

July 13, 2008

"How's That Working For You?"

Steven Conger

Genesis 25:19-34

(Genesis 25:19-34 NRSV) These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, {20} and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. {21} Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. {22} The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. {23} 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." {24} When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. {25} The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. {26} Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. {27} When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. {28} Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. {29} Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. {30} Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) {31} Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." {32} Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" {33} Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. {34} Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

I hope that you have taken some time this last week to read your Bible and follow along with me on these great stories of our faith.

They are fascinating stories, but they are also difficult ones.

I appreciate the emails that I have gotten this week about this series, and the approach that I am taking, but I think the key to this adventure is that you do some reading and investigating at home on your own, because in this twenty minutes that I have on a Sunday morning, I can only take such a small snapshot of these wonderful stories, and if you don't know the story it makes it more difficult.

We will continue with Genesis through August
the next few weeks looking at:

The story of Jacob's ladder

Jacob marrying Rachel and Leah (Getting Tricked by Laban)

Jacob Wrestling with God
 Joseph and his dreams
 Joseph and the famine
 Moses

This morning we have the story of Jacob and Esau. It is a long and intriguing story, but I have decided to focus on just a couple of the verses.

One day Jacob was cooking a stew. Esau came in from the field, starved. Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red stew—I'm starved!" That's how he came to be called Edom (Red).

Jacob said, "Make me a trade: my stew for your rights as the firstborn."

Esau said, "I'm starving! What good is a birthright if I'm dead?"

Jacob said, "First, swear to me." And he did it. On oath Esau traded away his rights as the firstborn. Jacob gave him bread and the stew of lentils. He ate and drank, got up and left. That's how Esau shrugged off his rights as the firstborn.

Listening to that story you have got to wonder about Esau!

Esau comes home from hunting or gathering, because that is the kind of man that he was, and he is hungry. Jacob was a momma's boy who liked to hang out in the kitchen, and just happened to have some stew cooking.

Esau asks for some and Jacob offers him a "deal."

"Make me a trade: my stew for your rights as the firstborn."

What he was saying was — "I will give you some stew if you will give me your entire inheritance."

What kind of bargain is that?

I kind of get the impression that Esau was not super bright. All he cared about was the moment — no delayed gratification for him.

He was hungry NOW and he wanted food NOW.

When we focus in on this part of the story it is clearly a parable about the foolishness of immediate gratification at the expense of things that are truly important.

How often do we hear about — or maybe do that ourselves.
Neglect really important things for the sake of some passing fancy.

Esau wanted the stew — that was his immediate desire.
What about the inheritance — his answer is telling.

"I'm starving! What good is a birthright if I'm dead?"

Unfortunately, Esau forgot in that moment that the birthright, the inheritance was everything.

The eldest son got a double portion of the inheritance.
The eldest was the link to the past.
The eldest was the tie to the future.

And of course in this case the future was the promise with God!

But Esau says: "I'm starving! What good is a birthright if I'm dead?"

Of course, Esau wasn't on the verge of dying.

But even if he was — wasn't he really asking the wrong question.
Shouldn't he have been asking: "What is the use of LIVING if it is at the cost of my REASON for living?"

But wait a minute — before we bash Esau too much — Aren't we all like him — at least part of the time.

Aren't we drawn to temporary things — to instant gratification — at the expense of our birthright?

What, you are asking is our birthright?

First of all, the most important birthright is the one that is directly conferred upon each of us at our birth. And that is LIFE — We are given the gift of LIFE ITSELF!

And what could be more important than that?

Sure we all have done just like Jeremiah did when — in a fit of despair — he cursed the day he was born.

Cursed be the day
on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed!

Cursed be the man
who brought the news to my father

We have all felt that despair with life. But the truth is we can't blame ourselves for our birth — it is the one thing that we are not responsible for.

It just happened to you — you were born!

What a gift! The gift of life!

Think of it — out of the billions of possibilities — life landed on you! Life landed on us! So here we are — it is our birthright.

Paul expands on this point in the book of Romans where he reminds us that not only are we given the gift of life, but we are also offered the gift of the spirit.

"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.... But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you."
(Romans 8 NRSV)

I think what Paul is trying to say to us, is if we live our life simply chasing after the immediate gratifications — then we will lose it because the reality of life is that we will all die. But God has made us more than simply physical beings, we are also spiritual beings. And our spiritual life is an even greater gift than the physical one. Our spiritual life is our greatest birthright. It is there for all of us to claim.

Frederick Buechner's novel, *The Book of Bebb*, has an interesting scene in which this evangelist named Leo Bebb is talking about his chief associate, who is called Brownie.

Rev. Bebb is part charlatan himself, but also part deeply spiritual, and you never know which is going to come out on top. But this is how he describes Brownie to the narrator of the story, Antonio:

"Now, you take a man like Brownie, Antonio, and you ask yourself where the Almighty went wrong. Well, I tell you it's not the Almighty went wrong, it's Brownie went wrong. The Almighty gave Brownie a life, and Brownie never lived it.... But it's not too late for him, Antonio. Even for Brownie there's hope. There's got to be. Because if there's no hope for just a single one of us, then there's no hope for any of us..."

Sometimes, like this Brownie character, we can be so wounded in spirit that we're afraid to make a move. The point is, God is right there for us, helping us claim the life and spirit we've been given. It is our birthright. We can claim it this very moment!

But there is a second component to this birthright that we have been given.

We also have a cultural birthright to claim.

Life didn't start with us.

Before any of us there have been great civilizations with long histories.

And because of this, great treasure has been inherited by us.

Treasures of art and literature

philosophy and drama

music and humor

We cannot possess it all, but we are offered the opportunity to drink deeply from the well of our heritage.

We have all read stories about people who were held captive in war. More often than not the stories have a common theme. That in order to retain their sanity during their years of imprisonment — often times in horrible conditions. They would draw from that well of their heritage and remember.

They would remember the bible stories that they were taught as a child.

The hymns of their youth.

The history and legacy of their families and nation.

What would our children draw upon?

Guitar hero?

There is an important lesson here — reminding us how important it is to help our young people drink deeply from the well of our cultural inheritance.

Finally, I think that this story reminds us and challenges us on how we are going to use our God given talents.

Unfortunately, it is a matter of "use it or lose it."

We have to give back to God and human kind from the treasure that has been given us. We all have to make choices because we have more than we will ever be able to use.

The good news is we can make our lives count.

Herman Wouk's great novel, *The Caine Mutiny*, contains a poignant moment.

The central character of the novel is a young naval ensign named Willie Keith. He was, frankly, spoiled rotten by a wealthy father and mother. When he went off to the war, his father gave him a letter in a sealed envelope, telling him to read it when he was about to go on active duty. Weeks later, in Hawaii, Willie finally opened the letter. It spoke to him, and it speaks now to us. This is part of what it said:

"Dear Willie (Keith): By the time you read this letter, I think I will be dead. I'm sorry to startle you, but I suppose there's no pleasant way to break such news.... The prognosis is one hundred per cent bad.... I'm a little young to go, according to the insurance tables, and I must say I don't feel ready, but I daresay that's because I've accomplished so little. I look back on my life, Willie, and there's not much there. Your mother has been a fine wife, and I have no regrets on that score. But I seem to have led such a thoroughly second-rate life—not only compared to my father, but in view of my own capabilities. I had quite a feeling for research. When I fell in love with your mother I thought I couldn't marry her without undertaking general practice in a high income community. It was my plan to make a pile in ten or fifteen years of such work, and then return to research. I really think I might have done something in cancer. I had a theory—a notion, you might say—nothing I could have put on paper. It needed three years of systematic investigation. Nobody has touched it to this day. I've kept up with the literature.... But now there's no time even to outline the procedure. The worst of it is, I now feel your mother would have stood by me and lived modestly if I'd really insisted. But I've had a pleasant time... I've loved reading and golf, and I've had all of that I wanted. The days have gone by all too fast.... Think of me and of what I might have been, Willie, at the times in your life when you come to crossroads. For my sake, for the sake of the father who took the wrong turns, take the right ones, and carry my blessing and my justification with you.... Good-bye, my son. Be a man.

Dad

Are we ready to claim our birthright—the gift of life and spirit, the gifts of culture and civilization, the opportunity to give back and make our lives count?

Or are we too busy chasing after the now?

The frightening thought is that we don't *have* to!
 Nobody can force us to be what we were created to be.
 But it is there for us. God's love and God's gifts are there for us.
 God never forces us. But may God give us that extra measure of courage and grace to claim the gifts.

And may God bless each of you this day and every day. Amen