

The Dumbest People in the Bible

1. Esau

Genesis 25:19-34; Hebrews 12:12-17

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on July 31, 2016]

I

History never tells the whole story of who and what we are.

History always picks out certain events and actions that it considers to be most important,

but which are not always the events and actions we wish to have remembered.

For example...during the years I lived in Tonawanda, New York, right outside of Buffalo, the Buffalo Bills were a great football team—

so great that the Bills are to this day the only NFL team to play in four consecutive Super Bowls—

1991, 1992, 1993, and 1994.

A number of teams—

four, to be exact—

still haven't been even to one Super Bowl—

much less four in a row.

But how are the Buffalo Bills teams of those years remembered?

As the team that went to four consecutive Super Bowls?

Or as the team that failed to win even one of those Super Bowls?

So often history remembers the mistakes,

the errors,

the bonehead plays—

like Scott Norwood's missed field goal in SB XXV,

or Thurman Thomas' fumbles against Dallas in SB XXVIII.

Sometimes history remembers the things we would just as soon forget.

And that is how it is with poor old Esau.

Esau will always be remembered as the one who sold his birthright for a bowl of soup—

although my good friend Charlie Julian, who was from Texas, said it was a bowl of Texas chili—

which made it seem not so unreasonable to him.

We remember Esau for one of the worst business deals in history
and one of the dumbest personal decisions ever made.

So Esau is the ideal choice to begin a series of sermons on the dumbest people in the Bible.

II

Who was Esau and how did he get to be so dumb?

Esau was the first grandson of Abraham and Sarah,
the oldest of twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah.

It was a difficult pregnancy from the beginning,
as the twins struggled in the womb,
causing poor Rebekah to cry out to God.

God's response comes in the form of a poetic oracle:

*Two nations are in your womb,
And two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.*

Esau was born first—all red and wrinkled with lots of hair.

Then Jacob was born holding unto his brother's heel—
so he was given a name that means *he takes by the heel* or *he supplants*.

The boys were as different as night and day.

Esau was an outdoorsman—
and a skilled hunter—
while Jacob was a homebody who learned to cook.

As parents we are taught to love all our children equally,
but we know that isn't always how things work out.

The narrator tells us that Isaac loved Esau,
but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Perhaps Rebekah loved Jacob because of what God had told her—
that God had chosen him to rule over his older brother.

Whatever the reasons for the parents' affections,
it's always a recipe for trouble.

Years pass,
the boys grow up,
and one day, after a strenuous day of hunting,
Esau returns home so hungry he can hardly see straight.

He finds his brother Jacob cooking up a pot of lentil soup.

Esau walks over to the cooking fire and asks his brother for some of the soup.

Jacob said,

"Not so fast, bro...first sell me your rights as the first-born son."

Esau thinks to himself, what use is a birthright when I am about to starve to death?

So he says, *"Okay...let's eat."*

But Jacob—always the clever one—understands that a promise made on an empty stomach is easily forgotten when the stomach is full.

So Jacob says, "Swear to me first."

So Esau swore on the family Bible,
sold his birthright to Jacob,
and got his soup.

The story from Genesis chapter 25 concludes this way:

"Esau ate and drank and then got up and left. That was all Esau cared about his rights as the first-born son." (vs. 34)

III

To understand why this was such a bad bargain,
we must look at what a birthright meant in ancient times.

Esau and Jacob were fraternal twins.

However, since Esau was born first, he was considered the oldest.

The first-born or oldest son of a household had certain rights of birth.

He received honor and authority.

He received a double portion of his father's inheritance.

He often acted as priest for the family in offering sacrifices.

He also was the one to receive the special blessing from his father at the time of his father's death.

If Esau had kept his birthright, then it is not unreasonable to suggest that...

he would have been the one to inherit the promised land...

his descendants would be as numerous as stars in the sky or sand on the beach.

the heroes and heroines of God's chosen people would have been his descendants,

rather than Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, and Esther.

What did Esau receive in exchange for his birthright?

A bowl of soup?

How dumb can a person get?

IV

Yes, Esau was dumb, but like all dumb people, he did have some good qualities.

We know that Esau was a good hunter—that did require a certain amount of intelligence and skill in those days before hunters had high-powered scopes and high-powered, semi-automatic rifles.

We know that Esau had a certain quality of gentleness.

He was especially devoted to his father Isaac.

When Isaac was old and blind, he had but to ask for something to eat and Esau would not only kill the game, he would also cook it and serve it to his father.

Genesis 27 tells how while Esau was out hunting for game, Jacob and his mother conspired to deceive old Isaac, so that he would give to Jacob the blessing that should have gone to Esau at the oldest son.

D.R. Benson's book *Biblical Limericks* describes it this way:

*Blind Isaac on Esau did dote,
But Rebekah gave Jacob her vote;
By carefully finessing,
The patriarch's blessing
She got him (and, too, Esau's goat).*

As you can well imagine, Esau was not happy with his brother.

Robbed of his birthright and cheated out of his father's blessing,
he vows to kill Jacob.

Rebekah then sends Jacob away to her brother Laban's house.

Jacob spends the next 20 years wondering what would happen when he finally returns home.

In the end, we learn the most important thing about Esau:
he had a forgiving spirit.

Twice his brother Jacob tricked and defrauded him.

But in the end, when Jacob returned after many years away,
Esau decided he could not go on living with hatred and bitterness.

So he forgave his brother and the two were reconciled.

No...Esau was not totally dumb.

He simply did some dumb things...
and he made some dumb decisions.

And that describes you and me, doesn't it.

None of us is totally dumb.

We have all done some dumb things...
some that are really dumb.

And we will continue to do some dumb things from time to time.

Be we are not totally dumb—and neither was Esau.

V

But this incident doesn't speak very well for Jacob, does it?

Jacob was not acting like a brother.

If he had been a true brother,
 he would gladly have shared his food with Esau—
 without obligation or strings attached.

True families don't try to profit from or take advantage of the weakness of other family members.

It doesn't matter whether we are talking about immediate family,
 extended family,
 the church family,
 or the human family.

Jacob's conduct was not that of true family—
 and so he must bear partial responsibility for this dubious transaction.

But serious blame also rests with Esau.

He was stupid and short-sighted.

He did not have to accept Jacob's offer—
 any more than we have to accept all the enticing offers that come to us.

(Years ago on *Saturday Night Live*, comedian Dennis Miller joked about reading a classified ad in the *National Enquirer*. "STOP GETTING RIPPED OFF! Send \$10.00 and find out how." Miller said: "Now that sounds like a good deal. Maybe I should send \$20.00.")

We may not have much control over the propositions we receive—
 but we sure do have control over those we accept.

Why blame others for making certain proposals or propositions,
 when we are the ones who make the decisions to participate in those
 proposals or accept those propositions?

Yes, Jacob was greedy.

But Esau...well, he was just plain dumb.

VI

How dumb was Esau?

Well...it's like if you hold a penny close enough to your eye,
it will block out the sun.

A penny is nothing compared to the sun.

But if you hold it close enough, you will lose sight of the sun.

How foolish it would be to forget about the sun and concentrate on the penny.

How foolish it would be to act as if the sun didn't exist because we are so
captivated by the penny.

How foolish it would be to look at life from the perspective of a penny held too
closely and miss the sun, which, though far away,
nourishes and warms our bodies and turns night into day.

Yet that is precisely what Esau did!

He was hungry
and he was tired,
and all he could see was a bowl of soup,
a bowl of soup that looked like the most important thing in life.

The bright promise of his birthright seemed so far away
and the soup so close at hand.

Esau allowed a bowl of soup to block out the sunlight of God's promise.

Dumb and dumber!

We may find it easy to criticize Esau for being so shortsighted.

But how many times have we allowed the convenience of the moment,

the hunger for an immediate reward
 or instant revenge,
 the temptation to self-gratification,
 or the desire to win at any cost,
 to block out God's promise of a special future?

How many times have we allowed—
 a penny's worth of greed,
 a penny's worth of ego,
 a penny's worth of selfishness,
 a penny's worth of spite,
 a penny's worth of meanness,
 a penny's worth of uncontrolled anger,
 to block out the bright light of God's love,
 which even then was shining upon us?

God's love turns our midnight of sorrow into the high noon of peace.

God's love nourishes us with its wisdom and warms us with its truth.

It is possible to become so fixated on our present pain and inconveniences,
 that we forget the love God has for us
 and the future God is holding for us.

Admit it—when you're hungry and tired,
 Jacob's soup can look and smell so good,
 that we have difficulty remembering the value of our birthright.

When you've been lied to and deceived—
 revenge smells good.

When you say no to sin and see how happy those are who said yes to sin—
 temptation smells good.

When being honest costs you monetarily—
 compromise smells good.

When you've had your feelings hurt—

Jesus said, *Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* (Matt. 18:18)

Hold on to your birthright,
for we have been endowed with honor:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. (1 Peter 2:9a)

Hold on to your birthright,
for with it we inherit the blessing of Almighty God:

Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. (Rev. 21:7)

Hold on to your birthright!

Amen.

Sources: William Whatley; Charles W. Julian