

## Hebrews 12

### Warnings against Rejecting God's Grace

<sup>14</sup>Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup>See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. <sup>16</sup>See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

### Malachi 1: 2-5 Israel Preferred to Edom

<sup>2</sup>I have loved you, says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the LORD. Yet I have loved Jacob <sup>3</sup>but I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals. <sup>4</sup>If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the LORD of hosts says: They may build, but I will tear down, until they are called the wicked country, the people with whom the LORD is angry forever. <sup>5</sup>Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the LORD beyond the borders of Israel!"

## Genesis 25

### The Birth and Youth of Esau and Jacob

<sup>19</sup>These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, <sup>20</sup>and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. <sup>21</sup>Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. <sup>22</sup>The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way,

why do I live?"<sup>[a]</sup> So she went to inquire of the LORD. <sup>23</sup>And the LORD said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the elder shall serve the younger."

<sup>24</sup>When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. <sup>25</sup>The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. <sup>26</sup>Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.<sup>[a]</sup> Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

<sup>27</sup>When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. <sup>28</sup>Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

## Esau Sells His Birthright

<sup>29</sup>Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. <sup>30</sup>Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.<sup>[a]</sup>) <sup>31</sup>Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." <sup>32</sup>Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" <sup>33</sup>Jacob said, "Swear to me first."<sup>[a]</sup> So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. <sup>34</sup>Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

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**“Birthright”**

**Hebrews 12:14-16; Genesis 25:19-34**

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Recently I was contacted by the attorney that drew up our Virginia wills. It's been 5 years since my husband and I set them up and our lawyer was willing to schedule a complimentary courtesy call to see if we needed to change anything. That in and of itself isn't unusual. It's a checklist thing of adulthood that's good to have. And as part of that adulting, we were asked to fill out a form of the important things to consider prior to the call so he can help us in 30 minutes or less. The first question is a given – *List the properties that you have* – home, land, business. That and money are what you expect to pass on in an inheritance. Then I got to the question that reminded me of years ago when we filled out our marriage license in West Virginia. The question was, “Do you own any guns?”

Does this attorney know how families work during a will dispute or what? Chuck and I have not lobbied my father to receive any of the family guns, but given the history of hunting and mountain land in my family, if there's going to be a disputed item when a family member passes, it's going to be either a gun or a mountain, and more likely a gun.

Wills give people living now an opportunity to spell out how they want their possessions to be distributed upon their death. And if you die without a will, the state determines what happens with your stuff in probate court. But when you look back to Biblical times, it was your place in the family that determined what happened to your father's belongings when he died. If you happen to be the firstborn son, you can expect to get the lion's share of property and other valuables. If you are a son down the line, you likely will get something, but not as much. If you

are a daughter – you got your share when you were married and a bride price was paid to your husband for taking you. I must say I like our system better. It means that I can write my will such that both my son and daughter can receive an inheritance, or that I can, if I want to, designate everything to a save the rainforest.

This biblical concept of birthright has much to do with inheritance, and yet that's not solely what is going on with what Esau gives away. Or I might say what Esau gets tricked out of. There's a lot going on in the language of this text that is obscured to us as it gets translated into English. How things are said are as important as what's being said. Esau is the redneck of this text. He's the dumb hunter, not the sharp and studious one. His "Hebrew" has an accent – the kind of accent we would attribute to the backwoods, and hollers, and bayous. He agrees to give his birthright to his "younger brother" for a bowl of lentil soup, which he grunts out as "give me some of that red-red" because he's been out doing what he does and hasn't eaten probably in a few days. He's your mouth-breather, your hillbilly, your yokel. He's the butt of this story. And the prejudice against him continues for generations. He's the ONLY person named in the Bible as someone God hates. (Malachi 1) And the writer of Hebrews basically tells us, "Don't be an Esau." Just how far does our prejudice lean toward the Esau's of the world?

When I discovered this about Esau by reading up in a decent commentary, it made me even more curious about this text. I know what it's like, as Jimmy Buffet oddly sings, to be nobody from nowhere. The first line of that song is: "I'm nobody from nowhere you'd have ever heard of anyway." This is Esau, but Jacob sees himself as better than that – more worthy of what his father has to give. Shouldn't we be saying, "Don't be a Jacob?" Don't be the kind of person who takes advantage of your brother's hunger. Don't be like the one, who at the end of his father

Issac's life puts on furs to mimic his brother's hairiness in order to steal his dying blessing too. Does this text really teach us that the rubes of this world are fair game to cheat and steal from?

The birthright and the blessing go together, and Jacob scammed his way into getting both. And the biblical writers seem OK with that. Jacob is a strange character to be admired. Malachi even suggests that the lands developed by Jacob and Esau were either loved or despised by God, and you can probably guess which is which with Jacob as the foundation of Israel. It makes me wonder just how Esau could have handled things differently. What would have turned the corner? Did he need to fight for his birthright? Did he need to call out Jacob for stealing his blessing? What could he do when he lost his power, when he lost his status as the firstborn son?

And the very big question we don't have a precise answer to is, "What exactly did he give up?"

There seems to be a power or a privilege associated with this birth order stroke of luck that we don't acknowledge in the same way in our culture. There's something Biblically important about being a firstborn son. In patriarchal societies – some of that has to do with safeguarding lineage – which is also about who gets your stuff when you die. But even as we get to the gospel writers, making sure that Jesus is acknowledged as the firstborn and only begotten Son of God becomes paramount. John's gospel goes so far as to say that the Christ is the firstborn *of all creation*.

Later councils get into huge church splitting arguments about how EXACTLY the theological gymnastics work out for Jesus to be first of the firsts. Apparently getting that blessing is holy, spiritual, special – and a job qualification for being recognized as the Messiah.

The book of Hebrews says that those who would give away such a birthright are immoral, godless, like Esau. But I wonder if that's our bias talking. Whenever we point fingers at the one who is lesser than – whose grammar is imperfect, whose body is too hairy, whose hunger and poverty create impossible choices, who we look at as more animal than human, perhaps we've

missed some other important Biblical messages about love and compassion. Maybe Jacob and Esau's relationship is highlighted in scripture to remind us that our moral God is always having to work in an immoral world – at least that's what some of the Rabbinical scholars say. Jesus himself got frustrated at that "Son of God" title – sometimes telling his followers to shut up about it. His judgment of our twin Jacob and Esau natures is always covered in mercy, and love, and understanding. He challenges those who would trick and lie to do better, and comforts those who are oppressed or wounded and have little means. But he loves them both. The firstborn of all creation loves us all.

Which brings me to how I choose to practice birthright and blessing rituals in my own life. It may be that pastors see more death up close in their careers, so I have had a will in place since before I turned 30. It seemed the right thing to do – especially with kids in the picture. But not everyone is going to be excited about writing up or taking on the expense of a will. There are some cheap or free templates online, but it's not just about getting something down on a piece of paper. Rather it's about having those discussions about your values and dreams with the people closest to you. It has given us opportunities to share with our parents some of the values they have passed on to us, values we want our children to know and continue through their own lives. In some ways, birthright is still very much oriented along family lines – perhaps in both good ways and bad. There are also family traits that we hope are stopping with us and not getting sent on to further generations. Ask any child of an alcoholic about what their parent has passed on, and it will often include concern about genetics, and sadly a whole lot of heartache. We may be lucky enough to pass on wealth, but we may be on the side of passing on debt. Both are connected to how our birth and place in the family will continue from generation to generation.

Beyond the birthright to the blessing, examining one's own mortality can also lead to conversations with friends about how important they are in your life. Given that I am willing to consider that I won't live forever – it seems more pertinent to say what feels right to say when there's an opportunity to say it – and not to wait until I'm on my death bed to make some grand proclamations. I think I've gotten better at this as I get older. Youth and young adulthood can be so guarded. But now, I hope I have conveyed and will continue to convey my gratitude for friends who have made my life better. I know how joyous I feel when someone lets me know that I am important in their life. I want to be that blessing for others when I can. It's how I try to be in real life, and it's an aspirational goal even on social media to be one who lifts up considerably more often than I am tearing down. Do my words speak a blessing? Do my actions reflect that I understand life to be the world's best gift, and one that is easy to share? That's my hope.

And finally, the birthright and the blessing tend to follow a trajectory in how they are given from age to youth. Now I realize that perhaps it could go the other way. Some young people are old souls who will surprise you! Nevertheless, I believe it is the responsibility of the older generation to bless the younger generation to let them know that their birth and presence in this world is a particular gift of a God who wants for each person a particular kind of life. In Parker Palmer's book "A Hidden Wholeness" he talks about being able to see his granddaughter in a different light than he had seen his own children. He could see that even as a child she was living into her "birthright gifts." She arrived on earth to be "this kind of person rather than that, or that, or that." Watching her journey unfold was like seeing her true authentic self emerge into the world. From that story, he goes on to say that he could gently say as her grandfather what he saw in her in ways that were unique. It wasn't a push to do things the "right" way, or to fit into some

family pattern, but to help her recognize her own gifts. He wrote her letters that were about really seeing her. So this has become my high school graduation gift to the young people who are closest to me. I have written such letters for Cade, and for my niece and nephew who have graduated. I hoped to capture stories of who I see them to be so they can treasure those gifts from within. It's why I always give a charge and blessing to our seminary interns on their last Sunday working with us. We who gather more life experience can lend wisdom to the generations who come after us – that is if we are willing to put aside the advice column, “this is how you do adulthood” rhetoric and simply share with young people the observations you have about their gifts and strengths that God has put inside them. It's actually cool to reach that stage in life to be able to do that with grace and love, and not necessarily be the one still searching so hard for life's meaning myself.

What can we gain from studying Jacob and Esau? We can see that even twin brothers can turn out quite differently, and we can infer that picking favorites or striving for parental preference may not be the best way to go. Maybe it's time to re-institute blessings, all kinds of blessings, ones that aren't only, but can be, family oriented. Bless one another. With kindness. With comfort. With the touch of a hand. With the silence that speaks volumes. It matters far more than who gets the heirloom china, or the Winchester rifle. Amen.