

“THE HIGH COST OF A BOWL OF STEW” **(Genesis 25:27-34)**

This morning we are continuing our study of the life of Jacob and come to one of the most well-known stories of his life that actually has more to do with his brother Esau than Jacob. The title of today’s message is: The high cost of a bowl of stew.

Some of you might remember the epic battle in baseball that took place in the summer of 1998 between Mark McGuire of the St. Louis Cardinals and Sammy Sosa of the Chicago Cubs. The two sluggers were chasing the legendary single season home run record of 61. Mark McGuire was the first to reach 62, but a few days later Sammy Sosa of the Chicago Cubs launched two massive home runs to also break the record and tie McGuire at 62. Knowing that the record was about to be broken, thousands of Chicago fans gathered on Waveland Avenue just outside of Wrigley Field hoping to catch the famous ball should it leave the park. And sure enough, Sammy Sosa’s record-breaking home run flew out of the park, took a bounce, and landed in the lucky hands of a 47-year-old man named Moe Mullins. No sooner was it in his hands, than he was mobbed by a gang of people, who piled on top of him and began clawing and scratching to try to rip the ball from his hands.

Eventually the ball came loose and ended up in the possession of a 33-year-old fan named Brenden Cunningham, who took off down the street, running for his life. He was able to flag down a police car and was taken to a police station for his own safety. Cunningham became an instant celebrity, got his picture taken with the ball, and was set to make a lot of money if he decided to sell the ball. But the public quickly turned on him when they found out what happened to Moe Mullins. Moe Mullins ended up suing Cunningham, and a legal battle over the ball went on for several years.

As it turns out, 25 years later, all the turmoil over this little ball was for nothing. McGuire and Sosa both went on to hit several more home runs that season, making the value of this ball less significant. Three seasons later Barry Bonds shattered the home run record by hitting 73. And it was later revealed that McGuire and Sosa both were using steroids that season which invalidated their records. Today this once fought-over baseball sits in a storage locker, worth practically nothing except for the story that surrounds it.

This story is a reminder of how futile it is to chase after things that appear to be important, but prove to be of little value. Jesus talked about this very thing when he said, “What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, yet loses his own soul?” (Mark 8:36). If you end up possessing everything your heart desires, and die without making peace with God, you gain nothing. And once are saved and are made right with God, it is foolish to chase after the temporal things of the world. In 1 Corinthians 3 the Apostle Paul talks about the day when as believers we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and be judged for what we’ve done in life. The good works we have done for Christ – the gold, silver, and precious metal – will result in rewards we will enjoy for all eternity – but the time and opportunities we’ve squandered – the wood, hay, and stubble – will go up in flames and will be lost for eternity.

With this picture in mind we come to our story today in Genesis 25 that focuses not on a baseball, but a bowl of stew. And what happens over this bowl of stew will impact generations to come. In Genesis 25 the covenant blessing given by God to Abraham is passed on to his son Isaac, who in turn will pass it on to his son. Last week we saw how after waiting twenty years to have a baby, Isaac and Rebekah have twin boys.

The first twin born is Esau, which means “red.” He is a ruddy, healthy baby who also happens to have a lot of hair. Everything about him speaks of a strong, rugged, independent person. The second twin born, just second later, is Jacob, which means “heel-grabber.” As he’s coming out of the womb he’s holding on to his brother’s heel, which is prophetic of the competition and conflict between these two brothers.

We pick up the story in verse 27... “The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.” Although they are twins, Esau and Jacob could not be more different.

- Esau is a hunter; Jacob is a shepherd.
- Esau is an outdoorsman; Jacob is a homebody.
- Esau is a nomad; Jacob is settled.
- Esau is impulsive; Jacob is thoughtful
- Esau valued freedom; Jacob valued responsibility.

Of the two boys, Esau was the one more likely to chase after a baseball, while Jacob was a greater judge of value.

From the world’s standpoint, Esau is the more admirable brother – he’s strong, free-spirited, fun-loving, and free-wheeling – he’s the kind of guy you’d want to hang around. Jacob, on the other hand, is often portrayed as weak and soft and boring. And yet as the story continues the reader is led to think of Jacob as the preferable brother – especially considering the choices that Esau makes.

Esau is a hunter, and brings to mind another hunter mentioned earlier in Genesis – a man named Nimrod in chapter 10 who is described as a mighty hunter – a larger-than-life figure who became the founder of Babylon – a place synonymous with rebellion against God. Nimrod name actually means “rebel,” and he helped orchestrate the rebellion against God at the tower of Babel. He was a self-made man who lived completely independently of God. Esau follows in the footsteps of Nimrod – a man who lives on his own terms with no regard for God.

Jacob, on the other hand, while no saint, is pictured as being settled and responsible and someone who thinks seriously about life. More importantly, he is perceptive to the things of God and has an understanding of his family’s place in God’s plan. He and Esau both grew up hearing about the promises God made to their family. When you do the math, Abraham died when Esau and Jacob were 15-years-old. They heard directly from grandpa about God’s promise to bless their family, to give them many descendants, and a land to live on – and they both knew that God had great plans for their family that extended far into the future.

In their culture – which was around 1700 BC – the firstborn son received the family “birthright,” which included both material and spiritual blessings. When the patriarch of the family died, the firstborn son received a “double portion” of the estate. That meant if there were two sons, the inheritance would be divided into three portions and the firstborn son would receive two. There was a great advantage in being the firstborn.

In addition to receiving the bulk of the inheritance, the firstborn also became the leader of the family – similar to the British monarchy where Prince William, the firstborn son of soon-to-be King Charles, will assume the role once his father passes. Abraham’s birthright also included the privilege and honor of being the line that would produce the Messiah. The birthright had supreme value and significance.

It’s evident from the start that Esau had no interest in the spiritual side of the birthright. He was a man of the world and had no use for God in his life. On the other hand, Jacob highly regarded the birthright and spiritual things, and from the beginning he was intent on finding a way to grab the birthright from Esau. Although Jacob was right to desire the birthright and he appreciated what it stood for, he was wrong in the way he schemed to take it, and his lack of patience in waiting for God’s timing would get him into trouble many times.

The tension between Esau and Jacob grows in verse 28 when their mom and dad chose favorites... “Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Ut-oh. When it says, “Isaac loved Esau, and Rebekah loved Jacob,” it’s a Hebrew expression for preference. It doesn’t mean they didn’t love the other child, but that they favored one over the other.

Isaac favored Esau because he loved the taste of wild game. He loved the fact that Esau was a hunter and provided all kinds of game to eat. He admired Esau in the way some dads bask in a son who excels in sports. It was common for fathers in this culture to favor their firstborn, as Abraham did with Ishmael when he was born. The firstborn had all the advantages.

We’re not told why Rebekah loved Jacob more, but part of it may have to do with the prophecy she was given while pregnant that the younger will be stronger than the older, and the older will serve the younger. She was convinced, based on this oracle, that the birthright would be passed on to Jacob instead of Esau. Rebekah may have thought correctly, but in chapter 27 she would conspire with Jacob to obtain the birthright by deception instead of trusting God to work out the details. Both of them would run ahead of God.

All this background sets up the main story that begins in verse 29... “Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, ‘Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!’ (That is why he was also called Edom.) Jacob replied, ‘First sell me your birthright’” (29-31).

Here the personalities of Esau and Jacob are on full display as Jacob is home cooking some stew, and Esau – as usual – is out hunting. What is also revealed is their basic character. Jacob is a thinker, a strategist, a manipulator – while Esau is impulsive, roaming the open country, living for the moment. What happens is not random – Jacob has a well-thought-out plan that will prey upon Esau’s vulnerabilities – and Esau the hunter will become the hunted.

What Jacob will eventually learn is that God doesn’t need his help. If God chose Jacob to receive the birthright, Jacob could trust God to work out the details of how that will happen. Jacob does the same thing his grandmother Sarah did when she schemed for Abraham to have a child through Hagar. She ran ahead of God and her manipulation led to a host of problems, just as Jacob will in this story.

Jacob knows Esau's patterns and when he will be coming home from hunting, and he makes sure to have a steaming hot pot of stew for when he walked through the door. The stew was designed to appeal to Esau's senses and desires, much like the serpent used the forbidden fruit to lure Eve into sin. Jacob knew that his impulsive brother would be easily tricked into selling his birthright by the immediate gratification of his desires.

Right on cue, Esau comes home from hunting, and he's starved. He smells Jacob's stew and says, "Feed me." The Hebrew word conveys the idea of gulping down food, and was used of an animal inhaling large amounts of food at one time. Esau says, "Let me gulp down some of that stew." He's like a wild animal that must satisfy its cravings immediately.

Moses, the author of Genesis, highlights the fact that the stew was "red... red lentil soup," and then adds that this why was Esau was called Edom which means "red." Esau's descendants were known the Edomites, who would be a thorn in the side of Israel for centuries to come, and would share the godless character of Esau.

In verse 31 Jacob lays the trap... "Jacob replied, 'First sell me your birthright.'" Jacob calmly says, "It's all yours, brother, just sell me your birthright, and you can have the whole pot."

Verse 32... "'Look, I am about to die,' Esau said. 'What good is the birthright to me?'" Esau is not the kind of person to think about the future – he's driven by the here and now – and all he can think about is food. He's so hungry he thinks he's going to die, which is obviously an exaggeration. When you're weary and tired you're prone to make rash decisions.

Verse 33... "'But Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.'" Jacob wants to make the transaction official, and Esau says, "Yeah, yeah... I swear, the birthright is yours, now give me that stew." Later, in chapter 27, he will forget that he even sold his birthright, and be livid at Jacob for tricking him.

Verse 34... "'Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.'" While it's tempting to think of Jacob as being the bad guy in this story – manipulating his brother the way he did – every Jewish reader would immediately be shocked by Esau's utter disregard for the birthright. To "despise" something means to treat it as worthless and with contempt. Esau takes something of infinite, eternal value and tosses it to the side as something meaningless. After getting his fill, he simply gets up and walks away as if nothing happened. The birthright means nothing to him.

We read in the New Testament that the stories of the Old Testament are written as examples for us to learn from and warnings to not follow the same tragic path. With this in mind, three major lessons emerge from this story, and the first is: **Beware of grasping at things which have no lasting value.** Suppose I were to give you a choice between a handful of coins or a \$20 bill. You would naturally choose the \$20 bill because it is of far greater value. If I gave my one-year-old granddaughter the same choice, she would choose the coins. They're shiny, they jingle when you shake them, you can stack them and play with them. She's going to grab what is most appealing based on her value system. As you get older and wiser, you hopefully are able to discern between what is truly valuable and what is fleeting.

Jacob – as devious as he was – gave careful thought to what was important and highly valued the family birthright. He saw not only the immediate blessings it provided in the present, but the long-term blessings it would bring in the future.

Esau, on the other hand, was like a child who grabbed the shiny coins. He lived for the here-and-now, for the thrill of the hunt, and feeding his fleshly appetites. He gave no thought to the future or the consequences of his actions. He trades what is of infinite value for a bowl of stew that takes a few seconds to gulp down.

An entire book of the Bible – the book of Ecclesiastes – is written to warn us against chasing after the temporal things of this world. Solomon tells how as a young man he pursued every avenue of pleasure under the sun – he hired the finest comedians and singers to entertain him, he built palaces with lavish gardens and parks, he married women from all around the world, he intoxicated himself with the finest wines – and when it was all said and done he said, “It’s all meaningless – a chasing the wind.” No worldly pursuit under the sun brought him lasting satisfaction and fulfillment.

The prodigal son took his father’s inheritance and blew it all on temporary pleasure, and like Solomon he found himself empty and disillusioned, and ran back home to the arms of his father. His story illustrates how chasing pleasure may give you a temporary thrill, the thrill is temporary and leaves you worse off than before.

Wise is the person who prioritizes their life around what is lasting, enduring, and eternal. Jim Elliot is a good example. He was a highly gifted, good-looking, charismatic young man who could have climbed the ladder of success and been very wealthy, but he dedicated his life to serving the Lord as a missionary in Ecuador, and in 1956 he and five other missionaries were killed by the very people they were trying to reach for Christ. In one of his journals, Jim Elliot said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” The world thinks it’s foolish to forfeit fun, fortune, and fame for denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Jesus. But the real fool is someone like Esau who gains a tasty bowl of stew, but loses his soul for eternity.

The second lesson we learn from Esau is: **Beware of seeking instant gratification.** Our brains are wired to seek instant gratification – to taste something now, to buy something now, to feel something now. But research shows that resisting an impulse or desire for immediate pleasure leads to a host of positive outcomes.

A famous experiment on delayed gratification – known as the marshmallow test – was conducted at Stanford University in the 1960s. Researchers selected 600 4-year-olds and put each child in a room alone with a single marshmallow in front of them. The children were told that if they could wait for 15 minutes and not eat the marshmallow, then they would be rewarded with another marshmallow. Each child was faced with the same dilemma, “Do I eat the one marshmallow now, or do I wait and get twice as many?”

You can watch some of these kids on you-tube and you can see their struggle. Some kids covered their eyes so they wouldn’t see the temptation, some tried to divert themselves by singing or talking to themselves, some played with the marshmallow in their hand, some sniffed it and put it up to their lips. Some couldn’t resist and went ahead and ate it.

Of the 600 children in the experiment, only 30% of them were able to wait. But the point of the experiment was to track the developmental progress of the children into adolescence and young adulthood. The 30% who practiced self-control were better adjusted socially, more dependable, better able to cope with stress, and more likely to plan ahead.

The marshmallow experiment showed that delayed gratification affects every area of life. One pediatrician said that if you want to raise successful, happy, well-adjusted kids, the single most important thing you can teach them is delayed gratification. It doesn't take much effort to give into our impulses, but it's hard to resist instant gratification. But those who learn to do the hard things first and experience the pain now, will be rewarded with greater pleasure in the future. Sometimes we must simply do the right thing regardless of how we feel in the moment.

The third lesson we learn from Esau's life, and the most important, is: **Beware of despising spiritual things**. The chapter ends simply by saying "So Esau despised his birthright." He gave it away for a bowl of red soup, and forfeited God's blessings on his life. He gave up the birthright passed down from his grandfather Abraham to be the spiritual leader of God's covenant family, and the privilege of being in the line that would produce the Messiah and being the channel through which God would bless the world.

Esau not only gave up the blessings of God in this world, but the world to come. He made no plans for life after death, for where he would spend eternity. He put all his emphasis on the here and now, and put sensual desires over spiritual desires. He put all of his eggs into this earthly basket. As believers, we have an inheritance that awaits us after this life – and inheritance Peter describes like this... "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Esau serves as a wake-up call for us to consider what's really important in life. Is it pleasure? Is it comfort? Is it having time and money to do what I want? Is it to satisfy my sensual desires? Or is it to seek God? Is it to recognize that my life is a gift from God and I am here to serve Him and please Him? Is it to live my life in view of eternity, knowing that the things of this world will pass away, but whatever treasures are laid up in heaven will last for eternity?

If you've been living the life of Esau, now is that time to change course, to come to God and repent of rebelling against Him and despising spiritual things. Come to Christ, acknowledge your sin to Him, and trust Him as your Savior from sin and be forgiven.

Maybe you have trusted Christ – you're a Christian – but you've been chasing after things that don't matter – you've been living impulsively – and you've been trading your birthright in Christ for a bowl of stew. Today you can reverse course and value spiritual things – the things of God that matter here and for eternity.