

I HAVE LOVED JACOB

by

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CHAPTER TWO

THE BIRTHRIGHT

MANY writers are ruthless in condemning Jacob's "heartlessness" in taking advantage of Esau's famished condition. They ignore the facts that grandfather Abraham had three hundred or more servants, and that Isaac surely had as many, and that there was not the slightest danger of Esau starving, or even suffering from hunger.

Historically, the birthright, the right of primogeniture, was not strictly observed among the Hebrews of that period, but was a gracious gift of a loving God, and He gave it to whomsoever He would. He gave it to Isaac, the second son, notwithstanding Abraham's prayer on behalf of Ishmael, the firstborn; He gave it to the second son, Jacob, in spite of Isaac's preference for Esau. Judah, a fourth son, received it, as also did Judah's fourth son. Neither David nor Solomon was the firstborn, but each was made the recipient of its prerogatives by God's explicit command. It can plainly be seen that instead of Esau being cheated out of his birthright, he got the better of Jacob by selling him something that already belonged to him! Yet Esau has received a great deal of undeserved sympathy.

The Eternal Purposes of God

Another stubborn consideration the critics ignore in their eager desire to make Jacob appear as despicable as possible, is that if it had been God's will to choose Esau, then Isaac's blessing would have been valueless to Jacob, and God would have punished him instead of blessing him through a long, useful and righteous life.

It has been argued, speciously we think, that since God had intended all along for Jacob to have the birthright blessing, Jacob did wrong in conniving to gain it by his own effort. But the answer is, how do you know that the method used by Rebekah and Jacob was not the method God had long before pre-ordained? Who are you to judge God, or God's ways?

When God rejected the first choice of Samuel among the sons of Jesse, He said to Samuel, "**Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart**" (I Samuel 16:7). Beneath the surface attractiveness of Esau, was a mean and shallow soul. While in Jacob God saw one of the great souls of the ages.

Esau did not care for God. The New Testament calls him a profane person, “**Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright**” (Hebrews 12:16).

We use “profane” as though it had only to do with speech. Here it refers to the kind of life a man lives. “**Profane**” literally means “*outside the sphere of religious things*.” That was the kind of life Esau lived. He did not care for God or for religion, and had nothing to do with either. When the family of Isaac assembled about the altar and the patriarch looked out over the group, there was always one empty place. Esau was not there.

Turn now to Jacob, whom God accepted. God loved him because he valued the birthright. He wanted it more than anything else. When it came to a choice between his father’s wealth or his father’s religion, he unhesitatingly chose the religion, and went out from his home empty-handed. Esau had the material riches. Jacob had the spiritual blessing. Does any of us doubt today as to which was the richer?

Just How Selfish Was Jacob?

In negotiating for the birthright, which openly entitled him to the blessing, Jacob risked the accusation of being selfish; but he proved this to be wrong by leaving for Esau all that Esau really cared for, and later by increasing Esau’s wealth with a present of 580 head of the finest livestock. Esau, being thus assured that Jacob was not going to claim his rights in the temporary inheritance, was satisfied; which only proves the place and condition of Esau’s heart.

Analyze the Actual Transaction

We read in Genesis 25:29, “**And Jacob sod pottage.**” He cooked a meal. The next verse tells us that it was red pottage, showing that he was doing something that Esau as the first-born child should have been doing.

It was customary on a certain day of the year for the first-born son, as the priest of the family, to seethe this red pottage and place it on the grave of Abraham. Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein in his “*Bible Comments for Home Reading*,” has the following to say with regard to this custom:

“According to the Rabbis, on that day Abraham died; and as is the custom and has ever been, the first meal after the burial is provided for by those who are not mourners themselves. This food is generally round-shaped to symbolize that the wheel of death is turning around, and eventually reaches every one. Hence Jacob had to boil the food, which could not be done by his parents.”

We summarize from Jewish Talmudic writings:

“But Esau, instead of performing this duty, was off hunting, while Jacob, for the sake of the family, was doing what only the first-born was supposed to do. No doubt Jacob was going forward with the work of seething the pottage, hoping his brother would make his appearance later.

“But Esau came in from the field apparently half-famished, with no interest outside of satisfying the craving of his fallen, carnal nature. He said, ‘**Feed me, I pray thee, with this same red pottage, for I am faint.**’ Jacob said then, ‘**Sell me this day thy birthright.**’ He might have added—if I am to do this in your stead—because only as the first-born am I entitled to perform this office.’ It had to be done by the first-born, and, I understand, fasting.

But Esau despised his birth-right, as we are told in the Word, (Genesis 25:34) and sold it for ‘**a mess of pottage.**’

After eating and drinking and satisfying his hunger, he ‘**rose up and went his way**’ . . . caring only for his own selfish pleasure and enjoyment.”

And so Jacob bought the birthright from Esau and paid for it. It was an open and honest business transaction. Gullible indeed would be he who would believe that Esau was on the verge of a hunger-collapse!

Within ten or fifteen minutes, he could have cooked something for himself from what he had shot in the field, sufficient to appease his hunger. The Word of God states, “**And Esau despised his birthright.**”

Jacob had respect for the promises of God, while Esau despised them. Jacob was not buying fortune, but seeking the blessing of the promises given to Abraham and Isaac. Few people seem to understand that the blessing he sought was not material wealth, but the right of Messianic succession. Either from Jacob, or from Esau, must run the Messianic line. To be the forebear of the Messiah, Jacob was ready to pay any price. So we have an exhibition of Jacob’s faith and Esau’s profanity.

“To Have and To Hold”

The moment Jacob had paid for this birthright, it was his forever. This is just as true as would be the case if you bought and paid for a title deed to a piece of property; from that time forward the property is absolutely yours. It is important to stress this, because this forms the basis which made it possible later for Jacob to say to his father, “**I am Esau thy first born.**”

And when he said this, he told the truth, for he had bought and paid for the right to say so. It was Esau who had the audacity still to claim to be the older son —Esau, the rascal, who only a short while ago had sold the birthright and now wanted to deny the bargain. What a shiftless welcher!

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