

Genesis: *Obtaining Your Birthright*
Genesis 25:24-34

As we return to Genesis 25, remember that God recently proclaimed that there are two nations dwelling in the womb of Isaac's wife Rebekah. One shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger. This morning we will pick up the narrative beginning with vs. 24 and we will read through to the end of the chapter. Please stand for the reading of God's Word:

²⁴ When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. ³⁰ And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) ³¹ Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." ³² Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³ Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

My message will fall under three subheadings this morning: 1) Different and Divided; 2) A Shameful Exchange; and 3) Despising the Birthright.

I. Different and Divided

Most of you know that I have a younger brother named Marc. Marc is only 15 months younger than I am, and yet he is five inches taller than I am...which is completely unjust. At any rate, when we were boys, everyone thought we were twins. Because Marc was genetically "bigger" by design, we were almost always the same height even though I was a year older. We also had very similar facial features with the same haircut, so it was not uncommon for people to get confused as to which brother they were talking to. For most of my early childhood, Marc and I were simply referred to as "the boys." We always got the same exact gifts for Christmas, we wore matching clothes, we spent endless hours together...we were in many ways like twins, even though we were not twins. I tell you this history because I can relate a bit with this story of Esau and Jacob.

Though Marc and I looked appeared almost identical, we were very different! My parents will tell you that I was a sweet child and a natural-born people-pleaser. Not so with Marc! Soon after Marc was born, he had to have a very serious surgery that left a scar on his stomach. My mom swears that surgery made Marc grumpy and then he stayed grumpy for most of his childhood! Whereas I was outgoing and made friends easily, Marc preferred to keep to himself. I loved to play every sport, Marc played sports begrudgingly if at all. I was always up for going outside with Dad to hunt and fish, Marc preferred to stay home and watch T.V. For me, everything was a playful competition, and Marc was always my natural-born competitor. For Marc, the competition was anything but playful, and our competition over everything led to a lot of fights...a LOT of fights.

I suspect this was very much the dynamic between young Esau and Jacob in their early childhood. We learned earlier that the boys were smashing each other in the womb, so they got off to a rough start. Then, when they were born, their appearances were strikingly different. We read this morning that Esau came out of womb red and hairy, which is why he was named Esau—a name that means “red.” The point is that Esau is practically a “a man’s man” when he came out of the womb. His twin brother, however, though born only seconds later, had no “manly” traits to speak of. Instead, he came out holding on to the heel of his brother Esau, so they named him Jacob. Jacob originally sounded like a Hebrew word meaning “heel” or “protect,” but based upon the life of Jacob in Genesis, the Hebrew term would take on a different nuance and come to mean “Heel-grabber” or “Over-reacher.” (Hughes, 335)

The picture in the text is clear: these two boys, though twins, were born different and divided...just as God had predicted in vs. 23 when He declared, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other...”

As the narrative goes on, we get the sense that Esau is the stronger brother. Life came easily for Esau. He was naturally muscular, rugged, hairy, and aggressive. He was likely handsome in a wild, dangerous kind of way. We learn that he was a skillful hunter and a man of the field; both were manly traits highly valued in the primitive world.

Jacob, on the other hand, is described as a quiet man who preferred dwelling in tents. He is not ruddy and hairy like his brother. Tent-dwelling would not have ranked high amongst manly traits, so we are left with the perception that Jacob was quiet, pensive, and determined to NOT follow in the footsteps of his brother, Esau. Whereas Esau would have spent much of his youth outdoors hunting and tending his father’s flocks, Jacob would have been in the tents, working with his mother in the domestic tasks often associated with “women’s work.”

The boy’s biological differences and contrasting tendencies naturally prompted division between them, but their parents did not help the situation. We learn in vs. 28 that “Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Each parent favored one brother over the other.

Now, let’s pause for a moment. Parents, can I assume that you have never favored one of your children above the others? To be clear, you have never favored one child over the others, right? You shouldn’t lie in church.

Listen: we all know that, though parents typically “LOVE” their children equally, it is not at all uncommon for a parent to ‘favor’ one child above the others for any number of reasons. It is easy to favor the compliant, over-achieving firstborn over the rascally, rebellious second born. It is easy to favor the child who loves the things that the parent loves instead of the kid who wants nothing to do with the parents’ hobbies or interests. It’s easy to favor the child who adopts the faith and moral values of the parents as opposed to the child who rejects the family faith and lives an immoral lifestyle. No parent will ever admit that he/she has a favorite, but the kids generally know that you do! You don’t hide it as well as you think.

Parental favoritism may be inevitable to some extent, but such favoritism is rarely, if ever, painted in a favorable light in classic literature. Here in Genesis 25 the very mention of such blatant parental favoritism foreshadows trouble ahead. We know intuitively that parents should not *love* one child over the other, so we know this is likely not going to end well even before we know the rest of the story. So, let's see what happens next as we turn to our second subheading...

II. A Shameful Exchange

As we read on, the narrative sets up a scene that epitomizes the division between Jacob and Esau. Having learned that Esau was a mighty hunter and Jacob a man familiar with domestic tasks, Moses then tells a famous story that would have been scandalous in the ancient world. Beginning with vs. 29 we read:

29 Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. 30 And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.)

We can easily picture this scene, right? Jacob is quietly at work cooking for his family and perhaps many others who sojourned with them in Beer-lahai-roi. Cooking was an essential and important task that the whole community counted on, but no one would under-appreciate the art of meal preparation like Jacob's machismo brother, Esau. So, naturally, when Esau barges in smelling like he hadn't bathed in a month, demanding that Jacob serve him some soup before dinner is served, we don't need a lot of imagination to feel the tension rising in the room.

For starters, the stew likely had a proper name. If nothing else, we know from Moses that it was commonly called "lentil stew;" but the ruddy, red-haired Esau simply refers to Jacob's culinary creation as "red stew."

Secondly, Esau feels entitled to be served because he is "exhausted." Such entitlement assumes that Jacob is not exhausted, even though anyone who has cooked for large numbers of people will tell you that cooking can also be exhausting. That obviously didn't matter to Esau who regularly assumed that his manly work of hunting and working in the field was of greater strain and value than whatever it was that Jacob did while dwelling in a tent.

We can easily imagine Jacob's look of disgust when his twin brother shows no respect or appreciation for his work and acts as though the whole world needs to stop whenever Esau has a need to be filled. We might have expected a snippy response to Esau's entitled demands, but Jacob bites his tongue. We get the sense that Jacob is strategic and calculated. He may not be as physically aggressive as his twin brother, but Jacob is just as lethal. Without missing a beat, Jacob replies, "Sell me your birthright now."

Before we go any further, we must understand what Esau's birthright consisted of. In the ancient world, the firstborn son was entitled to a double portion of his father's estate. In other words, if the estate was divided between the two sons, Esau was entitled to twice as much land, livestock, and wealth than what Jacob would receive. The assumption behind this tradition was that the firstborn son would be the oldest, most responsible person in the family after the father died, and he would carry the burden of providing for the family and maintaining the family business. The firstborn would inherit the "head of household" status; so, upon Isaac's death, it would be Esau

who led the entire family unit with administrative authority. In the absence of his father, Isaac, Esau would be expected make the critical family decisions and even provide direction and discipline over the rest of the family. There was a lot of privilege and responsibility that went along with the firstborn “birthright.”

So, with all this in mind, I hope you can see that Jacob’s response is brilliant. If Esau is of his right mind, Jacob’s response simply translates as, “Go pound sand. I’m not your servant; go fix your own ‘red stew.’” In other words, Jacob’s command is so unthinkable and outrageous that it’s essentially saying, “I will give you some stew when you give me the moon.”

However, if Esau is truly famished and desperate enough, Jacob’s response serves as the price Esau must pay if he wants some of the ‘red stew’ that Jacob is preparing right at that moment. Jacob instinctively knows that Esau is impulsive and self-absorbed. The younger brother knows there is a slight chance that Esau might actually take the bait under the right conditions.

Sure enough, Esau takes the bait. He replies in vs. 32, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?”

Esau’s is consumed by his own appetite. His short-term hunger overrides his long-term thinking. In that moment, the only thing that matters to Esau is satisfying the craving within him.

Jacob sees the compromised state of his brother, and he’s not about to miss this opportunity. He fires back in vs. 33, “Swear to me now.”

And Moses writes, “So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

Esau sells his birthright for a bowl of soup. As ridiculous as that sounds, this moment is not taken lightly in the scriptures. In fact, the writer of Hebrews will point back to this moment with a very stern warning to the early church.

That will lead us to our third subheading...

III. Despising the Birthright

If you think about it, a birthright is in some ways akin to grace. Why? Well, we have no say as to when we are born. If you happened to be born the oldest male in the ancient world, the birthright was yours, no questions asked. You didn’t earn it, you didn’t deserve it, but it was yours for the taking...or not.

So why would a firstborn ever give up his birthright? Well, even though the birthright of the oldest son was ‘grace’ in that it was not earned, the birthright also came with responsibilities attached. You were immediately given tremendous wealth and possessions upon the death of

your father, but you were also entrusted with the care of your entire family and managing the business that was entrusted to you by your father. The gift came first, then the responsibilities to steward the gift came second.

So, the only reason one entitled to a birthright would reject his birthright is because he doesn't want the responsibility that comes with the inheritance, right?

I hope you can see how this story points to the Gospel. Because Jesus died and rose on the third day, because Jesus conquered the power of sin and death, the GIFT of God's unmerited grace and election has been extended to those who are born on this side of an empty tomb. For all who have been born into this world since the resurrection, this is your "birthright" whether you understand that yet or not. No one is excluded based upon age, ethnicity, gender, intelligence, morality, or any other qualification. The "birthright" of grace is extended to all through the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Let me say it again to be perfectly clear: God's grace and forgiveness are not those things which must be earned. God's gift of grace is given freely to all who will receive the gift. But here's the part that creates tension: the gift comes with responsibilities. Should we receive the gift of God's unmerited grace and forgiveness, we must also accept the responsibilities that come with stewarding God's gifts. To receive our birthright is to accept that Jesus Christ is LORD, so we may no longer go about our lives as though we serve a different LORD. The grace comes with responsibilities, just as the birthright of the oldest son came with responsibilities.

So, keeping this allegory in mind, let us think again about Esau's decision to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew. First of all, we should note that Esau was in a vulnerable state. Had he been well fed and well rested, we can likely assume that he would have never agreed to sell his birthright to Jacob. In fact, under any other conditions, we shouldn't imagine that Jacob would have even considered tempting Esau with such a ridiculous offer.

This is often how temptation works in our lives, right? Temptations to lust are easily resisted on our honeymoon; it's when the marriage has grown hard and complicated that we are inclined to look across the room at another. Temptations to cheat on a test are easily resisted when we have studied hard and know the material; but it's a different story when we failed to prepare and our final grade is on the line.

Church, be slow to judge Esau. All he was looking for was some relief from his hunger. He didn't barge into the tent looking to sell his birthright; the thought had never crossed his mind. That is until the temptation was set before him to lightly discard a long term blessing and responsibility to address an immediate and short term desire.

Friends, I pray you can find yourself in this story; for this is the human story. It is Adam and Eve all over again. It is the story of Lot all over again. It is the story of the rich young ruler all over again. How often do we reject our birthright of grace in exchange for a short-term desire to do whatever it is that we want to do or to have whatever it is that we want to have at that moment?

We want to do some drugs, so we reject our birthright to feel a certain way for a few minutes at a time. We want to have sex outside of marriage, so we reject our birthright to gratify our sexual appetite for a time. We want to be rich at any expense, so we reject our birthright so that we can lie, cheat, and steal without a conscience.

When you weigh the gift of forgiveness, grace, and an eternity with Jesus over the short-term pleasure of satisfying our appetites for a while, the exchange is as absurd as Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of soup.

Note how the text states that Esau ‘despised his birthright,’ and it would certainly appear so, right? In that moment when he was consumed with his appetite, he not only devalued his inheritance, but even worse, he devalued his people. When faced with a short-term need, he thought only of himself.

Listen: if you can hear my voice right now and you have rejected your birthright of grace, you need to know that decision is as remarkably selfish as it is shortsighted. There are people who love you who want to be with you for all eternity, but your decision to reject God’s grace and the substitutionary atonement that Jesus bought at the price of His own life will leave you separated from your loved ones for all eternity. Furthermore, your unwillingness to receive God’s grace and be reconciled to your Creator will also starve your friends and family of a great blessing in this life. Why? Because you will never be who God created you to be with all your gifts and talents employed for God’s glory and the good of the world if you remain unforgiven and dead in your sins. Your spouse, your children, your friends, your co-workers, and myriads of people you have yet to meet will suffer if you live your whole life refusing the gift of God’s unmerited grace. It is God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ that frees us from our past, liberates us from guilt and shame, and fills us with the animating power of the Holy Spirit. Why would you deny your inheritance and harm the people that love you over a veritable “bowl of soup?” It’s the exact same question we are left asking at the end of this story, right?

Now, to be fair, Jacob has to carry some of blame in this story. As a loving brother, Jacob could have simply said, “Here, have a bowl of red stew and let me know if you need another.” How boring that story would have been, right? That’s a story we would have never heard!

What we know is that Jacob is strategic and manipulative. Some will say, “Well, at least he valued the birthright and wanted the gift and responsibility.” That is true; nevertheless, taking advantage of his brother’s compromised state to swindle him out of a blessing and a responsibility that was his by grace is not commendable behavior by any standard. Indeed, Jacob is guilty of sin in the way he handled the situation. He literally became the voice of temptation to his starving brother; I pray that Satan will never find us so willing to do his work.

Jacob is guilty of sin; but historically, Esau’s sin is more soundly condemned. That is particularly true when we turn to Hebrews 12. In Hebrews 12, the writer of the epistle is encouraging the

church to endure hardship for the sake of Christ. In 12:3 he writes, “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

In vs. 7ff he writes: It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? For [our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Then, in vs. 12 he gets to the heart of this teaching. He writes:

Therefore lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

Our struggle against temptation and other hardships can lead us to be compromised, just like Esau. So, the writer of Hebrews calls the church to endure, and to avoid the sin of Esau. Now, did you notice what else the writer of Hebrews included within the context of Esau’s sin? Sexual immorality and the root of bitterness.

If I had to pick the top two reasons that people walk away from their birthright of grace, it would be sexual immorality and bitterness.

Sexual immorality, believe it or not, is the lesser of the two evils. We are all sexual creatures. Sex in and of itself is both good and natural. Sexual immorality, then, is taking a good and natural thing too far. It is at least a sin of passion and an overdeveloped desire for something that is, in and of itself, a good thing. What is required of us is a grace-powered commitment to deferred gratification for a time so that we do not end up rejecting our inheritance for a short-term pleasure.

Bitterness, on the other hand, is the sin of unforgiveness. It is a sin of resentment and self-righteousness that leads many, many people away from their birthrights. Bitterness attaches itself to us through many experiences in life ranging from the loss of a loved one, to a broken relationship, or some traumatic event that makes us question the goodness of God. Sometimes it’s a broken promise or a friend who betrayed us. Whatever the cause, when that root of bitterness takes root in the human heart, it acts like a cancer that eats away our soul until there is no grace left in us.

This is what the writer of Hebrews is concerned about most of all. Church, it’s what I am most concerned about as well. Sexual immorality is certainly a problem in our culture, but it pales in comparison to the root of bitterness I see in so, so many people...including many people who sit in churches. I am constantly shocked by the number of people who claim to be Christians and yet withhold forgiveness from their own family members or those who have wronged them. Listen to me: the root of bitterness and the liberating work of God’s unmerited grace are completely and

utterly incompatible. God's grace cuts off the root of bitterness, which is why the writer of Hebrews states, "Be sure that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, so that the root of bitterness will not spring up and cause trouble." I want you to think about that, particularly if you harbor bitterness in your heart.

Ironically, I don't think bitterness was ever Esau's problem. He was a glutton and a fool, but we can almost forgive him for the simple pursuit of his appetite in a time of acute need.

It is Jacob who harbors the root of bitterness...can you see that? Jacob's bitterness is at the heart of his manipulation; so, we will have to keep an eye on that as we follow this story, right?

OK, that's enough for today. Let me close with an invitation.

Whether you know or believe this yet or not, here's the truth: You have a birthright called grace! Before you ever took a breath or saw the light of day, the gift of God's unmerited grace was already placed on your account. All you need to do is obtain what has already been designated as yours! This inheritance of God's unmerited grace and forgiveness of your sins was purchased on your behalf by the only One who could make that purchase—Jesus of Nazareth who took your place on a cross that He did not deserve so that you might inherit a reconciled relationship with God that you could never deserve! I beg of you: do not despise your birthright; instead, claim what has been given to you with thanksgiving, and do so recognizing that the gift comes with responsibilities. To receive the gift of God's grace means we are responsible for forgiving those who hurt us and seeking the forgiveness of those we have wronged. To receive God's gift of grace is to surrender our lives to the lordship of Jesus and devote the rest of our lives to serving Jesus for the glory of God and the good of the world. That may sound like surrendering your freedom, but I can tell you it is the most freeing thing you will ever do. Because of God's grace, you will no longer be a slave to your appetites or your bitterness. Instead, you will become a blessing beyond your wildest imaginations to the very people who matter to you the most.

This is the invitation: extravagant grace that comes with responsibilities. Or, that bowl of stew.

Will you pray with me?