

“What Words Are Worth”

Genesis 25:27-34

August 8, 2021

Read Genesis 25:27-34

This is the Word of the LORD

Prayer of Invocation

What’s the big deal about a birthright? What is the big deal about the promise of stuff and a few words spoken?

As it turns out, treasuring a promise is a *big* deal.

We are looking at the early story of Jacob and Esau. It among the Bible’s first “compare and contrast” essays. In their births, they are compared and contrasted. Esau was the stronger, Jacob grasped onto his heel. Esau was all hairy and red; Jacob was smaller and had smooth skin. In their lives, they were compared and contrasted. Esau was a hunter, Jacob a man of the tents. As we consider God’s election and how that was manifest within the context of history, we have to see how different were the boys.

The Bible is remarkable in the precision and accuracy with which it describes the human condition. In just a few words the Bible writers gave us rich, complex pictures of the people through whom God was working. The pictures were not always flattering – which is true in life, too. In my family growing up, my sister hated having her picture taken. This was back in the days of film – when you had to go to the Fotomat booth (like the Dutch Bros Coffee drive-ups) to drop off your roll and then pick them up. Because my sister hated having her picture taken so much, we a gallery of still-life studies of her hand (blocking the camera) in our family albums. But the Bible looks past the hand, looks past the facades humans put on in order to please one another and shows us how we really are.

Differences in People

There are a number of different things going on in this text. First, the narrator was spelling out how God’s prophetic description was being fulfilled in the lives of Esau and Jacob. Remember, when Rebekah was pregnant, she was having a difficult time and inquired of the LORD,

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.”

Second, the narrator was revealing a shared impression of how Abraham’s family viewed themselves and their neighbors. For the most part, Esau more directly represented and resembled physically the people who lived near the Jews, whereas Jacob was seen more as the prototype for

the Jews. Esau was depicted as gruff, rude, uncouth, wild, undisciplined, rough, and violent. Jacob was depicted as more cultured, sophisticated, more polished, and more shrewd. Jacob was more the settled farmer, Esau the hunter.

Last week, I made reference to the Smother's Brothers' running joke of "Mom always liked you best!" Well, that seemed to be the case with the Abrahamson boys. Isaac loved Esau better because he enjoyed the meat the gifted hunter provided. Rebekah loved Jacob. Why? No reason is provided, but perhaps it was the promise.

Note here: Rebekah had the word from the LORD about the differences between the boys and how Jacob was going to be favored. Isaac remained a fairly passive presence in his own life and in his own home. The impression given – whether valid or not – was that Isaac was successful enough in human terms, but was not a particularly gifted, charismatic, powerful, or remarkable individual. He was an ordinary guy. Rebekah was the strong one in this marriage. Yet, it was Isaac through whom the promise would be confirmed and realized.

This is important to remember when we start comparing ourselves to other Christians. Most people are not Billy Graham; and most people point to Billy Graham as one of the greatest Christians of our age. Now, with no disrespect to Dr. Graham or the ministry he was given, the truth is we do not know that God took greater pleasure in Billy Graham's ministry than He does when any one of us reach out in compassion to a neighbor or stand up for justice for a stranger.

We each have a different calling, different gifts, different opportunities; and all these differences add up to the unique lives we have been given. For any of us who have sought to excuse ourselves from sharing a witness by thinking (or saying), "I am not Billy Graham." God called and gifted Billy Graham to be Billy Graham – and Billy Graham was not called or gifted to speak into the moment *you* have been given to share *your* testimony. He could not have done it for you. You cannot delegate the responsibility to be a witness.

On the other hand, you can take some comfort in that God has not put you in a place to speak to thousands, and tens of thousands - because I hear from many of you that you fear public speaking more than death. The point here is this: God uses whom he chooses, and it is not always the most popular, most charismatic, most articulate person around. Sometimes he chooses the ordinary guy who does nothing remarkable and is simply riding through life. Isaac is the poster boy for God's sovereignty working through an ordinary guy – despite (and perhaps because of) his tendency to just go along.

It is important we seek to bear the fruit of faithfulness; however, we cannot use others to measure. We cannot compare our own lives of faith with others – it does not work. We cannot measure blessing and faithfulness based upon human achievement and effort. We can be encouraged by the example of others, and we must seek to be faithful to God's specific calling in our own lives, but comparing our lives to others to see how we stack up? It is an exercise of folly. Isaac was as God intended. What about you? Are you the person God intended you to be – even if that means there is nothing particularly heroic or dramatic about your life? This is not an invitation to be spiritually inert; rather it is a challenge to be in communication with God to discern his will for you. Are you willing to be faithful in following God's call – no matter what it is; great or small?

The Trade

Back to the story. It is actually a fairly simple story to understand. The boys had grown into their teens or early twenties. Esau came back from the hunt hungry. Jacob “happened” (in air quotes because, as we will discuss in a moment, he may or may not have been angling for this very encounter) Jacob “happened” to be cooking a stew; something that smelled tremendous. There is a play on words that we lose in English, all centering around Esau’s redness. The stew looked red, which probably looked like Blood Soup, a delicacy and something really special. Esau blustered his way over, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished.”

Now, we do not know – and the narrator does not specifically say – whether Jacob was planning for this all along or if he was shrewdly opportunistic. However, you do not have to read too deeply to realize something was on his mind because his immediate response revealed his great desire, “First sell me your birthright.”

The birthright was a big deal. The birthright was special because it was attached to the son who was considered the first fruits of his father’s strength. He was privileged during the father’s lifetime. Then, at the father’s death, he received twice as much in inheritance as any other brother.

It was not uncommon in their region for brothers to buy and sell birthrights among each other. Whether Esau thought he was serious or whether he appreciated what Jacob was doing is unknown, but he gave a non-answer, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob realized he had Esau on the hook and pressed his advantage. He insisted that Esau swear to him; making binding the transaction – Jacob would trade what was in the pot for Esau’s birthright.

Esau swore. Jacob handed over the food, which the narrator points out was bread and lentil stew – which was not anything special, not anything particularly substantive, not anything remarkable, and certainly not worth the bargain Esau made. The narrator reported that Esau ate and drank, and rose and went his way. From the internal telling of this story, we get the sense that Esau was ok with this whole deal. However, that seems to be misleading. Prior to the meal, Esau was chatty and verbose; afterwards, silent. What happened?

What happened was that Esau must have realized the error of his choice. He sold with an oath his birthright for a pot of stew; that is, by his irresponsible behavior toward the choice Jacob offered, Esau actually despised himself and God.

Friends, Esau manifested a typical response to sinful behavior. Whatever captivated our lust, our attention, our idolization; once it is sated, we realize how temporary and insufficient it is and what a high price we have paid. There really are no words in those moments. Esau was not hungry any longer – for the time being. He would be hungry again, but he would no longer be privileged. He despised himself and, as we will see, despised his brother.

When we take a blessing for granted, or when we forget the blessing in which we are sustained, we despise ourselves and end up despising others. When that blessing is taken away – either by our own conduct or by something outside our control – we feel the pain of loss.

What happens when something we value is taken away?

One of my favorite writers is James Lileks, who is a columnist for the Minneapolis Star-Tribune. (The internet has made writers like Lileks available to a much wider audience.) He writes a daily column for his site, entitled “The Bleat.” Think along the lines of Garrison Keillor’s “Prairie Home Companion” as a style. It is an ongoing narrative of the weather, the growth of his daughter Natalie, and whatever adventures life throws at him. It is like reading a really entertaining diary.

He once wrote a piece entitled, “Sun, Water, Weeds and Trees.” There had been an ongoing battle between the author and a water feature he had installed in his back yard.

I’m up at the Water Feature, watching the water level. Phone rings; I look at the display and see my dad’s picture. “Well, hey there. What’s up?”

My cousin was killed in a head-on collision coming back from his cabin.

And I’m standing there, with a roll of duct tape in one hand, which I drop, and then I sit.

That’s about all I know right now.

I don’t know where they get the idea that you react to bad news with disbelief. My father said it was so, then it was so. I hung up and thought of the last time I’d seen him: his father’s funeral, just a few months ago. Before that, his nephew’s funeral. I thought of his brother, who has lost a son, father, and a brother in the space of two years. The horror widens as it spins.

When we last talked it was after the funeral; he was sitting at the piano. He’d played for the service. He was an excellent musician, a natural, but it was a hobby; his job was seed genetics. One son stayed on the farm to raise the crops, and the other went off to invent new ones. It was the same tiny rural church where most of the family funerals have been, one of those places where you fear the population in the pews decreases as the population in the graveyard behind the church grows and grows, a bumper crop of stone.

So.

Now I’m sitting here in the backyard with a cup of coffee, thinking back: afternoons at the farm as a kid, playing with the cousins. Staying overnight, maybe going on combining, coming back to shower in the basement with Lava soap to get off the dust. Playing the violin while he played the piano, serenading Grandpa. Going to the room he had in the other house. See, he grew up in a house next to his father’s childhood home, and that’s where Grandma and Grandpa lived. The new house was a rambler. The old house was a big old farmhouse with additions and deletions, and it had seen seventy years by the time we were kids. There was a room upstairs, at the end of a hall piled with old cast-off clothes and household items, and no one used it. Old bed with sagging springs, musty smell, a Victrola with those railroad-spike needles. Bruce set up a hideaway there at some point, as kids do; we all want a second secret room. He could see his house from the window. Must have been cool, and I probably envied him for having such a place. He was older and taller, and you know how you look up to people like that when you’re young.

The house was demolished years ago. My other cousin built a house on the other side of the property. I think he can see his old home, too, because the old farmhouse doesn't block the way. If you'd never been there, you might never know there was a house there at all, until you looked at the trees: the ground had no trees for a broad square area, and the trees on the perimeter had grown up around something, and their branches almost described the thing that was no longer there. You notice something when it's there, of course, but for the rest of your life you can remember it by the space it left empty when it went away for good.

Lileks, The Bleat, Monday, April 19, 2010. www.lileks.com

What a line: "You notice something when it's there, of course, but for the rest of your life you can remember it by the space it left empty when it went away for good." The old farmhouse, the cousin, the promise of the birthright; all of these things, "for the rest of your life you can remember it by the space it left empty when it went away for good."

The Value of a Promise

Esau's comment "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" deserves some reflection.

Of what value is God's promise? How do you see it? How important is it to understand our participation in God's covenants? Jesus talked about this in parables.

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place." (Matthew 13:44-53 NRSV)

How do you value your faith? What would it take for you to walk away or bargain it? What is your pot of stew?

Circumstances? If times were tough – if you lost your finances, you lost a special relationship, or if you lost your health – would you trade your faith to get it back?

Future uncertainty? If you were promised health and vitality and activity and sound mind until the very moment of your death at an old age, would you make the Faustian bargain and make that trade?

Peer pressure? If someone challenged you about your faith, saying that the promises of Christ are myth, foolish, and intolerant, would it shake you? Would you be prepared to defend the hope found within you or would you try to deny it and just get away?

Friends, God's promised blessing – adoption as a child of the King of kings, Lord of lords, citizens of the eternal Kingdom of God – that promised blessing is more than just words. It is the hope of our salvation to those who believe. It is the only treasure worth having, the only life worth living.

Conclusion

If you are a little unsettled this morning, good. It is good to take a critical look at your life to see if you are prioritizing the right things; to see if you are taking God's grace for granted and treating it as something to be bargained away on the cheap. If you are wondering whether you are like Jacob – scheming and waiting and angling to obtain the blessing of God's promise with every moment – *or* – like Esau who simply gave it away; good.

God's promises are good. Do not take God's promises for granted and act as if they are a commodity to be traded away; instead, seek first the Kingdom of God and all these other things will be added unto you. Rejoice, give thanks, and set your eyes on Him.

Amen.

Prayer

#275 How Firm A Foundation

Questions:

1. How much do you value the promises of God? How much does the promise of your faith mean to you? Where and how has it been challenged – what has been offered for you to give it up?
2. What are the fruits of faithfulness in your life? Where and how have you seen God work through you? (I am not asking you to brag to others; rather, ask God to reveal these things to you.)
3. Do you see someone else struggling with their faith – whether because of circumstances, future uncertainty, or peer pressure? How can you offer a word of encouragement or an act of support?