

"Life Changing Decisions"
Rodolfo Rodriguez May 6, 2007

Genesis 25: 21-34

Now Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her:

"Two nations are in your womb,
Two peoples shall be separated from your body;
One people shall be stronger than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger."

So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. (Hairy) Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. (Supplanter or Deceitful) Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Esau Sells His Birthright

Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Therefore his name was called Edom. (Red) But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Interesting story, but let's change the subject for a moment, dear brothers and sisters... let me go to the one subject I know the least about: sports.

Why is it that the new sports you see on television have to be so frightening? I get nervous watching those dainty little ice skaters attempting a triple Lutz, or the gymnasts leaping around on that narrow beam. The latest trend features kids doing summersaults on bicycles or roller-blading down the handrails on steep stairs. But the worst is rock climbing. Those athletes climb up the bare face of mountain cliffs without any kind of harness or safety ropes. Sometimes you see them actually hanging by a thumbnail on a wall of rock.

A rock climber named Lawrence Richards once said, "In rock climbing, there's something called the commitment move. You're tied to the ropes, and there's a moment when you're standing and have to let go of solid "ground" to move to the next higher place. It's a scary step. You must trust what you're tied to more than what you're standing on.

"The commitment move" - Something I can understand. Doesn't it seem that there come times like that in life, too? You've been climbing steadily through life, moving from one secure handhold to another. Then you come to a place where life requires a "commitment move." It's a time when you know you have to take a risk, and you know that your life may well take a dramatic turn based on this one decision.

Well, it was just that way in our scripture passage for today. Life changed because of the decisions made on one fateful day. Today we look at the life of Jacob, but his fate was intertwined with his twin brother, Esau, from the womb to his death. The scripture implies that these brothers even wrestled with each other before they were born. When the first one was born, the second one was still holding onto his heel. That little incident earned the second born son the name "Jacob, the supplanter." And he lived up to that name in several episodes to follow.

Our text for today deals with one such episode. Here we see how the younger brother swindled the older brother out of his inheritance. But I find this to be a complex story and one that is filled with twists and turns that remind me of those climbers making their way up the face of a cliff.

Jacob, the younger brother, was a quiet man who stayed home with his mother a lot. Esau, the older brother, was a skillful hunter, a man of the field. His father loved to eat the wild game that Esau often brought home.

On the surface, this story is pretty straightforward. With a remarkably few words, the Bible records the incident this way:

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

First, we are left to wonder what was the significance of this "birthright." Apparently, this was a very ancient custom in which the oldest son received twice as much inheritance as the youngest son. At Isaac's death, Esau would have received 2/3 of Isaac's properties, and Jacob would have received 1/3.

Allow me to bring this passage to present times, so we can better picture the incident:

For those of us who are interested in calculating Individual Retirement Accounts and long-term stock options, we are quick to see that this "birthright" arrangement was a bonanza for the oldest brother.

But Esau was a simple man, a man's man who loved to hunt and fish. He drove a pick-up truck and loved to wear flannel shirts. He wasn't really in to stock options or long-term return on investments. He was more interested in the here and now. And right now, he was famished. He had been out hunting all day. On this day, he apparently returned empty handed, and hungry.

Jacob, on the other hand, was a shrewd businessman. He usually stayed at home, talking to his mother about the rise in the stock market and the current margins on pork bellies. While his pot of stew boiled, Jacob had been calculating the net worth of his father's estate and projecting its value several years down the road. Then he calculated the difference between Esau's 2/3 of the estate and his paltry 1/3. The figures spoke for themselves and the more he and the pot stewed, the madder he got.

That's when Esau returned from the hunt hanging his smelly camouflage clothing in the corner, and griping about how hungry he was. Well, it was just the wrong time for Esau to be asking his younger brother for a favor, but Esau asked for a bowl of stew anyway. How was he to know what Jacob had been working out in his mind?

Jacob's silent response was, "Hey, he's the one with the big bucks coming to him. Why should I share my stew with a guy that's going to inherit 2/3 of everything our father has?"

I suspect that these brothers then launched into a classic sibling argument.

"Give me some stew."

"No, cook your own stew."

"Well, I didn't kill anything while hunting, so I don't have anything to cook."

"That's tough."

"Come on, Jacob, just a bowl of stew. Give me some."

"No way. It's not my fault that you can't hunt very well."

"Look, Jacob, I've been out hunting all day. I'm starving to death."

"So?"

"I'm gonna die if I don't get something to eat."

"And who do you think would cry about that?"

"Come on, Jacob, just a bowl of stew."

"What'll you give me for it?"

"Anything. Anything, Jacob, just give me the stew."

"How about your birthright?"

"My birthright? Hey, I won't see that inheritance for fifty years and shoot, Daddy may be broke by then anyway. I don't care anything about that. Sure, Jacob, you can have my share of the inheritance fifty years from now. Just give me a bowl of soup now!"

And the deal was done. The inheritance was swapped for a bowl of soup.

Now this deal goes straight to the record books as one of the worst business deals ever made. It reminds you of those stories you often hear about such deals.

In every town I've ever lived in, here in Baja even more, I've heard stories of old timers who bought some worthless land for pennies on the acre, and promptly turned around and sold it for millions.

Poor Esau, perhaps there was no way for him to realize what he had just done. He should have paid closer attention in math class. It must have been years before he realized the foolishness of this deal. Something like this scene was repeated some time later when Jacob swindled Esau out of the blessing on his father's deathbed. Through his astute behavior Jacob managed to become the father of the tribe and Esau became the renegade who founded the Edomites. The phrase, which would forever be passed on, would be: "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" instead of "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Esau."

...such is the price of that bowl of stew, my friends.

In rock climbing, it usually doesn't take long before you know if you have made the right move or not. But in life, it's often the long view that matters. Esau made a life-changing

mistake. He missed one "commitment move," and his heritage will forever be as the "also-ran" rather than the "father of Israel."

Before we go any further, I want to make clear to all of you that although the passage talks about an older and a younger twin, a father's and a mother's favorite, a strong and a weak twin, a great nation and a rebel nation a skilled hunter and a mild man, I assure you that this passage is not in the scriptures for us to increase our awareness of our brother and sister's intentions. Esau and Jacob represent the struggle within us, impulsive or sensible decisions, immediate or delayed gratification, etc and the fruits and consequences of them. One of my favorite quotes apply for this brothers: "if you don't want to be a good example, then you'll have to be a horrible warning."

Esau was only concerned about the present, not the future. His bodily comfort influenced his choices, and he could not delay the desire of the moment for the sake of realizing a greater good in a later time. Esau was the personification of those who seek instant gratification at the expense of future health, safety, or reward.

...something we have never seen or will ever see among us, right??

Jacob wasn't the most moral character in the Bible, but one thing he did have was a view for the long term. Sometimes I think the secret to life is delayed gratification. A sign of maturity is the ability to wait. Jacob worked for seven years to obtain the woman he wanted, but his father-in-law tricked him, and he had to work another seven. Later we will find him swindling his father-in-law out of sheep through a breeding plan that took a long time to fulfill. Jacob was astute and successful and became the father of Israel primarily because he was willing to consider the long-haul.

Today, many people are like Esau. They believe that the present is all that is important. They fail, or refuse, to consider the fruit of today's impulsive decisions. One is reminded of the sick old person who said, "If I had known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself."

If there is one central lesson that we can learn from this passage, it's the importance of delayed gratification. This is an especially difficult lesson for teenagers. Their success depends upon making decisions for the long-term. They must delay the immediate pleasures so that they can lay a strong foundation for a successful life. They must study now so that they will have the education for a good job later. They must postpone physical pleasure so that they can have a strong family later.

An example of Esau could be the guy who does not go to college because he wants to stay with his loved girlfriend in his hometown... chances are she'll leave him down the

road for someone who did get a degree and can offer her a better future. Or the couple that marries before college because she got pregnant. Or the young drug addict that will, statistically speaking, almost certainly have a complicated and painful future and will carry an extra load all his life...

But it's a lesson that adults must learn as well. We are always tempted to focus only on the present. Some people think the lottery will make them rich. But the odds are against them. I subscribe to the financial strategy of delayed gratification. Anybody can get rich if they put a little bit of money aside for a long time.

Brothers and sisters, be astute, shrewd as Jacob, my friends. Delayed gratification usually brings benefits. The consequences of instant gratification and impulsive decisions can be as costly as that bowl of lentil soup which price is astonishing, thousand of years later...

We build character by delayed gratification. You can't get a positive reputation overnight. It requires doing for others rather than doing for yourself. It requires service rather than self-service.

Esau probably understood the effects that his bad decision had in his own life, but he had no clue of the impact on his millions of descendants though thousands of years ahead...

I wonder if you are on the rocks today, climbing for your life. As you move from one foothold to another, you will come to times when you are faced with the "commitment move." Christ calls us to make commitments that will stand well for all of eternity.

I pray that you will have the shrewdness of Jacob instead of the impulsiveness of Esau in those decisions that affect your lives here on earth and the lives of the people around you, but very especially, in those decisions that affect eternity!

I like quotes because they help me remember key concepts or ideas, so I made one of my own to share with you, hoping that it will help us remember this message...

A known quote by Hanna More is:

“Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off the goal”
Likewise,

“Temptations are those luring things you feel when you take your focus off the Lord”
Rodolfo Rodriguez

Lets pray...