

JACOB: WRESTLING WITH GOD AND MAN

Jacob was a clever and crafty, colorful and captivating, calculative but commendable character. Instead of despising Jacob or rejecting his character or conduct outright, readers are more likely to relate with his strengths and weaknesses, successes and failure, story and inventiveness.

At times ruthless, Jacob can be reliable and redeemable at the same time. If faith characterized his grandfather Abraham, fairness, his father Isaac, then Jacob is known for his feistiness.

But just when you think Jacob is out of control, he showed his tender side, He fell truly, madly, deeply in love. Of course, the climax of his story was an epic struggle with God by the river of Jabbok. In the end, Jacob sought God for the cure to his ills, something God had patiently waited since Jacob's birth, and God blessed him, and made him the father of the nation Israel.

Also, remember that Jacob is not our model, nor are his methods and marriages. His motivation was skewed, his mistakes were paid in full, and his misery followed him for years.

WHAT TO DO WITH WHAT YOU HAVE (GEN 25:19-34)

19This is the account of Abraham's son Isaac. Abraham became the father of Isaac, 20and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram and sister of Laban the Aramean. 21Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. 22The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23The 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." 24When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. 25The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. 26After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

A lot of us can identify with Gen 25 because it talks about parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, and opposing personalities. The passage begins with the difficulty Rebekah experienced when she gave birth to her twins, the explanation God had given her when she inquired God, and the twin boys' striking arrival, appearance, and antagonism.

A Jewish story told about a poor man who noticed that there was a naked stranger in his house. "Hey," he shouted, "you get out of my house, do you hear?" "Dear sir," said the stranger, "just look at me. How can you bring yourself to drive a naked man into the street?" "You're right," said the poor man, "that would be a sin. But tell me, who are you?" "You don't recognize me? Well, to tell the truth, my name is Poverty."

When the poor man realized that he had Poverty living in his house, he was deeply distressed. He racked his brains for a way to get rid of him. Finally, he went to a tailor's shop, described Poverty, and ordered a suit to fit. The tailor wrote down Poverty's measurements and went to work. To pay for the suit the tailor was making, the poor man had to sell everything he owned. But he gritted his teeth and bore it, because anything was better than having Poverty as a personal guest.

Finally, the tailor delivered the suit, and Poverty put it on. "Sorry," Poverty smiled. "It doesn't fit." The poor man turned on the tailor and cried, "How could you do this to me? I paid you good money, how could you made the suit too small?" "Don't scold the tailor," said Poverty, "it's not his fault. It's just that while you were spending the last of your money, I grew bigger." (YIVI Institute for Jewish Research, Edited by Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, Translated by Leonard Wolf).

The debate over God's sovereignty, fairness, and choice at this point is mute, premature, and futile, because the focus of the passage is strictly on the twin brothers' independent maneuvers over each other before, during, and after birth. Nevertheless, if the text seems to suggest that the younger Jacob had won the battle over his brother at birth, then the next conflict they had indicated that Esau had lost the war by selling his birthright.

16See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. 17Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears. (Heb 12:16-17)

So how did Esau lose his birthright? How can you lose something you have? What does one like Esau value and not value? Why should we respect spiritual things, and not take it for granted?

I. CHOOSE WHAT IS GOOD FOR YOU

27The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents. 28Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. 29Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. 30He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.) (Gen 25:27-30)

A.B. Simpson, the founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, told of a man who advertised for a coachman. Among those who came were two who seemed to him to be particularly bright. He took them aside and asked them how near they could drive to the edge of a precipice without falling over.

The first candidate answer that he could go within half an inch and had frequently done so, just shaving the edge and feeling perfectly safe. He then asked the other the same question. "Well, sir," replied the man modestly, "I really cannot tell, because I have never allowed myself to venture near the edge of a precipice. I have always made it a rule to keep as far as possible from danger, and I have had my reward in knowing that my master and his family were kept from danger and harm."

The master had no difficulty in deciding between the two candidates. "You are the man for me," he said, "the other may be brilliant, but you are safe." (The Holy Spirit, Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1994)

The problem of Esau was that he erred on the dangerous side. He did not know what was good for himself. He fell to the prey of sight, sound, and smell. Worse, he would exchange anything for it.

Esau was a man who loved an adventure, the outdoors, a good rumble in the jungle. Wild, insatiable, and unpredictable, he thirsted for temporary things, not permanent things; he thrived on borrowed things, rather than earned things; and he craved for things instantaneously, as opposed to gradually.

Esau ranted and raved about hunger pangs, lived and died over red stew, and lost himself over soup, porridge and beans. The skilled hunter was ironically stalked, baited and trapped by these things. Esau didn't cook, but he took – what an expensive, no-frills, quick snack. The king of the jungle was an easy prey in the kitchen.

If you had sympathy for Esau and blame Jacob for his troubles, note that Esau was not only carefree and careless for a moment, he cared for nobody but himself for many years. He observed his freedom to the point of rebellion. When Esau was forty years old, he married Hittite women, pagans, foreigners who worshipped idols. Not one, but two, both heathens, and they doubled the grief upon his father and mother (Gen 26:34-35), so much so that his mother Rebekah confided to Isaac that she was disgusted with living (Gen 27:46), and the quiet father Isaac finally advised his other son Jacob this: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman (Gen 28:1, 6)."

And if that was not enough, when Isaac overheard his father's final advice to his twin brother and realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac, instead of seeking a bride from his mother's family side like brother Jacob, Esau married Wild Uncle Ishmael's daughter, in addition to the wives he already had.

II. CHERISH WHAT IS GIVEN TO YOU

31*Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."* **32***"Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"* **33***But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. (Gen 25:31-33)*

Do you treasure what is given to you?

A British pastor, Rev. Billy Strachan once asked his congregation a set of effective, thought-provoking, service-related questions. The questions all contained five words and he asked them four questions. The first five words were, *What Gift Do You Want?* Leadership? Service? Faith? What gift do you wish for?

The next five were, *What Gift Did You Get?* Did you get something you expect? Something you least expect? Or more than what you expect? What gift have you received?

Then, *What Gift Do You Need?* Is it something necessary? Important? Does it serve a purpose in your life?

Finally, *What Good Did It Do?* What gift would benefit you? How? And why? (Keswick, 1990)

A birthright is a given status, responsibility and twice as much inheritance in the family, but Esau had a cavalier attitude toward his position. He did not know the worth of his birthright in the course of time, he needed infinitely more of what others had, and he did not hold on to what was priceless to his father, clan, and life.

Jacob, on the other hand, for all his faults, was poor, hungry, and determined. He was always second – the second string, the second banana, second in line -- but he was second to none.

Esau was not the only one to lose the right to lead the family. Jacob's three oldest sons – Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (Gen 49:3) – also lost the respect of their father, their reputation within the family, and their leadership roles in the nation.

Like the three oldest sons of Jacob, Esau lost his birthright because he was an obsessive-compulsive, carnal, and ungodly man whose god is his stomach, whose mind was on earthly things, and whose body was in good shape but out of control.

Esau fell into the entitlement trap. He thought he was entitled to God's spiritual blessing because he was the first born, older by a few seconds, but set for life. Like the Chinese said, "He has enough even though he breaks a leg." Dangerous, isn't it? But only ungodly people think this way: "I am entitled to spiritual service pensions and benefits from the Heavenly King all my shelf life."

Jacob, on the other hand, was the under rated 100-pound weakling with a big appetite, the soul and symbol and stock of an emerging nation. He did not just grab his brother's heel one time, the difference was that he held the duration of his life.

Esau lost everything because he did not treasure, keep or realize what he had in the first place.

III. COMPREHEND WHAT IS GONE FROM YOU

34Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright (Gen 25:34-26:1).

Frank Layden, the former coach of Utah Jazz in the seventies, had problems with a basketball player, and so he summoned the talented but troubled man to his office. Looking the player in the eye, the coach finally asked, "My son, I can't understand it with you. Is it ignorance of apathy?" What was the player's typical unconcern response? The player said, "Coach, I don't know and I don't care!" (Sports Illustrated "They Said it!" 1990 Oxmoor House 26)

The reason for Esau's rejection was due his passive-aggressive discard for his birthright. He was an indifferent, ignorant, and irreligious man, because not only was he passive in the knowledge, safeguard and nurture of what he had, he actively sold his birthright. He did not blink an eye, think twice, or walk back and forth over it.

Someone said, "There are three kinds of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who have no idea what happened."

Esau had no clue what he had, what he lost, and why. In other words, he did not care one way or another, he just gulped down the food and drink, bounced his knees and for departed for the next adventure. While he never said he despised his birthright, he was amused by the value of his birthright, the request of brother, and the folly of bargaining.

Note that Jacob believed, valued, and pursued what he did not have, not what he could have or will not have. Someone suggested that Jacob valued the birthright so highly that he was willing to stoop to the level he did to obtain it.
<http://www.bible.org/docs/ot/books/gen/deffin/gen-27.htm#TopOfPage>

Esau, I believe, would lose what he had to others, sooner or later, innocently or foolishly, whether to Jacob or others. God had disclosed the weakness, flaw and ruin of Esau and had told Rebekah this: the older one is going to serve the younger one (19-23). Esau was the No. 1 pick who did not bother to train, sign, or play. His life was characterized by excesses, exaggerations, and excuses.

Conclusion: It's been said, "When a man with money meets a man with experience, the man with the experience ends up with the money and the man with the money ends up with the experience." (Live and Learn 95). God has given us much, but He has also asked for much from us -- faithfulness to Him, cheerfulness for what we have, and usefulness for His service. In all things, do not take for granted God's gifts to you, His guidance in your life, and His grace that has covered your weaknesses. Good choices, godly character, and genuine commitment do matter!