
Despising the Important

Genesis 25:29-34

Introduction

Our story opens with the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. They had long been waited for and prayed over. Rebekah had suffered much during her pregnancy with them. At their birth and as they grow up, they turn out to be very different. We tend to think of twins as looking a lot alike and being a lot alike. Not these boys.

We are told in verses 27-28 how different they were. The description here is subtle and yet intended to convey much more than it seems on the surface. There is a real tension of the admirable and contemptible in both.

Esau is portrayed as an outdoorsman, a man of the field, a hunter. He is skilled and self-sufficient. He is able to bring home the venison. His dad loves him for it. This is not, in and of itself, the problem. The problem is in his character. He is rough, impulsive and sensual. The Hebrew here intends to convey the idea, as Kent Hughes points out, of a “shallow man, a lout” ruled by his impulses. (Hughes, *Genesis*, p. 336).

In contrast, Jacob is a man of the tent, cultured, civilized and self-contained. In the king lists of the same time period, admirable kings who were cultured and sophisticated were identified as “men of the tent.” But he is also calculating, conniving, scheming. He has the special love and attention of his mother.

So this is the setting. This is just a run of the mill, sinful and dysfunctional family. The parents show partiality to their children in sinful ways. The children grow up playing to that partiality. These very different boys are headed down very different paths. Conflict is almost sure to ensue.

God had also told Rebekah that He was going to reverse the normal order in the family. Verse 23 says, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger.” [ESV] Jacob, the younger, would become the leader of the family. The older would become his servant. Malachi, interpreting this event, says this was the sovereign choice by God. Paul, in Romans, argues further that God, in this sovereign choice of Jacob over Esau, did so of His own free purpose before either Jacob or Esau had done anything good or bad.

Our text today is about how all this started to come to pass...

Hearing the Story

Let's follow the story as Moses records it for us. I want to emphasize its structure so we can follow it more clearly.

A Jacob Prepares/Plots (v.29a)

Jacob has prepared the meal in view of the fact that Esau is out on the hunt. It is likely that they are not at the tent where they live, but are out on a trip together, possibly at a sheep station. This is no happen-stance. The hunter is tricked and trapped by an even cleverer hunter. Jacob has seen Esau come and go. He knows he tends to over extend himself. He knows that he will come in from the hunt hungry and thirsty. He knows that Esau is the slave of his appetites. So he prepares a red lentil soup, thick and savory as bait for his prey.

B Esau Arrives (v.29b)

Esau arrives from the hunt, famished and weakened. Just as Jacob seems to have expected, Esau comes back and he thinks he is starving. You can see him, can't you? He is covered in dust and sweat. He may even have carried home the game he has shot. His lips are dry. He feels weak. He sags wearily into the tent and there, wow, he can smell the delicious aroma of Jacob's soup.

C Esau Demands to Eat (v.30)

So, Esau demands some food. We get what are full, even sentences here in our English. The Hebrew scholars point out that Esau is speaking in short, guttural exclamations. He is saying, "Let me gulp it down!" "Give me some of that red stuff, red stuff." He is exhausted, famished and now foolish.

D Jacob Requires Him to Sell (v.31)

Here is how we know that Jacob is not just taking advantage of the moment, but rather has plotted to take advantage of the person. He immediately offers his soup in return for Esau's birthright. Here his brother is famished, exhausted and weak and Jacob is going to sell him a bowl of soup in exchange for the family inheritance.

What is the birthright? This is the family inheritance that normally would go to the eldest son. Esau would become the family leader and priest. The family line would pass through Esau down to his sons and grandsons. Esau would be the recipient of the promises to Abraham and to Isaac. It was a great privilege, involved great wealth and a recognition of God's promises and purposes.

But God had told Rebekah that the younger, meaning Jacob, would take the place of the elder. Eventually, Jacob would be the heir. This was a promise that God had made. Now, Jacob, acting out of the deceptions and conniving of his own heart, is going to help God out. He is going to be sure that he gets what he was promised, even if it means taking advantage of his brother.

E Esau Disparages His Birthright (v.32)

“Out of the mouth, the heart speaks,” the NT says. Esau’s words in the moment are not just casual words that don’t mean much. They are a reflection of his heart. He has no real use for his birthright. He does not believe in it so He does not value it. He is then quick to trade it for a brief meal to satisfy his immediate hunger. Now look, even if he is actually on the verge of death – which I seriously doubt – he is ready and willing to trade it for food. He is a foolish man ready to give away his whole inheritance for a bowl of bean soup.

D Jacob Requires Him to Swear (v.33)

Ah, but Jacob is ever ready to take advantage. He is not going to just take Esau at his word, he wants him to swear it over. Esau, in full view of what he is doing and get a bowl of soup, signs over his inheritance, its position, priesthood and privilege. He swears to Jacob that he can have it if Jacob will feed him.

C Esau Proceeds to Eat (v.34a)

Esau takes the food and gulps it down. He eats and drinks. His appetite is satisfied. His belly is full. He is not going to die! So everything is going to be OK.

B Esau Departs (v.34b)

Esau gets up and goes on his way. He probably thinks he has won. After all, who in the world is going to believe Jacob? There is a casualness about this that is quite stunning. If you had just traded away the accumulated riches of Abraham and Isaac, the privilege of being the one through whom God would fulfill His promises, don’t you think you would be more concerned?

A Esau Despises (v.34c)

The final sentence captures it – thus, Esau despised his birthright. He had something that was actually valuable, rich and wonderful. But he rejected God’s definition of what was important. His heart had defined food and hunting and being alive as the most important things. Therefore he craved food more than his birthright. In fact, he despised it.

Look at the verbs where Esau is the subject. He arrived; he demanded; he ate; he drank; he left; he despised. Here is a man who is casual and carnal, just doing what he always does without real consideration of what is important, valuable and lasting. Just another day in the neighborhood.

Moses means for Israel to understand that they cannot be like either Jacob or Esau. They must not despise the very great and glorious promises of God and the privileges of being the people of God. Nor can they use sinful means to bring about what God has promised.

Crossing the Bridge

So what are we to make of all this? I want to highlight some very important observations and principles here.

People live out of their hearts.

Do not hear me to be saying that people are controlled by their emotions. This is not what the Bible means when it teaches that people are controlled by and live out the thinking of their hearts. Esau's actions are determined by what he is thinking. He acts the way he does because he thinks the way he does. Esau sells because he despises.

How does that happen? His heart has defined and described the birthright in such a way that he does not treasure it. Instead of being something he truly desires it is something he despises. This is not some appetite driven, momentary lapse. He does not value something that is truly important and so he trades it away.

You do this as well. You define in your heart what you believe to be truths and treasures. You then desire, move towards, pursue what you value and push away, move back from what you despise. The great danger is when you fail to believe what God says, agree with Him about what is true and what is a treasure, you will not desire nor choose what pleases God. You may well dismiss what is actually of great spiritual or practical importance.

People often allow their appetites to control them.

Again, people are not controlled by their bodies. An appetite for drink, food or sex is simply a bodily function. To be controlled by one or more of these is a heart problem. In other words, if I desire food or sex in such a way that I sin, it is because my heart is sinful and depraved, not because by body controls me. My bodily appetite is controlled by my hearts desires. Then, over time, my heart's desires become the slave of my bodily appetites.

So Esau may be famished and hungry. Jacob's soup may be delicious and savory. But he is willing to make the trade at the moment because his heart does not value the importance of his spiritual and physical heritage. When people become the slave of the union of their inner and outer appetites, then they are vulnerable to being used by people, tempted by sin and attacked by Satan.

Praise be to God, we do have to be the slave of our appetites, our inner and outer desires. Romans 6 says that we have been crucified with our Redeemer so that we have been delivered from the power of the flesh, the old man we used to be. But, if we continue to present (a heart choice) the members of our body (the physical instrument) to sin, we can once again become enslaved to sin. So, yield yourself and your body to God so that you are mastered, in heart and body, by your great and gracious King.

Wanting even a good thing too much will cause you to sin.

Jacob clearly illustrates something I say to people all the time in counseling. A good thing, a good want can become a bad master, a idol when you want it so badly you will sin to get it, or sin when you don't have it. These idolatrous wants

are most often couched in “need” words. Instead of saying, I want food, love, marital intimacy, success, obedient children we will say, “I need...” This want, pretending to be a need, will then cause us either to commit a sin to gain what we wanted. Or, it may cause us to sin when we are unable to get it.

This is what is going on with Jacob. He wants the inheritance. It may even be his because of God’s Word. But he wants it so badly he will connive, scheme, trap and take advantage of his brother’s sinful weakness to get it. And so will you. We are not now talking about wanting an evil thing. We are talking when you even want what appears to be good and godly. It is a good thing to want to minister to as many people as possible. It is a terrible thing to give away the gospel in order to have a crowd. It is a good thing to want obedient children. But that can master us or become idolatrous in such a way that we will disobey God to get it. How many husbands, loving peace too much, have stopped confronting their wife or children? Maybe that promotion has just dangled out there and cutting a corner or cheating just a bit will bring it home? Maybe your husband just won’t lead the family like he should so you nag him or you are sullen and angry. Brothers and sisters, even wanting a good thing must be bowed to Jesus, submitted to His perfect will.

Jesus is contrast to both Jacob and Esau.

Jesus has a high regard for the treasures His Father has defined for Him. So much so that He was willing to give up His own life to secure that treasure, the salvation of His people. Further, He is willing to wait for the full inheritance until the Father is pleased to bring it to fulfillment. He does not chafe or resist or seek to circumvent the Father’s will. He is ever and always bowed to the will of His Father. So He does not despise the great inheritance His Father planned for Him nor does He pursue in ways that are displeasing to His Father. Do we follow His example?

God is sovereign even over our sin.

Here is a difficult, but hope giving truth. God is going to elevate Jacob over Esau. He has chosen to love Jacob and hate Esau. He has done so, not in view of what they would become, but simply because He is free to love whomever He chooses. This is simply what the story of Esau, the response of Malachi and the teaching of Paul in Romans tells us.

But, in accomplishing what He has purposed, God gathers up all our sin into that plan. He did not make Esau despise his birthright. He did not cause Jacob to ambush Esau. But He works their sin into His sovereign plan. Thus, through the sin of despising and discounting his inheritance and through the sin of deceiving and taking advantage of his brother, God’s will is accomplished.

Now look, if you deny this, then you will have to deny the cross. God, from eternity past planned the fall, the cross and our redemption in history. He planned for Jesus to die on a certain day at the hands of certain people. The sin of the Jews, the Romans, and even the disciples all wove the tapestry of Jesus’ death on the cross. Yet, every sinner who participated in Jesus’ death is held accountable for their sin. Listen to what Peter says in Acts 2:22-23. *Men of Israel, hear these words:*

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— 23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. [ESV] God delivered Jesus to the cross through His plan; wicked people executed that plan and they, not God, are accountable for their wickedness.

Now why is this a great, hope giving truth? It is a wonderful thing to know, that while I am accountable for my sin, God is never thwarted by it. He has woven into the tapestry of my and all who touch it. This is a measure of God's greatness and grace to us. I have such peace, not to minimize my sin in the past or to excuse the possibility of sin in the future, but rather to know that God's purposes and plans are moving with stately majesty to final day.

One final and sobering warning over the life of Esau from the sermon that we know **Lessons** as the book of Hebrews.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ 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. Hebrews 12:14-17

Conflict and carnality will destroy your life with consequences you will be unable to change. Esau was profane, unholy, despising what was spiritually important so sold his birthright for a little bowl of soup. The consequences for him were irreparable. Yes, he had great regret. But he could not change what had happened.

So, do not fail to obtain the enabling grace of God. Use every means to get it. Use every opportunity to exercise it. For the love of God and sake of your souls, do not despise what is important lest you come to a sad day when you reap what you have sown.

So let us pray and let us sing as a heartfelt prayer, *Change my heart, O God.*