

Food for Thought—Esau and What We Value



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What are we valuing or failing to value? A look at one portion of the story of Jacob and Esau should raise this question in our own minds.

There is an important small aspect of the birthright story that very often goes unnoticed. Esau comes home from the hunt hungry and tells Jacob he wants some of his stew. He is starving, he says. Christians have tended to take Esau at his word and assume that he really is starving. We somehow picture Jacob out in the middle of nowhere and Esau running into him by chance, just in time for Jacob to save Esau from death by starvation. But this is not so. Jacob and Esau are not out in the wilderness when this happens. They are both at home. Esau has just arrived back home from a hunt. He is at home. And because he is at home, Jacob's stew is not a necessity to keep Esau alive. Esau could just walk over to Rebekah's tent and ask her for some bread to munch on while he cooks his venison. Jacob's stew was not a need (there were plenty of other things to eat at hand). The stew is just what Esau preferred. It is simply what he had a hankering for at the moment.

What did Esau give up in exchange for this lentil pottage? A great deal. The birthright usually meant having a portion of the inheritance that was twice the size of a younger brother's portion. It also carried with it a spiritual blessing (and the oldest son who received a birthright was generally expected to be the family's spiritual leader after the death of the father).

Jacob, moreover was not doing something unheard of; brothers sometimes did trade or sell their birthrights but a normal man would only do that in exchange for something very valuable or important. When Esau demanded the stew, Jacob was likely joking when he suggested trading the birthright for it—who would trade something like that for a food craving? But when Esau took him up on the offer, Jacob was quick to seal the bargain. Who would trade a birthright for a Big Mac or a Hot Pocket? Well, apparently Esau would.

Why would Esau do this? It may have been his impulsivity or a failure to look ahead down the road in life, his apparent lack of interest in the spiritual aspect of a birthright, or all of the above, or perhaps something else. What is clear, however, is that Esau simply didn't value the birthright. When the KJV says Esau "despised" his birthright, it is using an older meaning of that word; it meant "to see no value in" a thing. For Esau, the birthright meant less to him than a transitory craving.

Years later, Esau suddenly does value the birthright when Isaac is dying and Esau realizes that he has lost it along with the blessing. Often, we too fail to value something only when we no longer have it.

What are the things which are worth a great deal (like the birthright was) but which we fail to see value in? Do we have even one friend? If we do, then we are blessed; even having one friend is a thing that is of great value. To see the beauty of even one tree is a gift. From fully-functioning modern toilets to reliable cars to the love of a pet to the ability to see or hear or read, our lives contain many things we fail to value or fail even to notice. This is not meant as an exercise in feeling guilty about the 800 things we don't remember to be thankful for. But it IS an invitation to remember even a few of the things that are of great value—the breeze on a hot day,

the wind in the trees or grass, the first crocus of spring, the fact that cats will purr when we pet them, the sound of a robin singing at eventide, the gift of laughter....

Jacob and Esau also eventually both became better people. Esau finally (it took a long time) became less completely self-centered (it took years for him to even notice whether the things he did gladdened or saddened his parents) and made better decisions. Also (and this too took time), he eventually let bygones be bygones with Jacob. Jacob, for his part, spent many years doing hard work for Laban and learning patience. We too can improve (especially over time), and that is an encouraging thought. The ability to (with God's help) change is also something we often forget to value, forget even to notice.

So meditate today on at least 5 things which you sometimes forget to notice or value but which are things of great worth indeed.