Israel has her God. No foot of land perhaps you call your own, you do not know where your next suit of clothes will come from, and God has kept you on short commons, and multiplied your straits and needs. Never mind—yours is the lot of the chosen, for “Jacob and his children went down into Egypt.” That is where the story ends, according to my text, but you know the story does not end there at all, for out of Jacob and his children came the Star, the Scepter and the Throne. The Godhead took up the seed of Israel, and now today He that sprang of Jacob’s loins, according to the flesh, sits on the highest throne of God and reigns supreme. The Shiloh has come, and it matters nothing what Egypt brought of sorrow unto Jacob’s seed, seeing that out of them at the last came the King and Savior of men. If Jesus is ours, the rest is a small affair. Give me Christ, and I ask for nothing else. Having faith in Jesus, I can leave all things with the great Disposer of events. Christ and a crust, the promise and a parish coat, grace and an almshouse! Cannot a saint be more than content with these?

So have I set before you the varying lots of God’s own people and of the wicked. I hope that you are ready to say that you would rather suffer affliction with the people of God than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. God help you to make that wise choice, and to make it at once. May His Spirit lead you to take the Lord Jesus to be your all in all. Amen.

**PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—JOSHUA 24.
HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—23 (2ND VERSION), 17, 32 (2ND PART).**

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