

Lesson 41

Esau Sells His Birthright

Esau, the older twin, sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew.

Overview

Lesson Focus

God answered Isaac's prayer for Rebekah to have children and gave them twin boys—Esau and Jacob. God told Rebekah that the older brother would serve the younger. Esau was born first, but he despised his birthright and sold it to Jacob for a bowl of stew.

Key Passages

Genesis 25:27, 25:29–33

Memory Verse

Proverbs 3:5–6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Prepare to Share

Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

In Genesis 24, God sovereignly provided Rebekah as a wife for Isaac, who was comforted after his mother's death. The account of Abraham and his descendants continues in Genesis 25. Abraham married Keturah and had more sons. However, he gave these sons gifts and sent them to the east, leaving all he owned to Isaac. When Abraham died at age 175, his passing is described as timely and peaceful (Genesis 25:8). Isaac and Ishmael buried their father in the cave he had purchased for Sarah's burial. Next, the genealogy of Ishmael shows that God multiplied his descendants in the land east of Canaan. Ishmael died at age 137 among his people (Genesis 25:17–18).

Unlike Ishmael's genealogy, Isaac's genealogy begins with a problem—his wife Rebekah is barren. This is distressing for any couple, but especially for them because of God's promise to multiply their descendants. Isaac responded correctly to the problem and went to the Lord in prayer on behalf of his wife (Genesis 25:21). As he did for Abraham and Sarah, God fulfilled his promise and answered Isaac's prayer by enabling Rebekah to conceive. Rebekah noticed unusual movement in her womb and asked the Lord what was happening. God answered by telling her she was expecting twins: each child would become a nation, but the older would serve the younger (Genesis 25:23). This prophecy was contrary to the typical birthright of the younger siblings serving the oldest.

When the twins were born, they differed drastically in appearance, and their parents named them accordingly. Esau was born first, looking red and hairy,

and his name literally means “hairy.” Jacob was delivered right after Esau, and he was grasping Esau’s heel. His name means deceiver or supplanter. As they grew, the boys’ differences extended beyond their physical appearances to their activities. Esau became a skilled hunter who enjoyed the outdoors, while Jacob preferred to stay by the tents, cooking and caring for animals. Isaac favored Esau because he liked the meat Esau brought him from hunting, but Rebekah favored Jacob. God had already chosen Jacob to inherit his promises to Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob desired the birthright and blessing that belonged to his older brother Esau.

Jacob’s opportunity came to seize the birthright when Esau came back from the field hungry and tired. Jacob had cooked a lentil stew, and Esau wanted some. Jacob took advantage of his brother’s weakness—his desire to satisfy his appetite—and asked him to sell his birthright for some stew. Esau’s careless response about being close to death so that his birthright was useless showed that he did not value long-term blessings but instead focused on his immediate desires (Genesis 25:32). Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, ate his meal, and went his way without remorse for what he’d lost. Genesis 25 ends with the summary, “Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

Historical/Apologetics Background

For modern readers, the importance of the birthright in the times of the biblical patriarchs may be hard to understand. But the birthright bestowed significant privileges on the firstborn son. The firstborn son would assume the leadership and responsibilities of his father when he died. He also received a double portion of his father’s inheritance. A father could remove the birthright from his firstborn and give it to a younger son, but this was not typical. In the case of Esau and Jacob, the birthright was even more significant because of God’s covenant with their father. Which son would inherit the promises God made to Abraham? The firstborn had to be recognized by a witness, which is likely why such detail is given in Genesis 25:24–26 about the delivery of Esau and Jacob. Esau was born first, but Jacob was already striving to supplant his brother’s position by grabbing his heel.

The favoritism of each parent for a different son likely added to the sibling competition. Both Isaac and Rebekah knew what God had said about the older brother serving the younger, but Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob. His favoritism was based on his appetite for the game Esau hunted. Rebekah loved Jacob and wanted to see him receive the benefits of the firstborn.

Esau despised his birthright, selling it for red stew and thereby earning the name Edom (red), which his descendants would take. Esau remains an example of a worldly person who satisfied his temporary desires and didn’t immediately repent or recognize what he had lost. Hebrews 12:16 warns believers to not be “sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.” The word “unholy” in this verse implies godlessness or something common. Esau lacked the wisdom to make decisions of long-term and eternal value. He serves as a warning to us. We can easily be led astray to make poor choices based on the things of the world. Esau let the sight and smell of food lead to a terrible bargain with his brother. The double

portion of Isaac's wealth was worth much more than a single meal. However, Esau ate and left without remorse. We also can fail to recognize our poor decisions and carry on as though nothing happened. But when the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, may we be quick to repent.

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