



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Valuing the Things of God

Genesis 25:29-34

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Last week our text introduced us to the twin sons of Isaac: Esau and Jacob, otherwise known as “Hairy Monster” and “Back-stabber”. After twenty years of infertility and in answer to prayer, God finally blessed Isaac and Rebekah, not with one son, but with two. And yet we read that the two boys struggled with each other in her womb so much that Rebekah sought God, wanting to know what was going on inside her and, no doubt, concerned for their well-being. In answer, God had told her that the struggle between her sons in the womb was a foreshadowing of the struggle that would exist between them in life and between the nations that would spring from them in future. Even more significant was God’s declaration to her that, running against every cultural norm of the day, the older of the two boys would grow up to serve the younger.

We read that Esau, the older was born covered in so much hair that they gave him a name that played on the word for “hair”. He grew up to be an outdoorsman and a hunter. Jacob, the younger brother, was born grasping at Esau’s heel. While his name, Jacob, literally refers to God’s protection or blessing of him, it’s also a word play on the circumstances of his birth: he was the “heel-grabber”, the “supplanter”. And in stark contrast to his “redneck” brother, Jacob grew up to be a cultured and civilised man who lived in the camp—probably keeping his father’s accounts and overseeing his slaves and hired hands.

We also read that Isaac favoured Esau because of the delicious game he both so skilfully caught and skilfully cooked. Rebekah, however, favoured Jacob, probably with God’s oracle in mind that the older would one day serve the younger.

The text doesn’t tell whether or not Esau and Jacob were let in on God’s oracle about their struggle and about Esau’s eventual subjection to Jacob. That’s the sort of thing that would foster plenty of ugly sibling rivalry. Reading between the lines, it would seem that at least Esau was ignorant of the oracle. It seems likely that Jacob knew about it. Isaac, in his preference for Esau, probably shielded his favoured son, hoping that the oracle wasn’t really true. All the while, Rebekah raised Jacob with the secret knowledge that God intended for him to one day inherit his father’s wealth and God’s covenant promises. When your mother secretly confides in you that, despite your father’s preference for your older brother, God once said that you would be his master, that’s just that sort of thing that would naturally be a catalyst for the sort of secret scheming we see in Jacob.

These are the two men who stand to inherit the covenant that God had established with Abraham and his children. But once again, that covenant is in jeopardy. First, God promised that it would pass to the younger brother, but humanly speaking, Esau, the “Hairy Monster” and a rough man who lives by the sword, stands in the way. Even if Esau were to inherit the covenant, what we read here and in the following chapters shows us that he had no heart for the heritage God had given to his family. He would squander God’s promises and blessings. And yet even if the covenant promises were to be transferred to the younger brother,

we wonder what he’ll do with them. He’s the “Back-stabber”—he’s a schemer and a “snake in the grass”. Is God’s venture of faith going to be run into the ground by this third generation that doesn’t share the values that Abraham had? That’s the focus of the story here. And remember: this is ultimately God’s story. He shows us all the obstacles in his way and then he shows us how he removes them all. He wants us to know that he is always faithful to his promises and through that he builds our faith; through that he reminds us that he is still faithful today and that he still overcomes obstacles. He also gives us hope; if he could work through someone like Isaac who tried to thwart his will and if he could work through Jacob, the scheming “Back-stabber”, all to build his kingdom and bring redemption to the world, he can work through us.

In Chapter 25, verses 29 to 34, we see Esau and Jacob in action—we see the conflict between them and we see the values and the character that drives each of them. Look at verses 29 and 30:

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

Right from the start the story sets up the character of these two. There’s no question about what Esau is up to. We’ve been told that he’s a skilful outdoorsman and hunter and so we would expect him to be out in the wild hunting game. On this day he stumbles into one of his father’s camps absolutely ravenous with hunger. Jacob, on the other hand, we’re told is in the camp cooking stew. If we stop and think about this for a minute we might wonder why

Jacob is cooking stew. He was the son of a wealthy and prosperous man who had all sorts of hired hands and slaves. Why is cultured and civilised Jacob doing this kind of work? Menial work isn't something we'd expect Jacob to be doing. And yet, consider that Jacob is the "schemer", the "grasper", the "supplanter". He is, in fact, doing exactly what we should expect: he's scheming something. The fact that Esau doesn't appeal to their father in the face of Jacob's outrageous demands tells us that Isaac wasn't around. They weren't at home; they were out at some remote shepherding camp where Jacob was overseeing his father's men. And so away from Dad, Jacob could play out his scheme and Esau had no one to appeal to.

As Esau comes into the camp he finds Jacob cooking up a pot of something red, probably lentils. We get a glimpse into his character here. He's coarse, impulsive, and demanding. Literally, he demands: "I famished. I want to eat some of your red stuff, *this* red stuff, now!" There's no reason to doubt that he was hungry, but Esau makes his demand in overblown language. I think of waking my parents up on Saturday mornings when I was little when they wanted to sleep in: "Mom, Dad...I'm *starving!*" Esau didn't even know what it was that Jacob was cooking. He just demands a bowl of that "red stuff". He's hungry and nothing else matters. It's appropriate then that both he and the nation that eventually descended from his bear this name "Edom", which means "red". For the rest of history Esau and his people are remembered for the fact that he was a man with no self-control and was ruled by his fleshly appetites.

But this is exactly what Jacob's been waiting for. He knew his brother well and now he springs his trap in verse 31:

Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now."

First, we need to know what the "birthright" was. In that culture the inheritance was divided by the number of sons a man had plus one, with the extra share going to the eldest son. If a man had ten sons, his inheritance would be divided into eleven portions. The first son would receive two portions and the rest a single portion. In this case, Isaac had two sons, so his material possessions would, at his death, be divided into three portions. Esau, being the firstborn, would have normally received two portions while Jacob would only have received one.¹ The cultural evidence we have suggests that the birthright that Jacob demands here is strictly a matter of *material* inheritance. What Jacob is demanding in payment is that extra portion that Esau would have received as firstborn.

However, in Hebrews 12 we have a divinely inspired commentary on Esau's actions. We're told there, in verses 15 to 17:

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God...that no one is...unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

¹ M. Tsevat, "בְּכֹרֶת" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, p. 126; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2000), p. 58.

Hebrews tells us that there was more to the birthright than just an extra portion of Isaac's wealth. The writer of Hebrews equates that extra portion with the inheritance of God's gracious covenant. But we're about to get ahead of their story. Jacob's demand is over the top. Esau was hungry, but surely there was something else he could have eaten in the camp. We've been told that he was a skilful hunter. Surely he had fresh game with him—something that could have been cooked without too much trouble. How can a birthright, even if we don't consider the possible spiritual implications, be worth a meal? And yet here again we see Esau's impetuous and impatient side. He thinks only for today. He's hungry *right* now and he lets the appetites of his flesh overrule any thought for tomorrow. And so he responds to Jacob:

Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"
(Genesis 25:32)

This is the point where the original Jewish audience would be gasping at Esau's careless words. Regardless of whether or not he was truly on the verge of death by starvation, those blunt words: "What use is a birthright to me?" reflected horribly on his character. Esau lived in a culture in which family heritage and one's place in the family was *everything*. Even their understanding of the afterlife was all about family and heritage. There was nothing more important. And this was doubly so for the Jews. Their entire identity was tied up in being the children and spiritual heirs of Abraham. Everything in life for them was centred on the promises that God had made to Abraham and to his offspring. To give up that inheritance so easily was proof to them that Esau was completely

undeserving of God's promises and blessing. God may have chosen Jacob before he was born and before either he or Esau had done anything to deserve his election or reprobation, but it shows the wisdom of God. Esau was a faithless man and stood as an obstacle in the way of God's promises. He stood to inherit them, but he would have squandered them. And now, in God's providence, Esau removes himself as an obstacle. He willingly gives them up and in the process demonstrates to everyone his unworthiness.

Jacob said, "Swear to me now." 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. (Genesis 25:33-34)

Of course, Jacob wanted to be sure, so he demanded that Esau swear. Swearing made the transaction irrevocable. Jacob truly was scheming to take advantage of his brother, knowing that his brother thought only for the day. Esau was thoughtless and careless. His attitude is stressed and underscored dramatically by the Hebrew. Jacob gave him the stew and some bread and Esau "ate, drank, rose, and went". The Hebrew is staccato and it vividly shows that Esau's behaviour is as coarse and careless as his speech. It suggests that he sold his birthright as easily and as carelessly as he "ate, drank, rose, and went". It's as if he didn't even give a thought to Jacob's outrageously high-price. He satisfied his hunger and walked away without a thought.

In fact, the commentary on Esau's behaviour is given in verse 34:

Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Esau placed no real value on his inheritance and heritage. He valued it so little that he was perfectly happy to sell it for a bowl of stew. The same Hebrew word is used in 2 Samuel 12:10, where we're told that David devalued the Lord when he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Our English word "contempt" gives us a good picture of this judgement on Esau. Think of what we mean when we speak of someone being in "contempt of court". Someone is charged with contempt of court when he fails to give a judge or the legal process the respect they deserve. I once saw a man charged with contempt when he walked into a courtroom, put his muddy shoes up on the back of the chair in front of him and started noisily eating from a bag of fast food. When the magistrate stopped the proceedings to comment on his inappropriate behaviour the man made a rude gesture with his hand and ended up charged with contempt. In a similar way, Esau is being charged here with contempt of his birthright and of God's covenant. The writer of Hebrews speaks of him as being "unholy" for having showed such contempt, and to be "unholy" is to be focused on worldly things instead of the things of God.

Esau serves as a warning to us, not to despise the things of God: his covenant, his promises, his will, his values. Griffith Thomas makes this point:

"The one thing needful is to put God first in our life. So far as we can see, God had no place in the life of Esau...He lived for the present, not for the future; for things physical, not spiritual; for time, not eternity. In this he is like many men today. They have everything that this world can give—wealth, money, natural powers, position—everything but God. And yet, with all their

advantages, they must necessarily fail...When God is first, then all else finds its place—purpose, power, and perpetual peace and progress."²

Brothers and sisters, we may not openly despise our spiritual birthright the way Esau did, but consider that every time we sin we are giving up the eternal things of God for the short-lived pleasures of sin today.

So it's a good thing that the birthright passed from Esau, who valued it so little, to Jacob. Obviously Jacob saw the value of it. And yet Jacob's character is hardly exemplary either. The covenant was in jeopardy as long as it was in Esau's hands, but Jacob's worldly scheming puts the covenant in jeopardy too. He watched and waited, came up with a scheme, played his brother like a fiddle when the time was ripe, and unjustly stole his brother's birthright. Jacob reminds us that we can never go after the things of God the wrong way. Again, to quote Griffith Thomas:

"Jacob's purpose in desiring the birthright was undoubtedly genuine and exemplary, but the way in which he went to work to obtain the birthright was in every way deplorable and wrong. He was one of the earliest, but unfortunately has not been by any means the last, of those who have considered that the end justifies the means. This is one of the deadliest foes of true living. The end does *not* justify the means; and right ends must always be accomplished by right means, or else left unaccomplished."³

² W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), p. 234.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

Pragmatism, the philosophy that the end justifies the means, is one of the most prominent philosophies of our day, but it is utterly opposed to the values of God. Pragmatism teaches that we can do whatever “works” so long as the result is something good. This is the prevailing attitude of our society. More than anything else, it’s the philosophy that drives most modern governments from unjust economic policy, to unjust confiscation and redistribution of property, to unjust wars. God teaches us that it is *never* okay to sin, no matter how good the end results might seem. And yet as this philosophy has permeated our society, it has permeated the Church too. Churches stop preaching about sin or about the need for personal holiness or about Christ being the only means of restoration to God, because they fear that those things will drive people away. And, in fact, we see churches that preach only happiness and prosperity growing huge, but the end does not justify the means. Our goal is not simply to grow our churches, it’s to preach the unadulterated Gospel that men and women might truly be saved. Preaching prosperity and self-help messages may draw crowds, but it doesn’t bring them to a recognition of their sin and need for a Saviour; it doesn’t bring them to Christ. Instead, it brings them in and gives them false assurance. It leaves them in a worse state than they started.

Jacob reminds us that we need to do what is right and wait on God for the results. If he’d only waited on God, the birthright would have been his. As we’ll see, his scheming to get on his own terms what God had promised is only going to lead to decades of trouble and heartache. Jacob took God at his word, but he didn’t wait on God. *Faith has two parts: We need trust God’s word, but*

we also need to be patient and wait for his timing.

The point of the story is that neither of these men deserved God’s promises. Esau put so little value on them that he sold them for some stew. And yet even though Jacob saw the value of the birthright and of God’s promises, he was so distant from God that he had no real understanding his ways. Esau was like the man who simply has no interest in God. Jacob is like a man who so wants God’s blessing that he robs a bank so that he can put something in the collection plate in hopes of God giving him a blessing in return.

The good news is that God never stops working. He removed Esau when he stood in the way of his plan, and as the story of Jacob unfolds, we’ll see that when God calls a man or a woman to do the work of his kingdom, he pours out his grace, he transforms and equips and makes holy. In Jacob’s case it took decades, not to mention plenty of grief, for his character to be reformed by God, but God does exactly that. In fact, God’s work of grace in Jacob’s life makes him the central character in Israel’s history. It’s telling that the great nation that God had promised Abraham would come from his offspring wasn’t, in the end, named after Abraham; it was named after Jacob!

Brothers and sisters, value the things of God. Esau reminds us not to despise the birthright of faith that we have been promised in the Gospel and that was given to us in our Baptism. But Jacob reminds us that faith is more than just valuing God, his kingdom, his blessing, and his promises. Faith also calls us to wait on God and his timing and to live our lives in ways that conform to his will and his character, that give him

honour, and that serve as a witness of him to the world around us.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, teach us to value your promises and the things of your kingdom. Graciously work in us by your Spirit, we ask and open our eyes. Let us see your amazing mercy and love in the message of the Gospel. And teach us to walk in your ways in faith. Give us a desire to do what is right and to wait on you and your timing in all things. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.