

# A Case of Mistaken Priorities

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November 1999

## Text

Genesis 25.29-34 (NKJV)

“Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.’ Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, ‘Sell me your birthright as of this day.’ And Esau said, ‘Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?’ Then Jacob said, ‘Swear to me as of this day.’ So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

## Background

According to TWOT, the term underlying “birthright” in Genesis 25 “[i]nvolves especially the legal claims of the firstborn to a double portion of the inheritance and to such other rights as might be his by virtue of his position as first born” (109). The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery corroborates:

The concept of birthright [. . .] in the OT [. . .] is inseparably linked to the notion of “firstborn” through their common Hebrew root *bkr*. [. . .] The concept of birthright alludes to the privileges and expectations of primogeniture. The noun always occurs in the singular with the special meaning of the legal claims of the eldest son to a double portion of the inheritance and the right to bear the family’s name and other privileges. (“Birthright” 96)

Significant Old Testament passages that allude to primogeniture include Gen 25.29-34; 48.14-20; Deut 21.15-17; and 1 Chr 5.1-2.

Hebrews 12.16-17 alludes to Esau’s forfeiture of his birthright in the following terms: “lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears” (NKJV). It is clear that what Esau did in this situation was viewed very negatively by God.

The imagery of the firstborn becomes highly significant in the New Testament in its application to Christ. He is the firstborn of all creation (Col 1.15; Heb 1.6), the firstborn from the dead (Col 1.18; Rev 1.5), and the firstborn among many brethren in the church (Rom 8.29; Heb 12.23). Had Christ turned his back on his identity as the firstborn, he would have been in rebellion against His Father’s plan for Him. When Esau despised his birthright, he rejected the blessings that naturally attended his position as firstborn.

## Conflicting Priorities

Esau’s choice to sell his birthright to Jacob was tragic. It illustrated that his priorities were mistaken on at least three counts. We are also capable of making short-sighted decisions if we fail to resolve the conflicting priorities in our own lives.

### 1. *The tangible vs. the intangible*

We face a conflict between the tangible and the intangible. The tangible is that which we can possess and hold in our hands now. However, the intangible is often much more valuable. The

tangible can be very enticing, yet it can be quite destructive, as Allen P. Ross explains:

Certainly the profane nature of Esau was a warning for Israel. It is wrong to sacrifice spiritual provisions to satisfy one's physical appetites. This is a question of priorities. [. . .]  
In this instance [Esau] was not a skillful hunter; he was more like an animal he had trapped with bait. To live on this base level, to satisfy one's appetites, inevitably leads to a despising of spiritual things. (Ross 70)

Mark 8:36-37 gives one example of the tension between the tangible and the intangible. There are many other examples--such as the conflict between future purity and present sexual pleasure. We need to remember that what we can touch with our hands is not necessarily worthy of our life's energies.

2. *The urgent vs. the important*

We face a second conflict--between the urgent and the important. Sometimes that which demands our immediate attention is not worthy of it. The important--that which brings long-term satisfaction both in this life and in the next--does not force itself upon us. As beings created in the image of God, we must discern what is truly important from what is merely urgent. In the desperation of a hungry moment, Esau gave up what really mattered for what would meet an immediate craving.

Enticed by the pottage which Jacob had boiled, he could not deny himself, but must, at once, gratify his appetite, though the calm and calculating Jacob should demand the birthright of the firstborn as the price. [. . .] Impulsively he snatched an immediate and sensual gratification at the forfeit of a future glory. Thus he lost the headship of the people through whom God's redemptive purpose was to be wrought out in the world, no less than the mere secular advantage of the firstborn son's chief share in the father's temporal possessions. (Forrester 971)

3. *The temporary vs. the permanent*

Related to the above is a third conflict--between the temporary and the permanent. It is easier to focus on the visible things than the invisible, yet the latter are permanent while the former are temporary (2 Cor 4:16-18). The essence of faith is trusting in the invisible rather than the seen (Heb 11, esp. vv 1, 6, 13, 27).

Commenting on Hebrews 12:15-17, Zane Hodges discusses the importance of resolving the conflict between the temporary and the permanent:

As a grim reminder of what can happen among believers, the writer warned that one who misses the grace of God may become like a bitter root whose infidelity to God affects others. [. . .] Such a person would be godless (*bebelos*, "profane, unhallowed, desecrated") like Esau, Jacob's brother, whose loose and profane character led him to sell his inheritance rights as the oldest son for the temporary gratification of a single meal. He warned the readers not to yield to transitory pressures and forfeit their inheritances. (810-11)

**Works Cited**

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- Forrester, Eldred John. "Esau." The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Ed. James Orr. 4 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.
- Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. Vol. 1. Chicago: Moody, 1980.

Hodges, Zane C. "Hebrews." The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament. N.p: Victor-Scripture, 1983.

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## Lesson Plan (Junior High)

### Objectives:

- To clearly explain the meaning of Genesis 25.29-34.
- To convince the participants of the reality of conflicting priorities in our lives.
- To discuss a biblical model for resolving conflicting priorities.
- To encourage participants to make right choices when faced with conflicting priorities.

### Procedure:

1. Ask how many of the participants are their parents' first child, and if being the firstborn in their families carries with it any special privileges.
2. Introduce the idea of primogeniture as found in the Old Testament. Read the text.
3. Discuss whether Jacob was right to seek his brother's birthright. Discuss whether Esau was right to sell his own birthright. Read Hebrews 12.16-17.
4. Discuss the mistaken priorities in Esau's life.
5. Provide relevant examples of conflicting priorities that the participants face.
  - a. *The tangible vs. the intangible*
    - Looking down at others because of what they wear
    - Getting involved in fun activities that keep us from going to church
    - Ignoring Christ because of our concern with what we own
  - b. *The urgent vs. the important*
    - Buying things we want instead of things we need
    - Using our money for our own cravings rather than giving it to God
    - Talking on the phone with our friends rather than doing our homework
  - c. *The temporary vs. the permanent*
    - Watching our favorite TV show rather than reading the Bible or praying
    - Giving up our sexual purity for a short time of pleasure (porn, sexual activity, etc.)
    - Using tobacco, alcohol, or drugs for a short high
6. Ask participants to suggest conflicting priorities that they face. Encourage them to make right choices when faced with conflicting priorities.