Genesis - Commentaries by Walter Thomas Turpin

Occasional Papers, Manasseh and Ephraim

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Genesis 12:51, 52

The names of Joseph's sons, born to him in the land of his exile, are full of the deepest interest and significance; his own history, remarkable and checkered as it was, I do not here refer to further than to notice, how it sets forth in figure and in type the varied exercises and trials to which a servant of God is subjected, in order that he may be a suitable vessel for the Master's use.

We do not find that either of these names was given without a special reason and intent; yet they were not, as is so commonly found, names which served to connect the child with some great members of the family, distinguished either by title or possession; on the contrary, this devoted servant of God will have the children born to him in a strange land, even in their names, witnesses of how entirely apart from "his father's house" he was, and how in it he was only left to be fruitful to God amid affliction and trial on every hand. How truly did Joseph, personally and typically, answer to Jacob his father's words of prophetic import: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well, whose branches run over the wall: the archers have sorely grieved him and shot at him and hated him: but this bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob, (from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel)" (Gen. 49:22-24; see also Moses' blessing as recorded in Deut. 33:13-17).

Now the meaning of Manasseh is forgetting, and of Ephraim, fruitful, and these are two great features which the revelation of God's mind and will for the present moment, when received in faith, produce in our hearts! No one can truly say that he forgets "his father's house," until his heart has found a treasure in a brighter scene; then where he is in body, becomes the land of exile to him, yet he has no desire to return to the past, he forgets it; what derives from him bears the confession of it in even the name; his toil and his father's house alike are faded from his remembrance. It is truly a wonderful emancipation to a man, when what he has found and possessed in heaven throws into shade and obscurity and oblivion all that natural pride of birth and pedigree which are connected with our "father's house."

Yet it is never the case, save as the heart has been won and satisfied by Christ in glory; it is only Christ in heaven that can displace "all things," leading us to count them loss for the excellency of His knowledge. How sorrowful it is to see many so little distinguished by this Manasseh character of testimony; although the doctrine as to it is accepted, at least outwardly, the conformity of the ways in practice is often so glaringly inconsistent, as to raise the question how far terms and language are understood, or how far it is the antinomianism of the heart manifesting itself.

It is sorrowful and solemn to reflect upon the feeble connection which seems to exist in many souls between truth and its maintenance; the highest character of testimony may be held doctrinally, along with the most evident self-seeking and worldliness. How is this? is often asked. I shall give the only answer that satisfies my own heart. Truth is sought after or held in the mind instead of Christ personally domiciling in the heart; I know I shall be met by some with—"But Christ is the truth." I reply, Quite true; but it is possible to separate Christ from truth, for what is the human heart not capable of? And it is a serious question how far more importance has been attached to natural quickness of apprehension than is its due, even to the slighting of some, who, though slow in apprehension, were far more solid in soul, and more conscientious in their handling of the truth because deeply impressed with the sense of its claims upon those who profess to receive it.

How blessed it is when in heart we can really walk through the world as in a foreign land! Christ in glory having so possessed us, that we are but vessels here at His disposal and pleasure. I say, vessels, in contrast with either agents or actors; as I understand it, a vessel is simply to contain and display what is set therein; we are set in this world as vessels to contain and display Christ, thus forgetting all our toil, and all our father's house.

When the eye is single, that is when Christ alone is filling its vision, all is lost sight of; not only our toil and father's house, but even our progress in pressing on to Christ in glory; hence says the apostle "forgetting those things which are behind," from the same word as is found in Genesis 46 (see Septuagint). What a wonderful and surpassing power which, by its own excellence and blessedness, turns out every claimant or rival, that Christ alone may rule and reign there! Reader, have you so found and known Him in this land of exile and strangership, that you can inscribe on all as your motto in part, Manasseh!

But another son was born to Joseph at this time also, to whom he gives the name of Ephraim, that is, fruitful.

Now this sets forth another and second testimony, which the blessed Lord has called His own to render for Him in the midst of this hostile scene. We are left in a world with which we ought to have nothing in common, to be fruitful for Christ, and that too where there is absolutely nothing to succor, but on the contrary where everything, even the best here, draws away from the only source of fruitfulness and blessing. Happy is the saint who has so learned to fear the baneful influences of this world's atmosphere, as to keep nigh to the one spot from whence vigor and freshness flow, and thus to be on earth like a tree reversed, the roots in heaven, the branches here; not only satisfied, but in some little measure displaying it in fruitfulness for Christ. Alas, how few there are who seem to be awake to the immense favor of God, in leaving us for Christ in such a world and time as this!

There is another point of great interest in this history, which finds its antitype in the Lord's ways with His saints at the present time. It required both the pit and the prison to develop and mature this testimony of Joseph. And is it not so with His saints now? Can there be either forgetfulness or fruitfulness, save as death practically works in us? Is it not as we bear about in our body the dying of Jesus, and as we who live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that His life is manifested? And what fruitfulness like this? It is blessed to learn and be assured of it; to His blessed death we owe our all; by it He has set us free from the moral pit and prison in which we were hopelessly undone;

but while almost every saint would glory in this, how few there are who have as yet accepted the solemn reality, that it is only through death, we can, as free, follow Him; and it is only as death practically works in us, we are either forgetting or fruitful.

May the Lord awaken us all to a more serious estimate of such a calling, so as to set forth in a scene of moral death and darkness, the land of our exile and stranger-ship, the beautiful simplicity of those whose father’s house and toil are all to us things of the past, to be no more remembered or resumed connection with, and we, though in a foreign land, fruitful trees of the Lord’s culture, even “planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit.”

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