

Jacob takes the birthright  
Genesis 25:19-34

Introduction

There are elements of the story of Jacob that sound strange to us because of the ancient Eastern setting and customs, but underneath the surface, the issues and the lessons to be learnt are remarkably up to date. People grasp hands across the centuries, and we soon find ourselves in the story.

This story is interesting for several reasons. We meet Jacob for the first time. He was a typical Jew. His other name was Israel, and so his direct descendants were the Israelites. (Though Abraham was the founder of the Jewish race, there were other nations descended from him, e.g. the Ishmaelites, so the descendants of Jacob narrow down the heredity to the Jewish people.)

Jews, besides being very spiritual people, have a reputation for being crafty and loving money. We see this in the extreme in Jacob. He was scheming and deceitful, yet he did have a deep spirituality. Like them, he went into exile, but still had a deep love for his home country.

His life speaks to us very forcefully. His many failures, compromises and craftiness are in contrast to his longings and vows desiring something better. We all have “Bethels”, where we meet God. He had family trouble and sorrows that we can relate to. Things did not go smoothly in his home. But we are encouraged as we see the grace of God in this human life. God never worked with more unpromising material!

When we first meet Jacob, he is a most unattractive, indeed repulsive character. But step-by-step divine grace works in him, disciplining, moulding, shaping, till the deceiver becomes “Israel” – “the prince with God”. And God can do the same kind of transformation in any life.

Esau and Jacob compared

It is amazing the way children in the same family, with the same parents, even if twins, can be completely different. The same home life, the same example, the same teaching, but they react in different ways and go in different directions. The contrast between Jacob and Esau was foretold before their birth, but was evident soon after birth, and the gap broadened as the years went by.

They differed in appearance. Esau was rough, ruddy, hairy and had great bodily strength. He enjoyed an adventurous and exciting life. Jacob was the reverse – smooth skinned, dark in features, slightly built, no match in physical strength for his strong athletic brother. But more than a match in craftiness.

They differed in interests. Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field and chase. Jacob loved the home life. He was a plain man dwelling in tents, not interested in the

outward-bound kind of life. He was content to look after the flocks and herds, and enjoyed a quiet pastoral life.

They differed in character. There was much which was attractive in Esau. He was impetuous but generous, rash but frank. He would have made splendid company. He was every inch a man and an extrovert. Not much depth, but harmless enough. Jacob, on the other hand, was quiet. And beneath his calm exterior there were real depths. He was capable of craft and deceit. He was also capable of spiritual devotion and faith. He could look beyond the material to the spiritual, beyond the temporal to the eternal. It is interesting that Esau was Isaac's favourite, and Jacob was Rebekah's favourite.

The differences were supremely seen in their attitude to the birthright. For bread and lentil stew Esau was ready to barter away his birthright because he was desperately hungry and all that mattered to him was a good meal. Jacob was more far seeing. He had his eyes on that birthright. He knew its value, seized his chance, took advantage of his brother's weakness and got exactly what he wanted.

What was the birthright? It was not worldly prosperity, because though he lost it, Esau did have a great fortune. He had all this world could give him. Neither did the birthright mean immunity from sorrow, for though Jacob gained it, he had plenty of sorrow – exile, family troubles, a sad and weary life. The birthright was mainly a spiritual heritage. It was the right of being a priest in the family, and revealer and teacher of God's secrets and will. It meant being the head of the tribe, and therefore receiving a double portion of the father's inheritance. And it meant being a direct link in the line of descent whereby the Messiah would be born. So the birthright wielded power with God and with men. It made him part of the spiritual aristocracy of mankind. (C.f. the Christian birthright – redemption through Christ, new birth by the Holy Spirit, joint heirs with Christ.)

#### Lessons to be learnt from Esau

Here is a real note of warning to us. The New Testament spells it out very clearly to us. **See that no one is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son** (Hebrews 12:16). How many have thrown away and despised the possibilities of blessing and blessedness, great talents, deep Christian teaching, noble inheritance, the opportunities of usefulness in God's service, for selfish indulgence, for some immediate advantage. If only people, at a crucial moment, had put a hand on their shoulder and said, "Is this wise?" "Think where it will lead."

Instead, on an impulse, they have started a habit, which eventually enslaved them, a friendship which took them away from the things of God, a relationship that ended in a disastrous marriage. Small things, things of the moment, can bring a great challenge and test of character.

Esau was ravenously hungry. But he could have waited a bit longer. Instead, he must have his meal now, and he would give anything for it, even though it meant a change to his future. This wasn't even a great crisis in his life involving a difficult decision – it was something so trivial as a quick bite to eat. How often small things have had enormous consequences – one moment of passion, one look, one page in a book, one movement, one chance meeting, one question, one answer. There are no trifles in life,

even the Christian's life. From the smallest seed can spring a great harvest for good or ill.

Behind Esau's fatal decision was the real reason – as far as we can see, God had no place in his life. He was earth-bound. What mattered to him was what he could see and touch. The spiritual life was of no consequence. The world was everything, God was nothing. He lived for the material and physical, not the moral. He wanted present gratification, not spiritual values. Many today have everything the world can offer in terms of wealth, material possessions, good position, and they also have lovely personalities and natural gifts – but they lack the one thing that is needful – God and His Christ.

Esau warns us about the importance of knowing God and ensuring He is in the right place every day of our lives. Otherwise our lives are pointing in the wrong direction. And in the little things we will make wrong choices with fatal consequences. When God is not only present but also pre-eminent, all else is in its proper place – purpose of life, power to live, peace of heart and progress in the things that really matter.

#### Lessons to be learnt from Jacob

Let's begin with a reminder. It was God's purpose from the beginning that the birthright and superior position should go to Jacob, though he was the younger of the two. Before the birth, **the 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."** (Genesis 25:23). Jacob with everyone else must have known this. But Jacob could not wait for God's timing. He made his own plans to seize the birthright as soon as he could. So this was one of the earliest, but unhappily not the last, occasion when people acted in the belief that the end justifies the means.

Jacob was right in wanting spiritual blessings as God purposed. But he was wrong in getting his hands on them the way he did. The right ends must be accomplished by the right means. How important it is to wait for God – and how difficult. The problem is that God's clock keeps different time from ours. Jacob should have waited for God's time and God's way. God would have been glorified and he would have saved himself much trouble and shame, and his family much bitterness.

How like Jacob we are. We take God at His word, yet we do not wait for God's time. The result is sorrow and trouble for ourselves and others. **Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him** (Psalm 37:7). **I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry** (Psalm 40:1). **Imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised** (Hebrews 6:12). This is so difficult. We are tempted to outrun Him, and force the pace of His plans. We need to believe that what God has promised He is able to perform. For all his grasping, God did not allow Jacob to actually possess the birthright till a long time afterwards, when Esau formally abandoned it. **Esau took his wives and sons and daughters and all the members of his household, as well as his livestock and all his other animals and all the goods he had acquired in Canaan, and moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob** (Genesis 36:6).

God can carry out His purposes without our helping Him through deceit and cleverness. The only guarantee of true living is when God is in the heart and life as supreme. Then daily, walk closely to Him. Christ must be in the heart as Saviour, in the conscience as Master, and in the life as Lord. Then we will enjoy all that God has for us.

### Conclusion

At the Northfield Conference on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1910, a meeting was held in honour of Dr.A.T.Pierson. During the meeting he repeated rules and promises tested in his own experience. These four scriptures had influenced his life:

- **Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked ... but his delight is in the law of the Lord** (Psalm 1:1,2). The sole secret of prosperity and peace – to meditate on God’s Word.
- **In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight** (Proverbs 3:6). Never make a plan without seeking God’s guidance. Never achieve success without giving Him praise.
- **But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness** (Matthew 6:33). Put God first. Then you will lack nothing.
- **If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out** (John 7:17). You can know God’s will if you are willing to do it.

Pierson concluded by saying, “After more than fifty years of closest study and experience, I can say that it pays to be a follower of God.”