

“Despising Our Birthright?”

Genesis 25:19-34

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What is the most valuable thing you possess?

Not necessarily what is worth the most money – but what is most valuable to you.

If you were forced to choose the one thing you would keep if everything else were taken – what would you keep?

Is it a wedding ring, a picture album, a watch handed down from your great-grandfather?

This time, don't limit your thinking to material things but to all you have – what is most valuable to you?

Is it a relationship with a spouse, a child, a parent, or a friend?

Jesus told a parable. He said, in Matthew 13:45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

What is worth so much to you that you would give up everything else to get it or keep it?

Today we are going to look at the story of a man who gave up the most important thing in his life for a bowl of watered down soup.

We need to ask the question, “**Why would he do that?**”

AND we must also ask, “**Am I doing the same thing?**”

The answers are tied up in the idea of what he, and we, value most in life.

The story is a short one, telling of an event in a man's life that probably took no more than 15 minutes.

But it tells a great deal about the man.

READ Genesis 25:29-34

The author of the book points out, at the end, that the major character in this story is the man named Esau.

And the action that should have our attention is the sale of his birthright.

“So Esau despised his birthright.”

We’ll come back to the story in a few minutes but before we do I want to remind you of the context.

We have been learning from the book of Genesis for the past several months.

The author of Genesis, whom we believe to be Moses, divided the book into 10 parts after the introduction.

Each part begins with the words; “This is the account of...”

1:1-2:3	Creation
2:4-4:26	“The Account of the Heavens and Earth” Adam and Eve The first sin and consequent fall Cain and Abel
5:1-6:8	“The Account of Adam’s line” Genealogy from Adam to Noah
6:9-9:26	“The Account of Noah” Noah and the flood
10:1-11:9	“The Account of Shem, Ham and Japeth” The nations of the world and Babel
11:10-26	“The Account of Shem” Genealogy from Noah to Abram
11:27-25:11	“The Account of Terah (Abram’s father)” (Though this section is named after Terah, it is Terah’s son, Abraham, that it tells most about: 16 short stories in Abraham’s life History of Abraham The Call of Abram Abram and Sarah in Egypt Abram rescues Lot God’s Covenant with Abram Hagar and Ishmael The Covenant of Circumcision The Promise of a son Sodom and Gomorrah Abraham, Sarah and Abimilech Birth of Isaac Hagar and Ishmael sent away The Great Test of Abraham The Burial Place of Sarah Isaac marries Rebekah It ends with the <u>Death of Abraham</u> in the first part of chapter 25.

- 25:12-18 "The Account of Abraham's son Ishmael"
Ishmael's descendants
- 25:19-35:29 "The Account of Isaac"
Jacob and Esau
- 36:1-43 "The Account of Esau"
Esau's descendants
- 37:2-50:26 "The Account of Jacob"
Mostly about Joseph

It is relatively easy to remember the historical flow of the book of Genesis by remembering six names:

Adam
Noah
Abraham
Isaac
Jacob
Joseph

Another way is to remember five major events:

Creation
Fall
Flood
Call of Abram
Israel goes to Egypt

In our study of Genesis we have come today to the 8th of the 10 sections of the book – Genesis 25:19 "This is the account of Abraham's son Isaac."

As with most of the other headings, it means that what follows will concern itself mainly with the children of the person named.

So most of the events in this section are not about Isaac but about his sons – Esau and Jacob.

When we last saw Abraham and his family in chapter 24, Abraham had commanded his servant to go to Abraham's hometown in present-day Iraq to get a wife for his son Isaac.

The servant went and brought back Rebekah, whom Isaac married.

As the author begins chapter 25 he cuts away from Isaac for a little while to discuss other children that Abraham had and to discuss Abraham's oldest son, Ishmael – we will come back to that next week.

At verse 19 (of chapter 25), Moses turns his attention once again to the covenant family - the specific family through whom God had promised he would work specially – Abraham's son Isaac.

Remember we have the advantage of knowing how this all works out in history:

2000 B.C. Abraham

Isaac

Jacob (Israel) and Esau

12 sons (the 12 families of Israel)

Judah, Levi, Joseph, et al.

(70 in number when they move to Egypt)

1500 B.C. 400 years later they are over 1 million living in Egypt and enslaved.

From Levi's family came Moses.

The Israelites escape Egypt to go to Promised Land

1000 B.C. From Judah's family came the kings of Israel - David

B.C./A.D. From the line of Judah came Jesus - Messiah

A.D. 2000 More than a billion Christians and 5 billion who need to know.

But we go back to Isaac and Genesis 25:20 – nearly 4000 years ago. Isaac, the son of Abraham, was 40 when he married Rebekah (who was from Abraham's family and home country).

21 But Rebekah was unable to have children.

For the next 20 years of their marriage this was so.

Verse 26b tells us this "Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them (the twins)."

She was not just unable to have children for three or four years until she matured or until other conditions were right. For twenty years she was unable. It was clearly confirmed that she was barren.

This in stark contrast to the blessing pronounced on her by her family when she left home to go to be Isaac's wife – 24:60 "Our sister, may you increase to thousands upon thousands..."

It is also in sharp contrast to the promise of God expected.

Abraham's servant had gone to Abraham's home country specifically to get a wife for Isaac, a wife through whom the promises of God could be carried forward.

This wife was perfect.

She was so obviously God's choice – everything about the selection indicated God's involvement.

21 "Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife because she was barren".

Imagine the 20 years of waiting. The first couple of years they probably didn't worry but then they suspected there was a problem, then finally they realized Rachel couldn't conceive.

Why would Isaac continue to pray?

Isaac was committed to the promise given to Abraham – he believed God.

Isaac's faith is demonstrated in his prayer in the face of the impossible.

21 "The Lord answered his prayer" and his wife Rebekah became pregnant."

22 "The babies jostled each other within her".

This word "jostled" is more literally "smashed" or "crushed" – a violent action.

Though Rebekah couldn't know it at the time, these twins are fighting even before they are born – it is clearly meant to portend the future, a future we will look at in the weeks to come.

The activity was so great that she despaired – “Why is this happening to me?”

If motherhood is like this pregnancy, I’m not certain I want to go on living.

We are to meant to think that something very significant is taking place.

So Rebekah went to the Lord with it.

What has happened to the spiritual life of this semi-pagan woman from Mesopotamia? Has twenty years of contact with Isaac and Abraham won her over to the Lord? Has she matured in her faith so that she goes to the Lord with her problem rather than just complaining about it and acting fatalistically?

23 “The Lord said to her “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.”

Next week we will come back to this somewhat cryptic statement.

24 As God had said and as she probably knew before they were born, Rebekah gave birth to twins.

25 The firstborn was red and hairy (Esau) and they named him “hairy”. (Later he chose the red stew his brother had made and therefore also took on the nick-name “Edom” which means “red”. And it is this name that becomes the name of the land in which his descendants live.)

26 The second child was born immediately thereafter and he was delivered grasping the heel of his firstborn brother and so he was named “Jacob” which means God protects but it also means “grabbing the heel”. And that is why his parents named him Jacob.

Again the symbolism is important in the coming chapters – from the beginning the second son is seen as desperately attempting to catch up to the first – “grasping his heel”.

27 The story moves forward quickly telling us **in one verse** about Esau's and Jacob's growing up years and what they were like.

Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country.
 An outdoorsman, rough looking, rough living and rough acting.
 Jacob was a quiet man who stayed among the tents, tending sheep like his forefathers.

28 The result was favoritism, each by a different parent.
 Isaac who liked wild game, loved Esau.
 Rebekah loved Jacob.

It's not hard to read into this the kind of things Isaac and Rebekah did that showed this favoritism and fostered hostility between these two brothers.

Did Rebekah selfishly respond to Jacob because he was the quiet helpful one who spent his time with her?
 Did Jacob, with a quiet spirit, spend most of his time with Rebekah helping around the tents so that she grew more attached to him and he to her?
 Did Isaac selfishly praise Esau and Esau soon responded to his father's praise as Esau would bring home game from his hunting?

The author has told us in few words what set the stage for what happened next.

The boys were born struggling with each other.
 They were very different.
 They were each shown favoritism by a different parent.

With that background we get to the major part of the story.

29 "Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished.

30 "He said to Jacob, 'Quickly, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished.' (That is why he was also called Edom-Red)."

The words used by Esau to describe his hunger are coarse, fitting this coarse man.

31 “Jacob replied, ‘First sell me your birthright’.

What is this “birthright”?

Later in the Bible, it is clear that a birthright meant the son who had it would receive at least a double portion of the inheritance.

If Jacob was in line to get 1/3 of Isaac’s wealth then Esau was in line to get 2/3.

It is also clear that there was a place of special honor accorded to the oldest son.

Our media love to follow British royalty.

And often when pictures of young Prince William are shown, there is some comment about the future that is his - for one day he will be king of England, with all its privileges and responsibilities – that is his birthright.

It would seem that by this time in his life, Esau would have known clearly about the promises to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac – promises about a great **family** and a **land** of their own, a **special relationship to God**, and a **special responsibility to the whole world**.

It would also seem to be clear that the oldest son would have a special role in the development of that promise.

His birthright included not only property but also the future of the world.

Let me remind you of what Esau had undoubtedly heard numerous times as he was growing up:

Genesis 12:2-3 **God had said to his grandfather Abraham:**

“And I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse;

And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 15:4-5,7

Genesis 17:5-8

"I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

Genesis 17:15-16

"God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarah... I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

Genesis 18:17-19

Then the LORD said... Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

Genesis 22:17-18

Esau must have been told repeatedly that through him, the oldest son, the blessings of God would come to their family and to the whole world.

What a weighty and fabulous future.

Through you, Esau, God is going to accomplish his purposes in the world.

But what does Esau say?

32 "Look, I am about to die,' Esau said, 'What good is the birthright to me?'"

These words are meant to shock us.

What kind of man would give up such a birthright?

What kind of man would know about his place in God's kingdom and say it is worthless.

This indifference to the "birthright" shows the kind of man Esau was. He gave no significance to an honored position and responsibility.

He apparently thought the promises of God were not worthy of his involvement – they were of too little importance or value for him to care about them.

33 “But Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.”

But Jacob knew what he was doing!

Whether Jacob’s motivation is selfish (likely) or altruistic (less likely), he understood the significance of having that place of honor and responsibility and he wanted it.

Jacob wanted more than a handshake and Esau’s word, which later he might deny.

Jacob asked Esau to take an oath – to formalize the transaction in some way that would make it more binding.

And Esau did it – He swore with an oath that he would trade his birthright for some of Jacob’s soup.

What kind of man would make such a bargain?

It was one thing, in the midst of his hunger to make an exaggerated statement – “What good is a birthright to me, if I’m dead?” - but it is quite another thing to be given the opportunity to think about it and still make the same decision!

34 “Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. Esau ate, drank, got up, left.”

In almost staccato language the author describes Esau’s actions – he quickly, easily, left behind everything that is **important**.

And then Moses makes this damning statement about Esau: “So Esau despised his birthright.”

Jacob may have been a schemer and deceiver but it is Esau that the author comments on.

It is Esau who has done the unimaginable.

Esau has treated himself and God disrespectfully.

He has treated the most valuable promises of God as if they have no value.

The Bible word for that is “despise”.

We might think, “despise” means “hate” but it doesn’t.

It means to consider it of no value, worthless, to think of it as inferior.

Hebrews 12:16 corroborates the idea that it is Esau’s action that is central in this text. For there we read, “See that no one...is **godless** like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.”

Esau **acted on impulse** to satisfy his belly.

He was more concerned about the immediate than the future.

He relinquished things of value for the satisfaction of his appetites.

He **had no regard** for things of God.

How about us?

Are we a privileged people with a great inheritance treating it as if it is of no value?

Are we committing ourselves fully to Christ and his kingdom or are we passing it all by for a chance to eat some diluted soup – the silliness and temporary goals of the world around us?

Several times each day we are given the choice Esau was.

God’s kingdom (with its responsibilities and privileges) or our own goals (seemingly more satisfying and secure).

What is your birthright?

As a Christian you have:

Access to God.

You have a family relationship with the living God – you are his child and he is jealous for your fellowship.

Do we truly value that or do we despise it – treat it as if it has little value?

Access to his Word.

You have the Holy Spirit living within you prepared to feed your eternal soul by the means of God’s Word. Do we value it?

Access to his People – the church.

You have been made part of a family of believers without whom you cannot grow and flourish as a follower of Christ and to whom you have a responsibility to help others grow and flourish. Do you value that or treat it indifferently?

Do you meet with God's people regularly or only when it doesn't interfere with something else more important?

Do you participate and invest in God's people or only when there aren't more important things to take your time?

Access to a Future of Significance here on earth and eternally.

As certainly as Abraham was given the privilege of being the one through whom the whole world would be blessed so we have been given that same privilege.

Jesus said, "You shall be my witnesses..."

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples..."

Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it."

Jesus said, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

God has decided that we are his means to accomplish his purposes in the world.

If you are a Christian, that is your birthright!

Does that matter to you?

How much does it matter?

As someone watched the way you live, what would they say is most important to you, valuable to you, **most worthwhile** to you?

Donald Barnhouse wrote, "Multitudes of men spend more time shaving than on their souls; and multitudes of women give more minutes to their makeup than to the life of their eternal spirit."

(Barnhouse, Genesis, 2:46)

The Apostle Paul said, I Corinthians 6:20 “You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

I Peter 1:18-19 “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

Bought at great price – Given an invaluable future!

Romans 12:1 “Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – that is your spiritual act of worship. Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and prove what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Esau didn’t consider the kingdom of God, God’s plan, purposes and work, to be worth as much as a bowl of soup!

How about you?

Is the kingdom of God worth YOUR life?