

## Essential Truths III: Working With God

## 2

## Taking the Baton

In the last lesson, we laid the foundation of an understanding of our birthright as Christians. It is only as we participate in the firstborn rights – the position, the inheritance and the responsibility – of Jesus himself that we move out in effective ministry to others.

In this lesson, we are going to examine our birthright more closely, this time putting the magnifying glass on the lives of two brothers who, in the Bible, exemplify the right and the wrong attitude toward the purposes of God.

**Read Malachi 1:2-3**

Here the Lord makes a bold and impassioned statement. The *King James Version* translates this:

“Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.”

The Lord is referring here to the nations of Israel and Edom, which had taken on the characteristics of their founders, Jacob and Esau. So emphatic is the Lord’s attitude toward these two brothers that this verse is repeated in **Romans 9:13** and used as a textbook example of the foreknowledge of God in his choosing of people to fulfill his purposes.

To get a little background on these two brothers, read the following passage of Scripture:

**Read Genesis 25:19-34**

Esau and Jacob are given to us as examples of the kind of lives that attract either

**The Birthright****Taking the Baton****The Great Commission****The Body of Christ****The Ministry of Every Believer****Joining the Work of God****The Tree of Life****Ministry of Reconciliation****Filled with the Spirit****Ministry to the Body****Sent into the Harvest****Speaking the Word of God****A Lifestyle Gospel****Salt of the Earth****Enforcing the Victory****Signs and Wonders****A New Kind of Leadership****Establishing a Daily Church****Making Disciples****The New Wine****The Goal of Ministry**

the love or hatred of God. What was it about Esau that caused the Lord to express such strong feelings about him? And why would Jacob, with all his personality flaws, draw the love of God?

As we follow the characters of these two men, as they are described in the Old and New Testaments, we will see that it was a particular attitude of heart that each one had that drew such a strong response from God. Their attitudes to life defined the motivation and orientation of their whole lives.

## Two Attitudes of Heart

Jacob and Esau were twins born to Isaac and Rebekah. From the moment of their birth they were seen to have distinctive attributes, and these attributes were reflected in the names given to them:

- **Jacob** – means “supplanter, deceiver, trickster.” It has the literal meaning of “one who grasps the heel” and the implied meaning of “one who takes the place of someone else by treacherous or underhanded means.” This name came from the fact that Jacob was born second, grasping the heel of his brother, part of the struggle they had had in the womb over who would be the first born. Esau would later lament, “Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me...!” (**Genesis 27:36**).
- **Esau** – means “hairy,” taken from the fact when he was born “his whole body was like a hairy garment,” something that must have come as quite a shock to his parents! He was also born with a noticeably red complexion, and this is reflected in his nickname, Edom, which means “red.”

As Jacob’s life later showed, his name certainly did describe his character, for he tricked and schemed his way to take Esau’s place as the firstborn and to get everything he wanted. But with all his faults, Jacob had the one ingredient in his life that drew the love of God and enabled the Lord eventually to transform his character, changing him into the kind of person he desired him to be. So what was this one ingredient that made all the difference?

**Genesis 25:27** provides us with the key to identifying Esau and Jacob’s heart-attitudes. In a simple observation of the difference between their lifestyles, the *New American Standard Bible* tells us:

“When the boys grew up, Esau became a skilful hunter, *a man of the field*; but Jacob was a peaceful man, *living in tents*.”

This statement reveals both the boys’ characters and their attitude toward life. Let’s take a closer looking at these two descriptions.

### ***Esau – the man of the field***

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of the “field” as a picture of the world (see **Matthew 13:24-30,36-43; John 4:34-38**). The statement that declared Esau a “man of the field” not only described his occupation, but also, as the story of his

life unfolds, was a picture of his heart-attitude.

Esau was a man who loved the things of the world. He lived for the pleasures that life could give him *now*.

### ***Jacob – the tent-dweller***

Esau at that time was also living in the tents with his father and mother, but the scripture does not characterize him as a tent-dweller. It does, however, specifically single Jacob out as the one who lived in tents. **Hebrews 11:8-10** gives the reason why:

“By faith Abraham . . . made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, *as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise*. For he was *looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*”

Jacob, like Abraham and Isaac, is recorded in Scripture as one who “lived in tents.” He lived a nomadic existence, not because this was his only option, but by choice. He lived in tents, **Hebrews 11:8-10** tells us, for four reasons:

- Because he “made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country...”
- Because he was an heir “with [Abraham and Isaac] of the same promise...”
- Because he was “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”
- Because he had faith.

This is exactly the same description given to us as believers in Christ. We too are called “aliens and strangers in the world” (**1 Peter 1:1,17; 2:11**). We too are heirs of the promise of Abraham (**Romans 4:16; 9:8; Galatians 3:14,29**). We too are looking forward to the City of God (**Hebrews 13:14**). And we too have our lives defined by a faith in God (**Romans 1:17; 2 Corinthians 5:7**).

Jacob, like Abraham and Isaac, had one main focus in life – he had his eyes on an eternal dwelling place. He believed God’s promise to Abraham, his grandfather, that he would be the father of many nations (**Genesis 12:2-3; 17:4-6,16; 18:18; 22:17-18**). This promise was ultimately to be fulfilled in Christ and the New Creation that came forth from him, for it is the New Creation people, born through Christ’s atoning work on the Cross, that make up the “City” of God (see **Hebrews 12:22-24; 13:14; Galatians 3:7-9,13-19,29; Revelation 21:2**).

The key to Jacob’s life was that “living in tents” represented a transient life. His whole attitude was that he was a foreigner and pilgrim in the world (**Hebrews 11:13-16**). With all his faults and failings, he had his eyes fixed on one major goal – God’s eternal purpose.

Now that we have an understanding of the motivations of Esau and Jacob, we are ready to look at the focal point of their contention – the birthright.

## Attitude to the Birthright

Esau and Jacob each had a different attitude toward the birthright. This attitude became the motivation of their whole lives.

### Read Hebrews 12:16

Esau is singled out as a “profane” (KJV) and “godless” (NIV) man, a description supported by the fact, in the view of the writer of **Hebrews**, that he sold his birthright for a single meal. By contrast, Jacob is singled out as a man of faith (**Hebrews 11:9,21**), and that faith was expressed in a single-eyed focus upon the birthright, an issue that defined the struggle between the two brothers right through their lives.

Even though God had planned for Jacob (the youngest) to be the firstborn (**Genesis 25:23**), Isaac had chosen Esau to be the one to carry the birthright. The problem was that Esau had no interest in the purposes of God. He did not have the heart of the firstborn, whereas Jacob did.

As we study the story of Jacob and Esau, we discover that the firstborn’s rights involved two clear parts. These two parts are shown in the two stages to their mutual story – the selling of the birthright and the supplanting of the blessing.

### *The selling of the birthright*

#### Read Genesis 25:29-34

Esau’s attitude to his birthright is revealed the first time a minor crisis appeared. Returning from the fields one day, having been unsuccessful in his hunt, Esau smells the aroma of lentil porridge wafting from Jacob’s tent. He asks for a bowl of the thick stew, but Jacob, cunning as he is, puts a price on the food: “Sell me your birthright.”

Esau’s response reveals the attitude of his heart, an attitude that **Hebrews 12:16** describes as “godless.” He says:

“Look, I am about to die...What good is the birthright to me?”

Jacob makes Esau swear an oath, which in patriarchal times was considered legally binding. Thus, says the **Genesis** account, “Esau despised his birthright.”

But this is not the end of the story.

### *The supplanting of the blessing*

#### Read Genesis 27:1-41

This account records how Jacob used trickery to obtain the blessing of the firstborn. This blessing is defined by the words of Isaac’s prayer over Jacob and the words that Isaac later used to describe this lost blessing to Esau.

- **The words of Isaac’s prayer over Jacob** – “May God give you of heaven’s dew and of earth’s richness – an abundance of grain and new

wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.\* May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.”

- **The words of Isaac’s explanation to Esau** – “I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine.”

Esau’s reaction to this event is very revealing. His words show a flawed conception of the meaning of the birthright, for he says:

“Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he’s taken my blessing!”

Firstly it should be noted that Esau is wrong. Jacob only deceived his brother once – in the supplanting of his blessing. There was no deceit in Jacob’s obtaining of the birthright. This was an open, legal transaction involving the exchange of items considered to be of equal value to Esau – the birthright exchanged for stew, the eternal for the immediate.

But we could easily miss something that Esau said when he reacted to the news of his brother’s deceit. Esau says, “He has deceived me these *two* times: He took my *birthright*, and now he’s taken my *blessing*!”

Esau saw the birthright and the blessing as two separate issues. He despised his birthright, but at no time did he ever plan to give up his blessing. After all, this is what Esau wanted. This was the focus of his life – the material blessings that this world could offer.

The account tells us that Esau “burst out with a loud and bitter cry,” or, as the *King James Version* phrases it, he “cried with an exceeding loud and bitter cry.” This shows the depth of his reaction to the news that he had lost his blessing. Yet a quick reread of **Genesis 25:29-34** shows no indication that Esau showed any similar remorse over the loss of his birthright. When Esau sold his birthright to Jacob there is no record that he “cried with an exceeding loud and bitter cry.”

The accounts of the selling of the birthright and the supplanting of the blessing reveal a fatal flaw in Esau’s attitude toward life, a flaw that would later attract from God the worst epitaph any person could have: “Esau I have hated.”

Let’s take a closer look at this flawed perception, for sadly this attitude, so hated by God, is rife even today in Christian lives.

## Two Parts to the Firstborn Rights

The story of Jacob and Esau reveals two parts to the firstborn rights:

- The birthright
- The blessing

\* Do you remember the dreams Joseph had? (**Genesis 37:5-9**).

In English these two words have *alliteration* (they begin with the same letter or sound), but in the original Hebrew, the two words are an *anagram* (they have exactly the same letters, but in a different order). The word for birthright is *bekorah*, while the word for blessing is *berakah*.<sup>\*</sup> As we shall see, these two words don't just sound alike. They are also conceptually tied together.

### ***The Birthright***

The birthright is nothing less than the right of the firstborn to carry on the purposes of God in his generation. When Esau sold his birthright to satisfy his physical hunger, the Bible says he was “godless,” which means simply, “to be without God.” He was declaring that he placed no value on the purposes of God. By rejecting his birthright, he was excluding God from his life.

### ***The Blessing***

#### **Read Hebrews 12:17**

While Esau had despised his birthright, he had absolutely no intention of giving up his material blessing and double portion inheritance. When he sold the birthright to Jacob, he knew he was selling him the birthright of God's purpose. This is why he said:

“Look, I am about to die...What good is the birthright to me?”

But Esau did not realize one vital fact: *the blessing is the result of the birthright*. As one commentary puts it:

“Though Esau tried to separate birthright from blessing, the former led inevitably to the latter, since both involved the inheritance of the firstborn.”<sup>1</sup>

This was Esau's fatal mistake. From God's perspective, you cannot separate the birthright from the blessing, but this is exactly what Esau tried to do (note again **Genesis 27:36**).

As Christians, we too are blessed because of our birthright in Christ. But for too many Christians, their focus is on the blessing. Without realizing it, they have fallen into the same trap Esau fell into.

#### **Read Philippians 3:17-20**

Paul is not speaking here of unbelievers but of believers who, like Esau, have rejected the birthright of God's eternal purpose for the sake of immediate earthly gain. As *The Bible Reader's Companion* expresses it:

“Esau is an example of the godless in that he saw absolutely no value in spiritual things and so traded his birthright to God's covenant promise for a bowl of stew. If you and I value only the material rather than the spiritual, we too will miss the blessing.”<sup>2</sup>

The blessing flows from the birthright.

<sup>\*</sup> In ancient Hebrew, there are usually no vowels used. *Bekorah* is spelled *bkrh* while *berakah* is spelled *brkh*.

## Focus on the Birthright

*The New Scofield Study Bible* describes the birthright in terms of three elements:

- The right to be a **God-Representer** – “[U]ntil the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood the head of the family exercised priestly rights.”<sup>3</sup> It was the firstborn who acted as a priest before God – representing the family to God and God to the family. This is a key part of the function of Christ as the Firstborn (**Hebrews 2:17; 8:1**), and one shade of meaning behind Israel being called God’s firstborn (**Exodus 4:22**). God’s intention was for Israel to be a priestly nation (**Exodus 19:6**), an intention that has now been fulfilled in what **Hebrews 12:23** calls “church of the firstborn” (**1 Peter 2:5,9**).
- The right to be a **Satan-Bruiser** – “The Abrahamic family held the Edenic promise of the Satan-Bruiser...”<sup>4</sup> Down through the generations, God’s promise that that “[the offspring of the woman] will crush [the serpent’s] head” (**Genesis 3:15**) was passed down from father to son as part of the covenantal birthright. As God’s Firstborn, this birthright was ultimately fulfilled in Christ (**Colossians 2:15**) and also in us, “the church of the firstborn [ones]” (**Romans 16:20**).
- The right to be an **Earth-Blessor** – The covenantal promise given to Abraham in **Genesis 12:3** not only emphasized God’s blessing on Abraham, but that “all peoples on earth will be blessed *through you*.” This is also the covenant of promise to which you, as a firstborn one in Christ, are an heir (note again **Galatians 3:29**). This is critical to our understanding of how the birthright and the blessing are intertwined. God told Abraham, “I will bless you...and *you will be a blessing*” (**Genesis 12:2**). Esau tried to separate the I-will-bless-you part from you-will-be-a-blessing part. He tried to divorce the blessing from the birthright. But this cannot be done. To be blessed and to be a blessing go hand-in-hand (**1 Peter 3:9**).

When Esau despised his birthright, he was despising the opportunity to be a God-Representer, a Satan-Bruiser and an Earth-Blessor in his generation.

## Taking Up the Birthright

### Read Hebrews 12:1

The writer of Hebrews uses the picture of a relay race that has been in progress throughout history. The heroes of faith in the past have all faithfully fulfilled their lap of the race, and have passed the baton on. Abraham passed it to Isaac. Isaac was going to pass it to Esau, but he didn’t want it. Jacob desired the baton more than anything else in life and so he took it up.

Down through the centuries the baton of God’s eternal purpose has been passed on from one generation to another (**Acts 13:36**). Now it’s our turn in the arena of

faith. We are completing the race that they began so that together we might reach the goal (**Hebrews 11:39-40**).

In the 1956 Olympic Games, the Australian Women's Relay Team was slated to win the gold. They had broken records and had in their team Marjorie Jackson, at that time the fastest woman sprinter in the world. Yet on the day of the relay finals, tragedy struck. Marjorie Jackson was waiting, poised, as the runners raced toward her. The Australian team was in front and this was the final section of the relay. The race was all but sewn up; gold was in sight.

Marjorie Jackson began to run, hand stretched behind her, ready to receive the baton. But as the baton was passed into her hand, it slipped and fell to the ground. Within seconds, the other runners flashed passed, leaving Marjorie and her teammate standing incredulously at the side of the track, hands on their hips, shaking their heads. In one fateful moment, the baton was dropped and the race lost.

The Bible says that you are now poised, in the final lap of a race that began with Abraham. As you look behind you, you can see the previous generation running toward you, with the baton held out in front of them. The question is: What will you do? Will you be like Esau, who considered the baton to be worthless, selling it out for any immediate blessings he could get from God? Or will you be like Jacob, who counted the baton of God's purpose to be the most valuable thing on earth? Will you drop the baton, or will you grip it with all your might and begin to run the race that has been set out before you?

**Read again Hebrews 12:1-2**

<sup>1</sup> Expert Commentary on Genesis 27:36, *Compton's Interactive Bible NIV*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bible Reader's Companion*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Scofield Study Bible*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Scofield Study Bible*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

The Online Bible College can be accessed at [www.online-bible-college.com](http://www.online-bible-college.com)