

Genesis 25D (2011)

- Who will inherit the promises and blessing contained in the birthright of Isaac?
 - Will it be the older, Esau?
 - The natural choice according to the world's expectations
 - He's the skilled hunter whom his father prefers because of his desire for wild game
 - Or will it be the younger, Jacob?
 - The one God has said will receive the birthright
 - The peaceful, blameless child that Rebekah loves
 - Since the father has the right to choose who receives the birthright, it would seem that God's preference doesn't stand a fighting chance
 - Isaac is likely to choose Esau for the birthright in keeping with custom and his preference for Esau
 - But God told Rebekah that the birthright shall be Jacob's, and she knows her husband isn't inclined to follow this command
- So today we witness the first step of how God resolves this dilemma

[Gen. 25:29](#) When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished;

[Gen. 25:30](#) and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom.

- Jacob was in the tent, cooking a stew, when Esau came in from the field
 - Here again our stereotypes are working against us
 - Do you imagine Jacob wearing an apron?
 - Do you assume Esau is taller?
 - In your mind's eye you see start to assign subtle meaning to each person's actions and words
 - But let's stick to the text
 - Esau comes into the tent with great hunger

- The Hebrew word for famished means “faint” as in weak
- His hunger is so great that he has reached a point of being faint
- No surprise there...working in the field will produce that kind of result
 - In fact, you might remember God’s curse on the ground
 - God told Adam that you will toil all the days of your life in working the ground
 - By the sweat of your face you will eat bread
 - Our physical labor and difficulty in sustaining ourselves by working the land is a result of God’s curse
- So Esau has entered the tent suffering from the physical consequences of the curse of Adam’s sin
- And Jacob has the potential to solve Esau’s physical problem
 - Jacob has been cooking a meal, probably for himself
 - The stew is called “red stuff” in our English text, because the literal Hebrew is simply “red red”
 - The term is literally adom edom, which explains how the name Edom came from Esau
 - But that connection becomes a point of shame for Esau and his descendants
 - Esau didn’t even know what kind of food it was...he was simply hungry and he knew his body needed food
- On one level, this moment resembles normal, daily life in every family
 - And if the situation had gone no farther, we wouldn’t even be talking about it
 - It wouldn’t be recorded in Scripture
 - But of course that’s not where it ended

- Before we look at what follows, consider the circumstances of nomadic life in that day
 - Isaac inherited all the wealth of Abraham, so he would have had a large family settlement
 - He had herds, servants, maids, and other possessions
 - He would have had many tents in an encampment
 - Part of that encampment included maids and servants responsible for cooking and washing and attending to the basic needs of Isaac and his family and his working men
- So as Esau comes in from the field, he could have expected a meal to be served at the end of that day
 - Esau wasn't required to find his own meal or go hungry
 - He only had to wait for the normal meal time, when the entire encampment would have been fed
- Why was Jacob cooking then?
 - One explanation is simply that Jacob was assisting in the preparation of food as a part of his working in the camp
 - Or perhaps he had decided to prepare his own meal apart from the normal meal service
 - In either case, Jacob's stew was not the only source of food in the camp
- Esau doesn't want to wait for his meal
 - Esau doesn't have a pantry of ready-made food for snacking
 - And the process of food preparation takes time and effort, much more so than we know today
 - So Jacob's food provides a quicker solution
- When Esau requests the food, he asks in a very unique way
 - The Hebrew word for swallow is an uncommon word
 - It means a greedy gulp, and the Hebrew word never appears again in Scripture

- It conveys a sense that Esau was so driven by his flesh, so greedy that it had reached the point he was willing to stuff the food down his throat in a grotesque way
- So Jacob senses that Esau is completely consumed by the needs of his flesh, and so he suggests that they should enter into a bargain over the food

[Gen. 25:31](#) But Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.”

[Gen. 25:32](#) Esau said, “Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?”

- Jacob makes an offer: I will give you what you want if you give me what I want
 - Esau can have the stew if he sells Jacob his birthright
 - This is a bizarre deal of course
 - Who would sell their birthright for anything so worthless?
 - Let’s be clear on what Jacob is suggesting
 - Esau is the firstborn, and therefore he held the birthright
 - Later in the Law, God codified the eastern tradition

[Deut. 21:17](#) “But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn.

- So, the birthright entitled Esau to a double portion of the father’s inheritance
 - He had a double portion of the father’s inheritance, the land, the servants, the livestock, etc.
 - In Isaac’s case the birthright also entitled the son to inherit God’s covenant blessings and promises
 - These promises were all-or-nothing
 - They could not be divided between sons, at least not at this point
 - Finally, by tradition the oldest also became the patriarch in the family and all other family members in the clan must serve him and answer to his authority

- So Jacob is suggesting that Esau trade all of that for a bowl of stew
 - If Esau agrees, he will no longer receive the double portion of the land
 - He will no longer be the leader of the clan
 - He will not receive God's promises in the covenant
- So, naturally Esau laughs at Jacob's suggestion and turns it down instantly
 - Amazingly, Esau responds by saying "I am about to die, so what good is my birthright"
 - Taken one way, Esau's comments are literally true
 - If the oldest son dies prior to the father's transfer of the inheritance, then he gains nothing from his birthright
 - The birthright would have transferred to Jacob anyway
 - Nevertheless, Esau's response is bizarre because he wasn't in danger of dying
 - We need to read his response with a sarcastic tone
 - We've all heard something similar in our family lives
 - Children who complain that they are going to "die" unless they eat something immediately
 - Esau's suggestion is something of the same...I'm "dying" of hunger
 - So Esau's response indicates he's willing to agree to Jacob's terms
 - What caused Jacob to even think that Esau would have made such a trade?
 - Would you even consider walking next door to your neighbor's house carrying a bowl of Texas chili and suggesting that they sell their house to you in exchange for a bowl of chili?
 - Even if you make the best Texas chili, it's still not something you're likely to do because you wouldn't expect someone to actually agree to those terms
 - The only way you might try something so ridiculous is if you had some reason to suspect the person might make such a deal

- So apparently, Jacob knew something about his brother's view of the birthright
- So let's see how this deal goes down

[Gen. 25:33](#) And Jacob said, "First swear to me"; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.

[Gen. 25:34](#) Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

- Jacob says swear to me first
 - The literal Hebrew reads swear to me today
 - We start to form a picture in our mind of how the scene played out
 - After Jacob suggested the deal, Esau made his flippant, exaggerated comment and then he probably reached for the stew
 - Maybe Jacob pulled the bowl back just out of reach
 - And then he said swear this to me today
 - Jacob knew that words are cheap
 - If Esau was even willing to consider this offer, Jacob needed to make it official now
 - In that culture, swearing an oath was a solemn, serious commitment
 - To swear an oath and then go back on your word was punishable by death
 - And people didn't lie over making such agreements either
 - Jacob's testimony concerning Esau's oath would have been enough to make the deal binding
 - So the text confirms that Esau took the oath and the birthright became Jacob's
 - In the ancient eastern culture, a son could sell his birthright to another son

- So this was a legitimate transaction, and the patriarch would have been bound to respect the transaction
- In v.24 we see the transaction completed
 - Esau gained what he wanted and rose up and went his way
 - He gives not a second thought for the birthright and what he traded for the meal
 - How can we explain Esau's behavior?
 - Let's assume for the moment he's not mentally ill or a complete idiot, since Scripture doesn't suggest this is the issue
 - So what would cause Esau to make such a deal?
 - There are two possible explanations
 - First, we might assume that Esau didn't think this arrangement would be binding
 - Perhaps he thought that this deal wouldn't hold in the end and their father Isaac would still give him the birthright in the end
 - Therefore, Esau was playing along here to get the stew without a real expectation the birthright would be transferred
 - There is a problem with this view
 - First, scripture testified that the birthright was transferred at this moment by means of an oath
 - When Jacob insisted on an oath, Esau knew this was binding
 - Both parties understood that a real deal was done
 - Secondly, we get confirmation from Esau himself that the birthright was transferred in this moment

Gen. 27:36 Then he said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing."

- We'll study this moment in a week to come, but Esau's statement makes clear that he knew that in this moment, he traded his birthright to Jacob

- So if Esau knew this was a binding transfer, why did he do it?
 - Logically, the only answer we have left is that Esau considered the stew more valuable than the birthright
 - How little regard would Esau have for his birthright if he felt it was less valuable than a bowl of stew?
 - We get our answer in v.34 when we're told that Esau despised his birthright
 - The word for despised is to have contempt or disdain for it
 - We have a phrase in English that says much the same thing
 - We say "I couldn't care less"
- Why did Esau despise something so valuable?
 - Let's consider what he understood he would inherit
 - The birthright gave him a double portion of his father's property
 - But Isaac owned very little in the land
 - He had tents, servants and herds
 - But Esau was a man of the field
 - What was he going to do with tents, sheep and the like?
 - He wanted land and Dad owned none
 - A double portion of his father's estate was of no greater value than a regular portion
 - Remember we asked how Jacob might have expected Esau to agree to such a dumb deal
 - And now we see why: Jacob knew his brother held his father's inheritance in low regard
 - But there is the matter of the right to rule over the clan and assume the role of patriarch

- In traditional terms, the right to rule over the clan was transferred by the patriarch in the form of a blessing upon the patriarch's deathbed
 - When the patriarch was nearing the end of his life, he would pronounce a blessing on each child
 - The blessing included the pronouncement of who would take his place as the pre-eminent member of the family and the leader of the clan
- This blessing had the force of law, and not even the patriarch could change it once it was pronounced
 - Think of it like the resignation of President Nixon and the the transition of power to President Ford
 - Even if Nixon had desired to change his mind and return to the Oval Office, he couldn't have done
 - The power had been transferred and he was no longer able to claim the office
- So Esau probably assumed that Isaac would still assign him the chief blessing of the family, even though the double portion of the inheritance had been sold to Jacob
- Finally, what about Esau's loss of God's promises
 - Isaac has certainly communicated to his sons that his inheritance includes the promises of God
 - These promises are the real treasure of Isaac's inheritance
 - In fact, the reason Isaac has no land or worthwhile inheritance to offer Esau is precisely because Isaac has placed all his trust and expectation in the future inheritance God has promised
 - Esau had no regard for the covenant, because he didn't believe in God's promises
 - Esau couldn't accept that Abraham and Isaac had trusted in the right thing
 - He was so flesh-driven, the thought of a good meal mattered more to him than the word of God

- In a word, Esau had no faith in God's promises, and it meant he despised – couldn't care less about – that inheritance
 - And since even the earthly inheritance was meaningless to him, he willingly traded it away
- What would you say if I walked up to you and suggested we make a bargain similar to the one Jacob and Esau made
 - I will give you a nice meal or perhaps a nice watch or even a nice car or beautiful house
 - In fact, I will give you all these things
 - But in exchange, I want the future inheritance you stand to receive upon the day Christ enters into His earthly kingdom
 - Would you make that deal?
 - Wouldn't your answer depend on what you believed about the Bible's teaching concerning eternal inheritance?
 - Wouldn't it depend on your faith in God's promises when He says

1Cor. 2:6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away;

1Cor. 2:7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory;

1Cor. 2:8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory;

1Cor. 2:9 but just as it is written,

**"THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD,
AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN,
ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."**

- If you are saved by grace, a child of God, a believer in Jesus Christ and the promises God has made to you by His Son, then you wouldn't trade that inheritance for the world
 - But if you view the promises in God's word as meaningless words in a worthless book
 - If you cannot trust in God and do not see Him as faithful, then you have nothing to lose by making that trade

- You would repeat the words of Esau, when he said what good are these things if I die
 - The unbeliever's heart only knows this world, the here-and-now, the things they see and touch
 - And death brings an end to all these things, and they have no hope for anything more to come
 - So all their trust remains in this world
 - There are no plans for eternity, no investment to be made in that future life, no hope for something better
 - So they take all that they can now in trade for that future, because when I die, there will be nothing left for me
- The believer is called to think and act in opposite ways
 - We are reminded that nothing in this life is worth trading for the inheritance to come
 - In fact, we do the opposite
 - We willingly trade everything in this life – like Abraham and Isaac did – to ensure our inheritance in the world to come
 - We believe in God's promises, we trust in God's faithfulness
 - We live by faith

[Matt. 13:44](#) "The kingdom of heaven is like a **treasure** hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

- Next week, we'll move on in the story, but we'll come back to this story in Chapter 27, to consider where God's purposes fit into these events