

“The Consequences of Almost”

Genesis 36

October 22, 2000

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Someone said, “Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.”

Well, “close” certainly doesn’t count in religion!

There are evidently millions of Americans who would fit the classification of “nominal” Christian.

The word “nominal” means “in name only”.

Christians in name only.

These are the men and women who think of themselves as Christians but for whom Christianity is little more than a cultural identity – I’m not Hindu or Buddhist or Atheist, I must be Christian.

Or maybe they know more than that about Christianity but it is more like a philosophy than a faith - They like knowing what they consider, the true religion, without taking much responsibility for living it.

They like being identified as part of a church – but it has no practical bearing on their lives.

Eddie Gibbs, an acquaintance of mine who pastors a church in California, has written that there are at least four types of nominal Christians:

1. The person who attends church regularly and even enjoys the experience but has no personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
2. The person who attends church regularly but for cultural or social reasons only.
3. The person who attends church only for major religious holidays or family ceremonies.
4. The person who rarely attends church but still considers himself a believer in God.

These people would argue vehemently that they believe - but they don’t care enough about what they believe to consider how it applies

to their lives.

They claim the Bible is the inspired word of God but they don't consider that belief significant enough that they want to read it carefully and live their lives by it.

In fact when the Gallup organization does polls of churchgoers in general compared to those who don't go to church at all, there isn't much, if any, difference between the two groups in terms of what they know, what they believe, the values they hold and what they do. The lifestyles are nearly indistinguishable.

(That is not true however when the "highly committed" or "born again" Christian is compared to the one who doesn't go to church - the differences then are striking.)

260 years ago John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, preached a message entitled, "The Almost Christian".

In our Scripture text for today we encounter a man who lived his whole life, from birth to death, near the people of God but oh so far from God.

He was always around real religion but never truly a part of it.

The text is Genesis 36 and the man is Esau.

Please look at the text in your own Bible so you can see it all at once.

You will notice there is largely a list of names – nearly 200 actually.

It is a genealogy – a listing of the people who descended from one man – Esau.

One commentator wrote,

"I would not expect too many expositors to devote an entire sermon to this chapter..." (Ross p586)

Another wrote, "Genealogies don't inspire theological reflection..." (Wenham p341)

I confess that when I first looked closely at this text several weeks ago I too wondered why Moses, the author of Genesis, included it.

The story line in Genesis, at the end of chapter 35 and continued at the beginning of chapter 37, doesn't seem to need the information given in chapter 36.

Chapter 35 ends with a listing of the sons of Jacob and the death of Isaac and chapter 37 opens with the account of Jacob's sons and in particular, one son, Joseph.

Why then chapter 36? Why the rather lengthy list of Esau's descendants?

First of all remember that this Esau and the Jacob to whom I referred earlier were brothers – and brothers of the closest kind – twins.

It is also important to remember that Esau was the first-born of the two and according to ancient custom was the heir-apparent to the family wealth and future – and particularly the great promise of God to that family.

And we remember that Esau gave up that privileged place by selling his birthright to his brother Jacob, for a bowl of soup.

The subsequent actions of Jacob where he tricks his father Isaac, and secures the privileged birthright and blessing that might have otherwise gone to Esau, only embittered Esau against Jacob and set the stage for years of antipathy.

From chapter 25 through 36 the two major characters are these twin brothers Jacob and Esau.

Even though Jacob dominates the story line – Esau, or the threat of Esau, is ever present.

It appears as though Moses is contrasting these two brothers and it certainly seems so as we come to this chapter.

We have looked rather closely at the life of Jacob in the past few chapters and we will continue looking closely at his and his sons' lives in the chapters to come – but what about Esau?

READ 36:1-8

To appreciate what I think Moses is communicating through this chapter, we need to have his perspective on Esau.

To follow this, it might be helpful for you to remember some names. Just as most of us go by more than one name – John or Jack, Gerald or Jerry – so these men are known by more than one name.

Jacob, as we have seen, was renamed Israel.

Esau was also called Edom.

In our day nations or states will sometimes be named after some famous person of the past, such as the state of Washington.

So in ancient history, it was customary for a country to take on the name of someone out of its past – hence the country of Israel was named after Israel whose first name was Jacob.

But that country had an earlier name – Canaan.

And the country of Edom was so named for its founder, Edom whose first name was Esau.

And likewise that country had an earlier name – Seir.

By the time of Moses, some 400 plus years after Jacob and Esau, Moses was the leader of the descendants of Jacob, called Israel.

Moses was leading them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land of Canaan that would itself eventually be called “Israel”.

One of the bitterest enemies of the people of Israel would be none other than the people of Edom.

Esau/Edom would be an archenemy of Jacob/Israel.

And that enemy status continued through the days of King David another 500 years later and to the days of Jesus another 1000 years later and to this day yet another 2000 years later.

By naming the names that he does, Moses is reminding his readers who these people are.

And by the time Moses writes these words, the people of Israel know full well the outcome of the life of Esau.

The implication seems to be, “Remember Esau.”

You can be around true religion all your life but never personally have the real thing.

Remember, “in name only” doesn’t count!

Let’s look more closely at the text.

And again I urge you to look at your own Bible so as to have the entire text open in front of you.

Chapter 36 is written in 6 parts:

V1-8 Esau’s wives, sons, and the move to Seir

These first 8 verses give list Esau’s wives and his sons and note the fact that he moved away from his father’s land to a nearby land then known as Seir.

V9-14 Esau’s sons, wives and grandsons.

These next 6 verses (9-14) list the wives and sons again but add the grandsons names.

V15-19 Esau’s grandsons listed as “chiefs”

The next 5 verses (15-19) identify Esau’s grandsons as “chiefs” or the heads of entire families or tribes.

V20-30 The descendants of Seir (predecessors in the land)

These next verses (20-30) list the names of the people who controlled the land of Seir before Esau moved there. Of special note are the two women who are mentioned.

V31-39 Later kings in Edom (descendants of Esau)

Verses 31-39 were undoubtedly added many years after Moses wrote the rest of the chapter. The reference to Israel’s kings was information Moses wouldn’t have known.

The reason for the inclusion is to demonstrate to a later generation (possibly as late as Solomon’s day) that Esau’s descendants continued to be bitter enemies of Israel.

V40-43 Chief’s from Esau by clans and regions.

The last verses (40-43) add the names of clans and geographical regions thus enabling Moses’ first readers to

better identify their own contemporaries in that rival nation of Edom.

There seem to be three special emphases in the text:

- Who Esau married, (foreign women)
- Where he lived (Seir/Edom)
- And the later identity of the nation as enemies of Israel

To describe this man who lived close to the true religion but missed it, Moses shows Esau's disregard for the people of promise and the land of promise.

1. Regarding his disregard for the people of promise, Esau married outside of the faith – outside of the family of promise.

In this text there is a great emphasis on the names and nationalities of Esau's three wives.

A side comment is necessary at this point.

The list of Esau's wives is different in another part of Genesis and is probably best accounted for by the likelihood that the women, like the men, probably had more than one name.

Esau's first two wives were from the pagan Canaanite people around him.

Adah was a Hittite and Oholibamah was a Hivite.

In Genesis 10:15 we are told that "Canaan (son of Ham, son of Noah) was the father of Sidon his firstborn, and of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites..." etc.

Esau was not from the line of Ham but from the line of Shem (another son of Noah).

Both Esau's father, Isaac, and his grandfather, Abraham, had expressed great concern that their sons marry only within the family line of Shem.

But Esau disregard that counsel and married two women who didn't share the same values as the family.

And we are told in chapter 27 that these women were a source of great grief to Esau's parents.

Knowing how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his parents and hearing how they instructed **Jacob** to take a wife only from within the greater family, Esau tried to remedy the situation by marrying another wife – her name was Basemath.

Genesis 28:8-9 "Esau then realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac; so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath (Basemath), the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had."

Apparently Esau thought that close was good enough.

Basemath was a granddaughter of Abraham but a granddaughter not by Sarah but by the Egyptian servant Hagar and her son Ishmael.

Ishmael and his children were not part of the people of promise.

Only 5 women are named in chapter 36 and the 4 main ones are from outside Abraham's family of blessing.

When we come to the part of the chapter, v20-30, that names the people who ruled the land of Seir before Esau renamed it Edom, we see two women listed.

The first is one of the women who became Esau's wives – Oholibamah.

Genesis 36:25 "The children of Anah: Dishon and Oholibamah, daughter of Anah."

The other one is a woman named Timna.

Genesis 36:22 "Timna was Lotan's sister."

Timna is shown to us in v 12 as a concubine or mistress of one of Esau's sons (Eliphaz).

The son of Eliphaz and Timna was named Amalek.

Genesis 36:12 "Esau's son Eliphaz also had a concubine named Timna, who bore him Amalek."

It is likely that this son is the forefather of an entire people known as the Amalekites who also became bitter enemies of Israel.

The women that Esau marries and that will bear and influence his children are women who believed in and followed other gods – other religions.

Esau apparently cared so little for the heritage that was his that he willingly corrupted it with pagan wives.

He was the son of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah.

He had all those examples of true belief before him and around him but Esau never made it his own.

He was close to it but oh so far.

Esau was a son of Isaac and Abraham “in name only”.

How many today, even in our churches, want to be identified by the name Christian but disregard the will of God regarding dating and marriage – the most important decisions of life?

2. The second emphasis I see in the text is on where Esau chose to live – he disregarded the land of promise.

The preceding chapters have made much of the fact that Jacob finally returned to the land of promise.

Canaan was the land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants.

In the land is where God promised to bless them as a family and nation and through them to bless the rest of the world.

Esau knew that!

And yet what chapter 36 shows us is that Esau, like Lot before him, moved out of the land of blessing and into a pagan culture.

Genesis 36:8 “So Esau (that is Edom) settled in the hill country of Seir.”

Esau lived next door to the Promised Land, but not in it.
Close but not quite.

How many today, even in our churches, want to be known as Christian but take no thought about God's will for their education, their work – where they invest their lives.

Oh they like being part of a church – close to the true religion – but disregard its implications.

What caused Esau to be close to true religion but not part of it?
What kept Esau from being “altogether” a man of God instead of just “almost”, of just living close.

Both the Old and New Testaments tell us.

In Genesis 25 we are told that the reason Esau sold his birthright so cheaply was that he “despised it” – he considered it of little or no value.

In Hebrews 12, commenting on the same incident, we are told, “See that no one is...godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.”

“Godless” means Esau had no appreciation for the promises of God. He valued what he could see and take here and now much more than what God said would be ahead for the man of faith.

Esau was probably an attractive man – a man's man. He loved the outdoors, he was rather care-free and rather sensual.

Someone wrote, “He grew up to be a big, hairy, red-headed lout whose focus was fun, food and females... He was a living beer commercial – bearded, steroid-macho” with one thing on his mind – his own desires. (Hughes Hebrews 184)

“He lived for personal enjoyment at the present moment... Whether we think of his willingness to barter his birthright for food, or contemplate his ill-advised marriage with (three inappropriate)

women, we see how entirely earth-bound he was and how fully he lived for himself alone and his own enjoyment. But all this was only indicative of what was at the root and foundation of his life. He had no true conception of the value of things spiritual... The promises of God had made no impression on him. The spiritual ideas associated with the covenant were as nothing to him... God was just not in his thoughts.” (Griffith Thomas p 349)

The late James Boice of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, wrote,

“If you will not give spiritual things first place in your life then the merely physical will flood in and dominate what you are and what you do.” (Boice 846)

Like too many today, Esau liked the identity, the mental comfort, of thinking of himself as part of the family of God, but he disregarded a true relationship of faith and obedience with God.

And what were the consequences of being close but so far, of being almost but not altogether the real thing?

The genealogy in chapter 36 emphasizes one other thing:

Esau’s descendants became some of the bitterest enemies Israel would ever have.

The entire OT book of Obediah is God’s curse on Edom (Esau’s descendants) because of the way they treated Israel.

In spite of how close, how well he knew the godliness of his father and grandfather, Esau failed to transmit spiritual values to his children and instead bore and transmitted a bitterness for his brother’s family that would be a cancer on his family for thousands of years.

It was written of Caesar, “the evil that men do lives after them.”

It could also have been written of Esau.

His disregard for the things of God bore violent fruit in the generations to come.

Heb 12:15-16 See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause

trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau...”

It is recorded for us in Numbers 20, that Esau’s family later became so embittered against the Lord that they refused to let Israel pass through on their way from Egypt to Canaan.

Later, in I Samuel 14 and I Kings 11, we are told that Edom became a bitter enemy of Israel in Sauls, Davids, and Solomon’s time.

The Herod before whom Jesus stood at trial was considered a descendant of Esau.

To this very day, literally this very day as we consider what is happening in the Middle East, the descendants of Esau are locked in bitter battle with the descendants of Jacob.

Esau’s disregard for the things of God has left a bloody mark on 4000 years of history.

Esau, a man who came from a godly family,
 knew godly people,
 lived close to the land of promise,
 married at least one wife who was close to being the right person, gave rise to a large family and nation,
 enjoyed great prosperity –
 but was so **far** away from a real relationship with God.

And the loss was not only his own soul but the soul of his family.
 The consequences of “almost” are staggering.

What about you?

Have you spent your life living close to the real thing but never really adopting it as yours?

Have you named the name of God and Christ but have never committed your LIFE to him?

Have you always been in and around the people of God but never one of them?

“Close” doesn’t count.

“Almost” is a tragedy of eternal proportion.