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A SUCCESSFUL MAN WHO  
FAILED WITH GOD

Genesis 36:1-43

by

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Genesis Lesson 63

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Genesis 36:1-43

Near my boyhood home there was a small cemetery that had been there since before the turn of the century. Sometimes I would go there and walk along the rows, reading the inscriptions on the tombstones. The most fascinating one was an old, weathered, wooden tombstone which read, "Injun Joe," and listed his death in the 1850's.

Most of the tombstones had a brief description of the person, such as "Beloved Mother" or "Dear Father," plus the dates they lived. I used to try to imagine what those people had been like. I wondered what they had done with their lives. The people buried there had meant much to their families and friends in their day, but now they were gone and unknown, except for this gravestone and the memories they left behind in the minds of their loved ones.

While I haven't spent much time walking through cemeteries and reading tombstones, it isn't a bad idea, now and then, to do that. It makes me stop and think about the fact that, unless the Lord returns, someday soon there will be a grave with my name on it, the years I lived, and a brief inscription. How do I want to be remembered? What do I want to accomplish in my brief years on earth? Am I living for the things that really count? The clock in the game of life is always running--there are no time outs!

Even if you read your Bible, I'll bet that Genesis 36 is a chapter you don't spend much time thinking about. It's one of those chapters that makes you wonder, if you're honest, why it's in the Bible. There are a bunch of names which mean nothing to us and about whom we can learn almost nothing. They lived and died almost 4,000 years ago, linked together with the common thread of being Esau's descendants. But pondering this chapter can be like a walk through a cemetery: It can make us stop and think about the

meaning of life and success.

Esau, the man whose generations are listed here, was a most successful man by worldly standards. He was the founder of a dynasty and a nation, the father of rulers and kings. He enjoyed financial prosperity. He had good-looking women in his harem. He had political power. He was a famous man in his time and for hundreds of years after. And he was a nice guy, the kind who would make a great neighbor or friend. But Esau lived for this world, and in so doing, he failed miserably where it matters most--with God. He was a successful man who went to hell.

This chapter is in the Bible for at least two reasons. First, Moses was writing to people who were about to conquer the land of Canaan. The Edomites, Esau's descendants, lived on the borders of that land. When Israel had sought to pass over their land en route to Canaan, the Edomite king refused, even though Moses promised to pay for any food or water they consumed (Num. 20:14-21). Perhaps once Israel was established in the land, someone would say, "Let's teach those Edomites a lesson!" But God commanded Israel not to provoke Edom and said that He would not give Israel any of their land (Deut. 2:2-5). So Israel needed to know who these people were so that they would treat them as the Lord had commanded.

A second reason for this chapter is to make Israel and us consider the outcome of Esau's profane life, especially as contrasted with Jacob's life. There is an obvious contrast between chapter 36, which outlines the wealth, success and power of Esau and his descendants and 37:1, which says with understatement, "Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan." While Esau was out conquering the land of Edom, founding a nation, fathering kings, and making a great worldly success of himself, Jacob was quietly living in a land he didn't even own, the land where his fathers had sojourned. While Esau's descendants were mighty chieftains, famous in their day, Jacob's descendants were down in Egypt, enslaved to Pharaoh.

So the chapter in its context portrays two roads set before us all: The road to earthly success, fame, and power, which can bring quick, visible results; and, the road of obedience to the will of God, which is much slower and less visible in terms of the payoff. The worldly road focuses on the things which are seen, which, from God's perspective, are destined to perish; God's road focuses on the things which are not seen, but which are eternal and cannot be taken from us (see 2 Cor. 4:18). So the chapter teaches:

If we succeed by worldly standards, but fail  
with God, we fail where it really matters.

The text reveals four areas where Esau and his descendants succeeded in this world, but failed terribly in light of eternity:

1. A beautiful family by the world's standards does not equal a family blessed by God.

Esau's turn away from God is seen in that he took his wives from the daughters of Canaan (36:2). Esau's grandfather, Abraham, had made his servant swear by the Lord that he would not take a wife for Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites (24:3). But Esau shrugged off the strong warning of his godly grandfather and chose his wives from the Canaanites (26:34). Later, still lacking spiritual discernment, he took a wife from the descendants of Ishmael (28:9).

It's significant that there is no mention of barren wives when it comes to Esau's line. Abraham had God's promise of many descendants, but his wife Sarah was barren. Isaac had the same promises, but Rebekah could not conceive for the first twenty years of their marriage. Jacob's favored wife, Rachel, was barren for a long time. But Esau's wives bore him five sons and a number of daughters with no trouble (36:4-6).

Esau represents the natural man--strong, capable, independent, able to cope with life's problems with his own resources. Who needs to depend on God for things when you

can take care of it yourself? Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their barren wives, represent God's way of working. He humbles our pride by shutting us up with problems we are incapable of solving-- problems like barren wives in the face of promises to make us into a great nation. Then, when we call on Him, He proves Himself mighty to save.

Esau had a beautiful family by the world's standards. He was the founder of a dynasty. To be one of Esau's descendants in that culture was like being a Ford, Rockefeller, or Kennedy in our day. Esau's sons and grandsons became chiefs and kings. Esau's wives were no doubt beautiful women, as their names indicate. Their names present a problem, in that the names given in earlier chapters do not correspond with the names listed here. In 26:34, it is said that Esau married Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemath, the daughter of Elon the Hittite. In 28:9 it reports that he added Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nabaioth. But in 36:2-3, different daughters' names are connected with each father.

The best solution to this problem is that the wives probably took different names, either when they moved from Canaan to Edom, or with changes in them over time (a common practice; Esau became known as "Red" ["Edom"] over the incident with the red stew which he traded for his birthright.) Names weren't given just because they sounded nice--they had meaning. So, perhaps, Basemath ("the perfumed one") later took on the name Adah ("ornament," "the adorned one"), as her focus shifted from perfume to jewelry and clothes. Mahalath ("the musical one") took over as the perfume queen and changed her name to Basemath when she developed a formula for homemade Chanel No. 5. Judith ("the praised one"), a young teenager when Esau married her, grew tall and became known as Oholibamah ("tent height," *i.e.*, "tall, stately"). Note that each of their names focuses on some outward feature of beauty or sensuality.

There is another problem: In 26:34, Judith's father is called

Beerli the Hittite. Beerli means "well-man." In 36:2 he is called Anah. But it is mentioned that he is the Anah who found the hot springs (hence, he could easily be nicknamed Beerli, "well-man"). Also, Anah (Beerli) is called a Hittite (26:34); a Hivite (36:2); and a Horite (36:20). Hittite is a broad term, roughly equivalent to Canaanite. Hivite is a branch of the Hittites, and Horite means "cave-dweller." So the terms are not contradictory, but explanatory in a more particular sense, much as we might refer to the same man as an American, an Arizonan, and a Phoenician (resident of Phoenix).

While the precise meaning of many of these names is uncertain, it's interesting that most of the names are not spiritual, but rather reflect the natural surroundings (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* [Baker], 2:932-933; James Boice, *Genesis* [Zondervan], 2:356). I've already mentioned this in reference to Esau's wives. Eliphaz (36:4) means "pure gold." Zerah (36:13) means "rising" or "east." Dishon (36:21) means "gazelle." Only two names out of 81 may hint at a belief in the true God: Reuel (36:10), Esau's son by Basemath, means "friend of God"; Jeush (36:14), Oholibamah's son, means "The Lord helps." But even these may have been connected with idolatry. One later king has a name of a false god, Baal-hanan (36:38).

The point is, Esau's family was outwardly attractive. His wives were beautiful women who bore him children. His kids were born leaders, talented and strong. Esau was a likable, popular man. He was a skilled outdoorsman, a man who loved the taste of game, a man caught up with the enjoyment of the good life. But there was one big problem: God was not a part of this family. Esau, the grandson of the godly Abraham, the favorite son of peaceful Isaac, was a thoroughly secular man who lived for the pleasure of the here and now. He was a successful man whose sons and grandsons after him were successful men, by worldly standards. But they all failed at what matters most because they left God out of their lives.

The most important thing you can impart to your kids is not how to be a worldly success. It's easy to encourage our kids to succeed in the wrong ways. They may make the football team or be the homecoming queen. They may score well on the SAT and go to the best colleges and get the best paying jobs. But if they fail with God, all that stuff doesn't matter at all. We need to instill in our kids what it means to succeed with God.

There's a second lesson we can learn by strolling through Esau's family cemetery:

2. Material prosperity does not equal spiritual prosperity.

Esau moved east because he was too prosperous to stay near Jacob (36:6-8). This took place before Jacob returned. Esau realized that the inheritance was going to Jacob, so he looked for a new place to live. It was nice of Esau to be so agreeable. But, sadly, he had no vision for God's promises to Abraham concerning Canaan. Ever since God called Abraham, He repeatedly emphasized Canaan as the land He would give to Abraham's descendants. But for Esau, any nice land would do. He had no spiritual vision. He was living for himself, not for God's purpose. He was materially rich, but spiritually poor.

To his credit, Esau was not greedy. When he saw Jacob after their twenty years apart, he declined Jacob's gift by saying, "I have plenty, my brother. Keep your things." But it's possible to be generous, contented people, but still to be living for material things, not for God. The danger is that our material prosperity dulls our senses with regard to our desperate need for God. The Lord warned the church in Laodicea, "... you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17). We American Christians, who have been so blessed materially, need to be careful to become rich toward God by laying up

treasures in heaven (Luke 12:13-34).

These tombstones reveal a third lesson about God's perspective on success and failure:

3. Political power does not equal power with God.

Esau and his descendants were men of great political power. They are called chiefs (36:15 ff.; 40 ff.) and kings (36:31 ff.). It is pointedly stated that these men reigned as kings in Edom before any king reigned in Israel (36:31). Critics leap upon this verse as proof that Genesis must have been written after the beginning of the monarchy, some 300 years after Moses. But in the previous chapter God had prophesied to Jacob that kings would come forth from him (35:11), a promise which had also been made to Abraham (17:6, 16).

Clearly, the point of 36:31 is to show that Esau's sons, who walked away from God, had the distinction of being kings long before Jacob's sons to whom it was promised. Jacob's sons were a nation of slaves at the same time that Esau's sons were kings. Esau's sons could have looked at Jacob's sons and scoffed, "Where is your God and His promises?"

Isn't that how it often seems--that the world is winning, while God's people are losing? We'll reign with Christ someday, but meanwhile the church is often persecuted and disregarded by powerful political leaders who laugh at God. But we need to remember that political power and power with God are two different things. The world may boast now in its political power, but He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord scoffs at them (Ps. 2:4). It is the Lord who "removes kings and establishes kings" (Dan. 2:21). While it is fine for Christian people to be involved in politics, we need to keep things in perspective. Political power is always subject to Him who is "ruler over the realm of mankind," who "bestows it on whom He wishes" (Dan. 4:17). True power is having power with God.

Esau's kingdom, Edom, later caused great trouble to Israel. There were frequent wars between the two nations. Edom cheered those who attacked God's people (Ps. 137:7; Obadiah). Amalek, Esau's grandson (36:12), became the founder of a people who were a perennial enemy of Israel (Exod. 17:8-16). There is a repeated emphasis in Genesis 36, that Esau is Edom (36:1, 8, 9, 19, and 43; also, the name Edom and its synonym, Seir, are used frequently). The significance of this otherwise unnecessary repetition seems to be that God wanted His people to see what results when a man lives apart from Him. From this one man, Esau, an outwardly good man, a likable man, a successful man from the world's perspective, came the godless nation Edom, which often plagued the people of God. So God says, "Remember: Esau is Edom!"

There's a final lesson we can learn about success and failure from our stroll through Esau's cemetery:

4. Temporal fame does not equal eternal recognition by God.

In their day, Esau was more famous than Jacob. At the end of their lives, Jacob had about 70 descendants living under Pharaoh's umbrella. Esau had conquered Edom and established a dynasty there. By Moses's day (over 400 years later), Israel was a fledgling nation of slaves, recently escaped from Egypt, owning no land of their own. Edom was an established kingdom which had the power to refuse Israel passage over their land.

But this tour through the graveyard of Genesis 36 shows us that God, not man, writes the final chapter of history. These once-famous names don't mean a thing to our world today, but Israel's name is in the news almost daily. These men, successful by the world's measure, passed off the scene and were soon forgotten as others clamored to take their place.

Today we don't know anything more about them than is written here. Fame is a fleeting thing.

The Edomite race endured until the time of Christ, when they were known as Idumeans. They disappeared from history in A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed. But before that, some famous Idumeans, descendants of Esau, ruled over Israel: Herod the Great and his successor, Herod Antipas. They were wealthy, power-hungry, cruel despots. Herod the Great slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem in his attempt to kill the newborn King of the Jews. Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded and mocked Jesus just prior to the crucifixion.

In a way it was a replay of history, when Esau's descendant, Herod, who at that time had far more worldly prosperity, power, and fame, and Jacob's descendant, Jesus, faced each other. God's side didn't seem to be winning. Jacob's descendant went to the cross, while Esau's descendant relaxed in his luxurious palace. But God would write the final chapter on that part of history as well. The great Herod, like his ancestor Esau, was a successful man who went to hell. Jesus Christ, the descendant of Jacob, was raised from the dead and is coming again to reign in power and glory.

What really matters is recognition by God, not by this world. We live in a culture that worships fame. If a famous person becomes a Christian, we rush his life story into print and hustle him onto the TV talk shows. The guy may be a babe in Christ, who doesn't know anything about the Bible, but we listen to his every word as if he's a spiritual authority.

But the recognition that counts will come soon, when we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." The most awful thing would be to be famous on this earth--even famous as a Christian--and to stand before the Lord and say, "Lord, Lord, I've done all these things in Your

name," but to hear Him say, "Depart from Me; I never knew you."

#### CONCLUSION

On the Shetland Islands off the northern coast of Scotland, a man spent five years and a lifetime of savings building a 62-foot steel yacht that weighed 126 tons. On the day of its launching, he invited a local band to play and the whole town turned out to help him celebrate. He planned a voyage around the world as soon as the boat was launched. The band played, the bottle of champagne was smashed across the bow, and the ship was lowered into the water. But it sank to the bottom of the harbor! What good is a beautiful boat that doesn't float? That man wasted five years and a lot of money building a useless thing--a boat that didn't float. What good is a successful life that ends, whether in 25 or 85 years, if the person is not ready for eternity? "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

Our tour through Esau's cemetery is over. I hope it's made you think about the question, "What am I living for?" While we still live, we all have a choice: To join Jacob and his descendants in waiting patiently for God to fulfill His covenant promises to us, as we labor for His coming kingdom. Or, to look over at Esau, prospering in the world, and join him in the pursuit of secular success. If we succeed by worldly standards, but fail with God, we have failed where it really matters. Whether we fail or succeed by worldly standards, if we succeed with God, we will have true and lasting success.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can we train our kids to aim for spiritual, not worldly, success? Should we encourage them toward worldly success?
2. Is financial success an unmitigated blessing, a mixed blessing, or a curse? Give biblical support.
3. Are Christians wasting their time to run for political office or to work for political causes? Why/why not?
4. Why does the Christian world give such high esteem to famous people who profess faith in Christ? What is the root of such adulation? What are some of its results?

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