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SERIES: Fear or Faith? (Genesis Vol. 3)

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Message

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This is a familiar story. I've heard it told many, many times and almost always the conclusion is that Jacob's kind of a scoundrel and Esau is the victim. I would suggest to you that that is not correct. As a matter of fact, it's just the opposite.

Let's go back and look at the text a little bit more carefully - Verse 27 [Gen. 25, NASB] - **When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter.** Now when we hear hunter, we think sportsman, you know, pheasant hunter, duck hunter, deer hunter. But that really wasn't the picture in the ancient near East. A hunter was kind of a wild man, lived out away from the people, lived on his own, lived - it says here - **in the fields**, like out in the caves, kind of like an animal, had no real social skills that were developed, made his life by surviving and killing. It was just kind of a rough, wild type of an existence. Let's contrast that with Jacob. Notice the contrast is not an *and*. He's not saying Esau was this way *and* Jacob was that way, but it's a contrast. It's the word "but", saying they were opposites: **but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents.** That word *peaceful*'s probably unfortunate there. This is the exact same Hebrew word that's used in Job Chapter One, Verse Nine to say, Job was a perfect man. It's a word that means to be upright, to be a person full of integrity.

It's really a word that was saying Jacob was a man of integrity. He was a man of uprightness. He was a man that walked rightly before God. Often I've heard it said that Esau was a *man's man* and Jacob was kind of a *mama's boy*. That isn't true at all. That isn't the picture here. It's a picture of one who was consumed with himself, and lived for survival, and was just kind of rough and crude and wild, versus one who lived among his people, lived in the tents, and cared about his people, and his heritage in *The Promise* and all of these things that mattered to God. That's really the comparison here.

Esau was out hunting. He's famished, so he comes in. Verse 30:

and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished."

Again, that's an unfortunate translation in my opinion. It sounds like Esau has just come back from finishing school, "*Please may I have some of that stew.*" That isn't the Hebrew at all. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew is kind of rough. It's kind of crude. It's kind of substandard. It's like he's from the wrong side of the tracks. This is the guy that has no social skills, who's lived among the animals, who survives by killing, and the literal Hebrew is "*Gimme some of that red stuff that I may gulp it.*" That's really what it says. It's very rough and that's really the picture of Esau. He's coming in; that's all he cares about, is whatever he needs to survive. So Jacob barter with and makes a deal with him. He wants the birthright.

Verse 34:

Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. (Vs. 34a)

This is an attempt by the writer to establish the personality or the character of Esau. In the ancient near East, eating together was very important. It was something that brought people and families together. Community was very important, so it was unheard of that somebody would be so crass, so crude, to come in, eat and leave. And so there's a rapid fire series of verbs to say that's the kind of person he was. He couldn't care less about anybody else. He *came, drank, rose, went.*

All of that is a commentary on who Esau was, but probably the most telling is the statement at the end of the text:

Thus Esau despised his birthright. (vs. 34b)

It is unusual that the Old Testament writers would conclude a narrative event with such a statement that tells you what the point of the narrative was. Usually they just trust you to figure that out. In this case, they just plain tell you. It doesn't say, *and Jacob was a scoundrel.* He's not the bad guy in the story. **Esau despised his birthright.** Despise means he saw no value in it. He didn't care. It meant nothing to him. He gave it away for a bowl of soup.

Hebrews Chapter 12, Verses 16 and 17 offer a New Testament commentary on this story. The writer of Hebrews says, don't be like Esau. Actually it says, "Don't be like godless Esau, who sold his birthright for a bowl of soup". There is no question that the writer of Hebrews is condemning Esau for what he did here. Remember again, that birthright was not just getting the goods. It came with a responsibility to care for your people, to shepherd your people, to be their leader, to be their shepherd, to be the patriarch. He couldn't have cared less about any of that. All he cared about was himself and surviving, so he gave it up for a bowl of soup. What's interesting is the writer of Hebrews in Chapter 12, when he uses Esau as an example, is in the midst of a discussion about grace. He says, don't come up short on grace. Don't become embittered. I think he's talking about the fact that the reality of grace is, that God's favor is poured out, on whomever God chooses to pour out his favor, and we love it when it comes our way, but we don't know what to do with it when it lands on somebody else. And Esau didn't know what to do with it; it wasn't fair. It wasn't right. The birthright, the inheritance, everything was supposed to be his. Now, did Jacob and Esau understand that at this point? We don't know, but what had been clearly evident is that God's hand of favor was upon Jacob. He was upright, he was righteous. And sometimes, when we see the grace of God on somebody else, we become embittered. We decide if that's the way God's going to be, then I'm going to do it myself. And that's what Esau did. He saw God's hand of favor on Jacob and he just then took his life into his own hands. He became godless and lived for himself, for his own survival. That's all he cared about. And that's the tone that *he despised his birthright.* He couldn't have cared less.

Over the years that I've been in ministry, I would like to think one of the things that has characterized my ministry, is I am a promoter of grace. I would like people someday to remember, he tried to create an environment of grace. But I would also say that over the years, the thing I've been criticized more for, than anything else, has been grace, because people don't

know what to do with it. They just don't know how to process it. I can't tell you how many times I've been told, that's not right. That's not fair. Why do we have these sinners attending our church? We need to throw them out. People don't know what to do with grace. It's unmerited. We start saying, that's not right. That's not fair. That's not the way it should be. That's grace, but we just don't know what to do with it. We love it when we're Jacob. We don't know what to do with it when we're Esau.

I am convinced that even though God chose that Esau would serve Jacob, there still was the potential for an enormous amount of blessing, as a member of that family, to have been poured out upon him, had he responded properly to the grace he still received, but that wasn't the choice he made. He chose to be godless. He chose to despise it. He chose to walk away from it. Again, you have this mystery between the sovereign plan of God and the choices that people make, but clearly the text is indicating that Esau made a choice and that choice condemned him. Was Jacob right for what he did? No, I don't think he was. I don't think he was. I think his heart was right, but I think his methodology was bad. He should have just waited and let God do his thing. He didn't have to try and manipulate it this way, but I do think what was in the heart of Jacob, is Jacob saw what was in the heart of Esau, and that Esau was not fit to lead. Esau was not fit to be the patriarch of his people. Remember, he was described as a righteous, upright, blameless man in the beginning of this story. And I think Jacob had it right, he needed to move into the position and take the leadership. He would lead his people. He would shepherd them, because Esau would destroy them. I think his heart was right. I just think his methodology was bad, but you don't see Jacob condemned here. You do see Esau condemned, which gets us really to where we need to start in this whole discussion about what it means to be a person of faith. It ultimately comes down to an issue of the heart, and Jacob had a good heart. I think Esau had a bad heart, and ultimately the issue of faith comes down to an issue of the heart. If you don't have the right heart, everything else is going to fall apart.

When you go back through the Old and New Testament, and you look at these great heroes of the faith, men and women, were they perfect people? No, they weren't. Some of them had catastrophic failures. Noah, Abraham, Moses, Isaac, Jacob, David, Thomas, Peter in the New Testament, and we look at those failures and we have some identity with that, and we say, Oh, they were like us. Before you identify with them and say, Oh, they were like us, you need to recognize these people had an incredible heart for God, remarkable hearts for God. That's what made them such great heroes of faith. They weren't perfect people. Sometimes they made bad decisions and sometimes they had lousy strategies and sometimes they wandered down the wrong path, but mostly they had a passionate heart for God, and their desire was to walk in obedience to Him and to accomplish His will in the world. That's what characterized them. I listen to the TV preachers and a lot of them talk about faith, but a lot of them talk about faith as something you can get, in order to get more money, in order to make sure your children never get sick, in order to make sure that God just paves your life the way you want it. That's the heart of Esau. That's a heart consumed with self and selfishness. God will never honor that in this walk of faith. The heart of one who really walks by faith, is a heart that has a passion to walk with God, to obey God, to see God's agenda accomplished on Earth, and the whole faith walk is about God and His plan and purpose, not me and my agenda and my stuff. If you don't understand that from the beginning, then the rest of the walk is never going to work.

We're prone toward rules and regulations and policies that are black and white and controlling, and define things for us, but in many ways, the Christian life just doesn't work that way. And we

struggle with that. Ultimately, the issue is about our hearts. Let me give you a couple examples of that. Over the last couple of years, the board of elders has been going back and reexamining some policies and philosophies, and re-discussing some of these things. One of them we've looked at is the whole issue of divorce and remarriage. It's very controversial, has been for 2000 years, and we figured it all out. [Laughter]. Historically what happens, is people and churches take very black and white rigid positions, but what we were struck with when we went back into the Scriptures, is the Bible doesn't do that.

We're much more rigid than God is. He doesn't give us these things in black and white terms. As a matter of fact, the terms related to this subject are very vague, and it's hard to understand exactly; God, what are you talking about here? And the reason we concluded that God does that is because he doesn't want us to operate on the basis of policies. He wants us to operate on the basis of heart. In other words, when we define things very rigidly, what happens is people whose marriages are falling apart, they come and they want to know, what does your church believe about divorce and remarriage? And what they're asking is, what are the loopholes? What are the loopholes - we call it, when is divorce permissible before God? But really what they're looking for is a loophole. "Oh, okay. Those are the loopholes." So then they go back, and they manipulate their circumstances such that they hit the loophole, and then it's okay.

They may have a dark heart before God, but in their mind, it's all okay; I hit the loophole. And what we've concluded is, that isn't the way it works. What we need to look at, is not whether or not somebody is hitting a loophole. We need to look at a person's heart; does this person long to walk with God and to walk in obedience to God and is there evidence of that? Because ultimately, that's what matters. Somebody may hit a loophole and still have a black heart before God, and that's what matters to God. Right now, we're in the process of discussing gender roles in the church, the roles of men and women, and it's again a very controversial subject. And we go back and we look at the Scriptures, and it's very hard to identify exactly where those lines are, what's appropriate and what's inappropriate, and when have we crossed over those lines.

It's not black and white; it's kind of mushy. And we find ourselves again asking God, why? Why is this so messy? Why? Why can't you just put a black and white line somewhere? And God seems to say, because I don't want you looking at lines and policies. I want you to looking at people's hearts. In the end, that is what's going to matter to God. There are areas where we're not sure where to draw the lines, and we'll probably draw them in the wrong places, but I don't think God's overly hung up about that. What He cares about is a person's heart, and that's what we need to be looking at, is people's hearts. Do they long to walk in obedience to God? Do they desire to accomplish God's will in the world? Sometimes all of our rigid policies and our black and white lines are just a mechanism, whereby we can go right to the edge, without feeling like we've stepped over.

Oftentimes, I get asked the question, what's appropriate and inappropriate, as far as physical contact in a dating relationship, but what I'm often being asked is, how far can I go before I step over the line? That misses the point completely. The point is not, how far can I go? Can I get right to the edge without going over? The point is, what is necessary to live my life, in such a way that it is pleasing and honoring to God? I don't want to live right next to the edge. I want to live in the center of the plan and purpose of God, but oftentimes in these standards out in the world, we're just trying to get right to the edge without going over. And God says, I don't want that. I want your heart. It's about longing to walk with me and walk in obedience to me, and wanting my will accomplishing in the world, and our faith is believing, that God can use us to accomplish what we couldn't do ourselves. Again, that becomes an issue of the heart. Now it's

true it's a very subjective thing; that's why we don't like it. We like the black and white. We like the policies, but that is why God has given us His Spirit to operate within us, that we might have discernment where we otherwise wouldn't, that we might be able to assess the condition of our hearts and those that we're with.

Well, **this whole subject of faith really comes down to an issue of heart.** I would suggest that all of us take some time this week to think about, what is the condition of my heart? When we talk about faith, am I wanting to use God like a rabbit's foot, to manipulate into somehow getting what I want? Is that my understanding of faith, or is it really a heart that longs to see God's plan and purpose accomplished in this world, and I just want to be a part of it, and I want to trust Him to do through me, what I could never do on my own. **That really is the starting point, that we have the heart of Jacob rather than the heart of Esau.**

Nat: So Bryan, as you know, I've been a pastor and I know how challenging some of these situations can actually be. I mean, can you talk a little bit more about the differences between implementing a policy, for example, on divorce and remarriage, and trying to assess people's hearts or motives?

Bryan: Yeah, so I think it is a problem. I think churches like policies, because they're black and white and it's convenient for the leaders, but life's messy, and I don't think black and white policies are typically in the best interest of the people. So you're sorting out things that are difficult. So divorce and remarriage is a good one, of the difference between clear policies, and people trying to figure out the loopholes, and whether or not they can get out based on these loopholes, versus a heart that wants to do the right thing, a heart that wants to walk in obedience. So you look at the stories of all these patriarchs and the great heroes of the faith. They weren't perfect. They made lots of mistakes, but they had a heart for God, and God had a way of responding to that and moving them along.

So I think another thing I mentioned in the message - I get this from a young people all the time - is they want to know how far is too far in a dating relationship? You know, they're talking about physical activity. And they ask that, because they want to go all the way up to the line, but not cross the line. And it's like, shouldn't the question be, what would be most pleasing to God? What does it mean to walk in righteousness in this relationship? So I think lots of times, legalism appeals to people because it creates lines, and people can go up to the line, but not over the line. And that's just completely the wrong conversation. It needs to be, **what does it mean to have a heart for righteousness and to be passionate about that?**

Nat: Great. Thanks, Brian.