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TRADING YOUR SOUL—FOR WHAT?

Genesis 25:27-34

By

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Genesis Lesson 45

TRADING YOUR SOUL-FOR WHAT?
Genesis 25:27-34; Heb. 12:16-17

The close of another year reminds us that we have just exchanged another year of our lives for something. Life is a process of trading one thing for another. We're all given a certain amount of time and ability which we exchange to gain other things, such as money, food, shelter, relationships, leisure, and pleasure. The scary thing is, it's easy to fritter away your life, exchanging your time and abilities for things that really don't matter, or even worse, for things that cause you and others great harm. Sometimes the bad bargain you make is so pivotal that it affects the rest of your life, and even has eternal consequences.

For example, a man decides to trade family time for business success. He loses his wife and children. Bad bargain! A Christian leader decides to exchange some of his time for sexual pleasure outside of his marriage. It costs him his ministry, a lot of family pain, and greatly damages the cause of Christ. Really bad bargain! It costs far more than it provides.

Every day you're trading your life-your soul-for something. The question is, *For what?* When it's all over and you've cashed in all the time and abilities which have been allotted to you, what will you have to show for it? If you trade it in for fleeting pleasure, to gratify your immediate needs, you'll come up empty. But if you trade your life for God's kingdom and righteousness, to fulfill His purpose, you'll be satisfied with that which no one can take from you.

Esau's life is the story of a man who traded his soul for fleeting pleasure. He sold his birthright, which included not only material benefits and family privileges, but spiritual blessings as well, for a bowl of soup. It says that "he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way" (25:34). He didn't have a second thought about what he had done. He did it, it felt good, and only much later did he come to regret it.

Someone has said that the difference between school and life is that in school, you're taught a lesson and then given a test. In life, you're given a test which teaches you a lesson. A lot of times those

tests sneak up on you and are over with before you realize what happened. In life, the teacher doesn't come into the room and announce, "The next few minutes are going to be an important test. Please think carefully before answering, because the results of this test will affect you for years to come." Instead, you're into the test situation, you make some decisions based on your thinking and behavior up to that time, and you come out of the test without realizing immediately what just happened. Time reveals the results.

Esau's decision to sell his birthright to Jacob was like that. My guess is that this wasn't the first time the matter had come up. On other occasions Jacob had sounded him out: "Hey, Esau, how much would you take for your birthright?" If Esau had said flat out, "It's not for sale for any price," that might have ended it there. But he had left the door open a crack. Jacob could tell that it just wasn't that important to Esau. Esau's motto in life was, "If it feels good, do it!" He was a good times guy. His conniving brother was shrewd enough to spot that, and he used it to take advantage of him. He waited for Esau to come in from the field famished. As his brother, Jacob should have gladly given Esau a bowl of soup. But instead he used it to take away Esau's birthright. The story shows that if you trade your soul to satisfy your flesh, you've made a bad deal.

Living for instant gratification will
rob you of spiritual blessing.

There are four lessons that we need to think about and apply from this Scripture which was written for our instruction:

1. You can lose great blessings if you do not appreciate them.

Esau was born into a situation with great blessings. He wasn't born into a pagan home, where his parents worshipped idols and abused him. He was the son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham, the friend of God. No doubt, during the first 15 years of Esau's life, while Abraham was alive, his grandfather had taught him about God and His covenant promises. Surely that teaching had been reinforced by Isaac and Rebekah. Esau had great spiritual privileges. But he threw them away because he didn't appreciate them.

Esau may have had some excuses for disregarding these privileges. He could have blamed God: "God predestined me to do it!" After all, the Lord had told his mother while he was still in the womb that the older shall serve the younger (25:23). But that would have been a cop out. While God is sovereign, men are responsible for their sin. The text assigns the blame to Esau when it says that he despised his birthright (25:34).

He might have blamed his parents for their errors in raising him. They did make some serious mistakes, although their mistakes do not absolve Esau of his wrong choice. We read, "Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah loved Jacob" (25:28). What a tragic sentence! It covers untold grief and conflict in that home. When parents play favorites with the children, it breeds bitterness and hatred. Chapter 27 tells how Esau wanted to kill Jacob. Jacob later played favorites with his sons, so that they wanted to kill his favorite son, Joseph. Rebekah's fondness for Jacob pitted her against her husband, Isaac, and led her to deceive him in order to help Jacob against Esau. No doubt Isaac often defended his adventuresome but godless son by telling Rebekah, "Get off his back! The boy just likes to have some fun in life." It wasn't a perfect home!

Two applications: First, for us who are parents. We need to realize that *our sin affects our children, and we need to deal with that sin*. We aren't free to excuse it by saying, "That's just the way I am." If we explode at our kids, we need to confess it to the Lord and ask forgiveness from our kids. If they see us bending the truth, we need to admit our sin, and make it right by being truthful. If they see us argue as a couple, they need to see us seek one another's forgiveness and talk through our differences in gentleness and love. If our kids don't see genuine Christianity- repentance, brokenness, the fruit of the Spirit-worked out in our daily lives, they probably won't be eager to follow the Lord.

The second application is for us who are children (including *adult children*): *We can't blame our disobedience to God on the way our parents treated us*. They may have acted piously on Sunday and like pagans the rest of the week. They may have been abusive. They may not have loved us as they should. They may have played favorites. But if I walk away from the Lord and the spiritual blessings He offers me in Christ, God will hold me accountable for despising my birthright.

At best, even the most godly parents are imperfect. Child rearing is not a matter of plugging in a formula. Every child, even among twins, is different from the womb. Note how different Esau and Jacob were. They looked different, even though they were twins. They had different temperaments, interests, and values. Esau liked the outdoors; Jacob liked to hang out in the kitchen. Esau liked physical activity; Jacob liked to use his head to outsmart others. Esau was impetuous and lived for the here and now; Jacob was more goal-oriented. He thought about how to gain advantage for himself down the road.

The tricky thing for parents is that loving your children equally doesn't mean treating them equally. It's wrong to play favorites, but not playing favorites isn't a matter of equal treatment, because every child is different. As a parent, you've got to study each child and do all you can to help each one come under the lordship of Christ. While there are solid principles for parents in the Bible, it requires a lot of wisdom. And you don't get the experience you need for the job until the job is over!

The point is that even though our parents—even Christian parents—were at best imperfect or at worst wrong in the way they raised us, God holds us accountable if we despise our spiritual heritage and walk away from Him. Sinful parents need to deal with their sin, but sinful kids need to deal with their sin, too! The fact is, each of us has great spiritual privileges: We've heard the gospel. We have the Bible. We live in a free country where we can attend a church where the Bible is taught, where we can get to know other Christians who can help us grow in our walk with God. But, like Esau despising his birthright, we can forfeit all these spiritual blessings if we don't appreciate them.

2. Small choices can have drastic consequences.

As I said, teachers don't walk into the room of life and announce that the most important test of your life is about to begin. Warning signs don't always flash. On the surface, it doesn't seem like a big deal. But it's a critical moment, and your decision can shape the rest of your life. Maybe it's an offer from a friend to try drugs. Perhaps it's an occasion to go to bed with your boyfriend, or to cheat on your marriage. It may be a chance to make a lot of money in a wrong

way. Often, you've got to make a quick decision. The decision you make may turn around and make or break you!

Esau's decision was impulsive, and yet it stemmed from years of disregarding spiritual things. Hebrews 12:16 calls Esau a godless (= profane) person. He lacked God's perspective on life. He was not concerned about spiritual matters. He lived for the here and now. "Who needs a birthright?" he thought. "After all, I may be dead tomorrow. What I need now is a good meal. What good is a birthright if I starve to death?"

Those who cast off God's moral standards often excuse it by saying that they had to meet their "need." We're buying into the notion that our needs take priority. In fact, I've heard that if you don't love yourself first, you *can't* love God and others! But Jesus says, "God knows your needs and you can trust Him to take care of them. Your real need is to seek first His kingdom and righteousness" (see Matt. 6:31-33).

What's frightening about Esau's impulsive decision is the lasting consequences. Hebrews 12:17 says that "afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears." Later he felt badly about what he had given up. He could see that his decision had been foolish and hasty. But even though he felt badly, he had operated so long on the principle of living for immediate gratification, he couldn't turn from his selfish ways to God. He later wanted what God could give him, but he didn't want God. That would mean yielding his life to God, and that was too big a price to pay. The series of small choices over the course of his life had drastic consequences.

Some people think that God is like a shopping mall. If you decide you don't like something, just bring it back for a full refund. They buy into living for themselves. When the thought of eternity comes up, they push it away by thinking that when their time to die comes, they'll take all their selfish living into God's store, ask for a refund, and buy into eternity then. But it doesn't work that way! We all face eternity every day, and we need to make daily decisions in that light. Otherwise, we may find that, like Esau, we come to the place where we want God's blessings, but we can't yield our lives to God.

Thus, you can lose great blessings if you don't appreciate them. Small choices can have drastic consequences.

3. It's easy to mistake as essential that which really is not.

Esau thought that he needed food. That sounds like an essential need, but it isn't. His essential need was to obey God and seek His purpose. Esau mistook as essential that which really was not, and he shrugged off as not essential that which really is. Spiritual matters were nice, but not necessary, for Esau. So he traded his soul for a bowl of soup.

The people to whom Moses was writing were in danger of doing the same thing. They had left slavery in Egypt and were headed for the promised land. God had taken them on a detour to teach them to endure hardship and warfare so that they would be ready to conquer the land. But a lot of them grumbled. They thought they needed good drinking water, food, shelter, and protection from their enemies. Those are essentials. If Moses couldn't provide those things, they would go back to Egypt. They were willing to give up their spiritual heritage of God's promises to Abraham in order to gain the comforts they lacked. But Moses is showing them that the essential thing is that they do the will of God, even if it's difficult. If they will do His will, He will take care of the other essentials of life.

We get mixed up in our ideas of what is essential and what is not. To look at our hectic lives, you would think that it's essential to make a lot of money. We work long hours to make a few extra bucks-and ruin our families and our health in the process. We spend hours watching inane TV shows, but don't have time to nurture our souls or serve the Lord. Some people endanger their health and even their lives through drugs, drinking, and sexual promiscuity, because they put feeling good right now as essential, but feeling good throughout eternity as secondary.

Each one of us needs to think carefully about what is really essential in life in light of God's Word. Write it down. Then periodically evaluate your life against those few essentials. I don't agree with everything Jerry Falwell has done, but he went up in my esteem when I read his response to the question, "What do you want to be remembered for?" He has some impressive achievements. At that time he was the head of the Moral Majority, with a \$100 million

budget. He is the founder and president of Liberty University, with over 5,000 students. He is the pastor of a church with over 20,000 members. He has a large TV ministry, and speaks all over the world. His answer was, "I want to be remembered as a godly husband, father, and pastor, in that order." Those things are the essentials! The rest isn't.

There's a final lesson:

4. It's easy to grab for the right things for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way.

Here my focus turns from Esau to Jacob. Jacob was right to want the birthright. He was wrong to want the birthright for the personal advantages it would bring him; and, he was wrong to take it in the way he did.

I'm sure Jacob would protest: "I bought that birthright fair and square! Esau didn't have to agree to the deal. Besides, he didn't really want it and I did. Everything was done out in the open." But Jacob went after the birthright for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way. He took advantage of his brother's impetuous personality and hungry condition. He should have waited on the Lord to fulfill His promises. As we'll see in future studies, God dealt with this deceiver by giving him a dose of his own medicine. Jacob was always scheming to work things out for his own advantage. He needed to learn that God could work things out if he would trust Him.

The people Moses was writing to faced the same problem. Many of them weren't even sure they wanted to conquer Canaan. Of those who did, my guess is that many wanted Canaan for the comfortable lifestyle it would provide them. They were willing to fight to get it, but they weren't thinking of God's purpose to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants. They wanted the homes and vineyards and other amenities Canaan would provide. They wanted a right thing for the wrong reason. And some tried to obtain that right thing in the wrong way, blundering ahead when God said to wait (Num. 14:39-45).

We face the same temptation. Frankly, some of you are here, not because you want to see God fulfill His purpose through His people, but rather for what being a Christian will do for you. Don't misunderstand-being a Christian has wonderful benefits! God gives

peace and joy. He puts broken marriages together. He gives you wisdom for raising your children. There's hardly an area of life where God's Word will not have a positive impact if you apply it.

But God doesn't make us happy and comfortable so that we can live for ourselves. He blesses us because He wants to use us to fulfill His purpose of blessing all nations through the Seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ. If we're into Christianity just for what it can do for us, then we're grabbing a right thing for a wrong reason. We need to pray, "Lord, bless me so You can use me in Your purpose of reaching all nations."

Even though it was God's will for Jacob ultimately to have the blessings of the birthright, he grabbed it in the wrong way, by taking advantage of his brother. In the same way, we need to be careful to go about God's work in God's way. Methods are just as important as the results. American Christians, especially, are highly pragmatic. If it works, it must be right. But it's important that we wait on God and do God's work in God's way.

CONCLUSION

As we face the New Year, ask yourself, "What am I living for?" If I'm living for good feelings in the short run, I'm missing God's purpose for my life. I'm selling my spiritual birthright for a mess of pottage.

A world-class runner entered a 10-K race in Connecticut. On the day of the race she drove from New York City, following the directions, or so she thought, given over the phone. She got lost, stopped at a gas station, and asked for help. She knew only that the race started in a shopping mall parking lot. The attendant also knew of such a race scheduled just up the road. When she arrived she was relieved to see that there weren't as many runners as she had anticipated.

She hurried to the registration table, announced herself, and was surprised at the race officials' excitement at having so renowned an athlete show up for their event. No, they had no record of her entry, but if she would hurry and put on this number, she could be in line just before the gun would go off. She ran and won easily-four minutes ahead of the first man! Only after the race did she learn that the race she had run was not the race she had entered earlier. *That*

race was being held several miles farther up the road in another town. She had gone to the wrong starting line, run the wrong course, and won a cheap prize (told by Bruce Lockerbie, *Bibliotheca Sacra* [Jan.-Mar., 1986], p. 8).

We only get one shot in the race of life. We need to make sure that we're not wasting our lives by running in the wrong race. If you're living for what meets your immediate needs, just using God for what He can do for you, you'll end up losing the spiritual blessings which count for eternity. You're trading your soul for the wrong things. But if you'll live to further God's purpose of blessing all nations through the Lord Jesus Christ, you'll be eternally blessed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it legitimate to present Christ to people from the angle of what He can do for them? Support your answer from Scripture.
2. What is the difference between "using God for self-help" and yielding everything to God even if I die as a martyr?
3. Is repentance always an option, or can a person harden himself beyond repentance?
4. Some say that we are free to choose whatever methods of evangelism or church growth are effective. Why is that not correct?
5. What is the most important factor in being a Christian parent?

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