

## **Eating: How Good It Is! (Part Two)**

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The Bible mentions eating around 700 times, highlighting the broad practicality of the Bible's instruction. Its lessons for us are drawn from life itself, and eating is a major part of everyone's experience. Regardless of race, wealth, education, gender, or age, everybody eats. We may do it carefully or carelessly. Some prefer that every meal include order and tranquility and perhaps even a measure of formality. Others catch every meal on the fly. Nevertheless, everybody eats. By studying eating in the experiences of others, we plumb a deep well of instruction from which we can draw vital lessons to help us through life.

Banquets get more ink in the Bible than one might expect. Everything from lavish state banquets held by kings to the less formal but happy occasions when families came together after a sheep shearing or harvest appear there. In each of these, something significant occurs that adds to our understanding. God also records several occasions when both the number of people involved and the amount of food eaten was small. A huge banquet is not necessary for great instructive events to happen.

Genesis provides many foundational principles and patterns that God continues to follow throughout the Bible. On at least four occasions, eating and sin or eating and righteousness crop up, showing the foundational principle. This signals that, even apart from eating being physically necessary, it in some way reveals a person's character, attitude and personality. In these four occasions, the Bible makes a clear statement about the character of the participants and gives helpful instruction for us to evaluate ourselves against.

Adam and Eve's original sin is one of these events, but we will skip it, as it has been explained so often. A second involves Jacob and Rebekah's deception of the blind Isaac, which we will peruse for its useful background information. However, we should carefully examine Esau's rejection of his

birthright. Esau's actions paint such a clear picture of an unconverted person. By choosing to eat a stew at the wrong time, he reveals a significant flaw in his character all of us share to some degree. We will also analyze a good example, Abraham's servant's conduct during his negotiations with Laban, which, for all who understand, stands in sharp contrast to the others.

## Two Opposite Approaches

Now Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, two [*manner of*, KJV] peoples shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger." (Genesis 25:21-23)

God's revelation to Rebekah regarding the struggling twins is that two kinds or types of people were in her womb. They were definitely not identical twins. The word "manner," as used in the King James Version, indicates the reason for their rivalry; they were so different despite having the same parents. Their struggling in Rebekah's womb was a precursor of what continued after their birth, which significantly influenced the history of Isaac's descendants.

Each son's approach toward and manner of life irritated the other. Each rubbed the other the wrong way. Rebekah seems naturally drawn to Jacob and Isaac to Esau, exacerbating an already volatile situation. Thus, each boy became a victim of the parent's favoritism and was encouraged to take advantage of it.

Genesis 25:27 describes Esau as "a skillful hunter, a man of the field." As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that he has a powerful black mark against him, yet despite this stain on his reputation, probably almost everyone, upon first impression, would choose Esau as a friend and companion over Jacob. "Man of the field" depicts him as a person of physical vigor, virile, an

outdoorsman and frontiersman, a kind of Daniel Boone of ancient times. We would likely find him to be frank, impulsive, generous, even chivalrous—but also careless and sensuous.

It appears that Isaac gravitated toward him almost instinctively. If he wanted anything done, Esau was a man who could do it. As Isaac aged, he leaned increasingly on Esau's strengths. Esau seems to have been a warmhearted man who sincerely loved his aged father, with whom he was gentle and quick to respond to when he needed anything.

We need to understand that Esau was not a vile person. Today, we would label him as a common, ordinary, good citizen and neighbor. He was simply worldly. Because his interests were not the same as God's, he paid little or no attention to the things of God. He is one of the Bible's major portraits of a worldly person.

Genesis 33:4, 9 reveals an entirely different aspect to his personality than we normally think: "But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. . . . But Esau said, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.'" This scene pictures a man who is generous and magnanimous even to one who had defrauded him of an extremely valuable possession.

God undoubtedly paved the way for Jacob in this instance, but still Esau's temperament seems to have been forgiving and without resentment even though normally more mercurial than Jacob's. It would quickly flare into anger and then subside just as quickly, so that it was difficult for him to hold a grudge. He seems lovable, impulsive, physically strong and easygoing, but unfortunately, he was also somewhat of a spiritual airhead, careless and lacking in strong principle.

### **Esau's Major Flaw**

Genesis 25:29-34 sets the stage for a valuable lesson:

Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Therefore his name was called Edom.

But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die, so what profit shall this birthright be to me?" Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Perhaps never in all man's history has something so valuable been purchased for so little! The major flaw in Esau's character reveals itself in his careless disregard of the high value of his birthright in favor of an immediate sensual satisfaction. Unfortunately, far too many of us are like him. Esau was a man, so to speak, who could not see two blocks down a straight road on a crystal-clear day. Because immediate concerns dominated his life, living by faith was extremely difficult for him.

Either he had no vision, or his personality demanded instant gratification. The things that he valued were those he could have right away. Notice verses 32 and 34. To paraphrase he says, "What good is the birthright if I have to wait for it?" Apparently, he either did not consider making a sacrifice to retain it at all or quickly passed over the thought. Therefore, he hungrily gratified his appetite and went his way, much like the harlot who, after plying her trade, unconcernedly says, "I have done no harm."

However, Moses writes, "Esau despised his birthright"! *Despise* is a strong word, meaning "to be scornful" or "to treat with contempt." Notice Paul's remarks about this in Hebrews 12:16: ". . . lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright." Paul judges him as "profane," which marks a person as irreverent toward what is sacred. The Greek word literally describes one standing in front of the temple (where God dwells) rather than within it, suggesting one not admitted into the body of true knowledge. Esau displays his profanity by treating something hallowed—his birthright—as if it were common.

Esau further demonstrates this perversity in his thinking in his choice of wives (Genesis 26:34-35). He is unconcerned about God, the things of God and the future. His mind is elsewhere; he is worldly. The Christian must live in the present dealing with life's problems as they come to him, but always with the future, the Kingdom of God, in mind.

God's Word depicts Esau's worldliness through the medium of eating. Eating something he desired at the moment meant more to him than a tremendously valuable gift of God. Though he became very wealthy, the Bible ignores his death, which oftentimes indicates something ominous. It is worth meditating upon how much satisfying immediate cravings and yearnings, perhaps even for food, presents a stumblingblock to our pleasing God.

### **Jacob, the Plain Man**

Of Jacob, Moses writes, "So the boys grew. . . . Jacob was a mild [*plain*, KJV] man, dwelling in tents" (Genesis 25:27). Some modern translations render "mild" or "plain" as "quiet." Unlike the more volatile Esau, Jacob's temperament was virtually devoid of peaks and valleys. Despite this quietness, other scriptures show Jacob had distinct character contrasts, including a strong streak of craftiness. The biblical narrative portrays him as a man keenly alive to his own interests.

These characteristics probably made him less appealing to others, perhaps even a puzzle others avoided penetrating. Like Esau, he is shown to be a physically strong, robust person, yet quiet, reflective, pastoral, timid, steady, orderly and contemplative.

It is interesting that each parent favored the son whose characteristics were most unlike him or her. The quiet peacemaking Isaac rejoices in the woodsy wildness of the adventurous Esau. The vigorous, take-charge Rebekah finds an outlet for her tenderness in the quiet, reflective, hesitant Jacob.

Genesis 27 shows Jacob, with Rebekah's urging, using food, clothing and craftiness to take advantage of Isaac's blindness and deceive him. Other scriptures also show Jacob cunningly deceiving Laban, his father-in-law. The Bible shows a clear contrast in personality between Esau and Jacob. Jacob, rather than using his physical strength like Esau, employed perseverance and dogged tenacity, preferring to use clever deceits and inventive strategies to achieve his ambitions.

Undoubtedly, he was creative, a man who looked and planned ahead. He did not merely live for the moment. He was always planning how to get the

upper hand and the best of a deal to come out on top. Clearly, he was not above lying to get what he wanted. However, he was persistent and persevering, and over a lifetime, he became by far a better man than his brother did.

The story of these two sons also parallels the fable of the race between the tortoise and the hare. Jacob, like the tortoise, through much plodding persistence succeeded, while the more colorful Esau, like the hare, failed because he beat himself. Though Jacob was also his own worst enemy, he never despised or turned his back on the hallowed things of God. With the help of God's calling, he overcame, and in the end, he became one of the great men in the history of Israel. He is not labeled as worldly like his twin but a true man of faith like his father and grandfather before him.

### **A Man Refuses to Eat**

Then [Abraham's servant] came to the house. And he unloaded the camels, and provided straw and feed for the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. And food was set before him to eat, but he said, "I will not eat until I have told about my errand." And [Laban] said, "Speak on." . . . Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, "The thing comes from the Lord; we cannot speak to you either bad or good. Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be your master's son's wife, as the Lord has spoken." And it came to pass, when Abraham's servant heard their words, that he worshiped the Lord, bowing himself to the earth. Then the servant brought out jewelry of silver, jewelry of gold, and clothing, and gave them to Rebekah. He also gave precious things to her brother and to her mother. And he and the men who were with him ate and drank and stayed all night. Then they arose in the morning, and he said, "Send me away to my master." (Genesis 24:32-33, 50-54)

This episode occurs when Abraham sends his most trusted servant to find a wife for Isaac. This story of eating stands in sharp contrast to Esau's satiation of his hunger, as Abraham's servant will allow nothing—not even good food,

convivial hospitality and the persistent appeal of Rebekah's relatives—to deter him from completing his mission. The servant's priorities are firm: His master's delegated responsibility came first!

Of course, so are Jesus' priorities when Satan tempted Him through food, as recorded in Matthew 4 and Luke 4. Somewhat later in His ministry, after His conversation with the woman at the well (John 4), the disciples want Him to eat. He replies that His food is to finish the work His Father gave Him to do (verse 34). He asserts, like Abraham's faithful servant, that sacrifice is in order because His immediate need to gratify His hunger was comparatively unimportant.

A major principle we can learn from these four episodes is that we will quite likely experience our most severe temptations and trials in common everyday events. We might fancifully picture ourselves giving our life for Christ before a firing squad; by being sawn asunder, as Isaiah is reputed to have been; or perhaps holding fast to our faith while imprisoned in a concentration camp. But these extreme cases do not happen to many. Most people's temptations and tests occur in the midst of everyday, commonplace events like eating or conducting business affairs or relating to others within a family or community.

Jacob undoubtedly had vision and looked ahead. If Esau looked ahead, the immediate loomed large and more important for him, and the spiritual aspects of life appear to have been completely unimportant to him. He could not control himself to wait patiently on the Lord because he did not highly value the things of God. He thus lacked proper vision.

Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:21, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Treasure is what we value highly, what we take great pains to serve, honor, preserve and embellish. Peter also touches on the importance of our valuation of responsibilities and things in his first epistle. Notice I Peter 3:7: "Likewise you husbands, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life."

"Honor" is the Greek word *time*. It indicates a value, money paid, esteem, honor, precious thing and price. Peter uses forms of this word in I Peter 1:19

and 2:7, where it is rendered *precious* in reference to Jesus' blood and Jesus Himself because of the extreme value His life and death are to us. Because of the value we place on Him and our calling, we diligently strive to make sure we are serving, honoring, preserving and embellishing our relationship with Him and the Father. This relationship is our highest priority because of the value we place on it.

Jacob and Esau reveal the areas of life they gave the highest priority to. One succeeds with God, and one fails. Eating is the showcase for the one who failed. The notion that one personality type is better than another in the eyes of God is not the issue here. The issue of greatest value to us lies in the answer to these questions: Why did Jacob succeed and Esau fail? Why did Jacob value certain things more than Esau did? Did Jacob have a distinct advantage, an "edge," over his brother?

## **The Advantage of Election**

Perhaps Paul most vividly and aggressively propounds the lesson of greatest value to us. Romans 9:10-16 is a startling and sobering revelation of what God gives us to enable us to succeed before Him as Jacob did:

And not only this, but when Rebekah also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The elder shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

Jacob had God's election, selection or calling, thus giving him a very decided advantage withheld from Esau by God, who did not choose to call him. God's election of Jacob and rejection of Esau had nothing to do with anything genetically inherent within them. It had nothing to do with what either of them had done. It had everything to do with what God chose to do



and did: He gave Jacob the edge. Jacob eventually responded correctly, but the sovereign God exercised His right to make moves and use people as He designs. This is Paul's main point.

God's decisions—what He elects to do—are not matters of emotion but of will. Whether we think they are right or wrong, fair or unfair, means nothing. Isaiah 55 makes plain we do not think as He does. Our thinking on these issues does not matter because, first, God is Creator and can do as He pleases. Second, what He does is always right anyway. That we are not completely masters of our own destinies and that free moral agency has its limits are sometimes humbling and difficult to accept. God, of His own volition, can and does treat some with what we might deem as favoritism, as though some are better than others.

Notice John the Baptist's reaction to a situation in which something like this is involved:

And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. . . . He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:26-27, 30)

John had come to grips with this concept. He understood that his role in the vast scope of God's purpose was limited by the overruling wisdom of the Creator as He carried out *His* purpose. This is a reason why salvation is spoken of as "free"—because God is not bound to show mercy to anybody since all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. All too often, we forget that the invisible God is working things out according to His purpose, not ours. God is free to do as He pleases. He owes no one anything.

I Corinthians 4:6-7 adds:

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from

another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Do we have grounds for being puffed up or jealous? John the Baptist did not think so, and what he declared is truth. I Corinthians 12 makes clear that God places people in the church as it pleases Him, and He gives gifts to them so they can be responsible for a function. The gifts do not make them "better," just prepared by the Creator to serve in a specialized way.

At this juncture, we can draw a major lesson from the Parable of the Talents and fit it into this picture:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. . . . So he who had received five talents, came and brought five other talents, saying, "Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them." . . . He also who had received two talents came and said, "Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them." . . . Then he who had received the one talent came and said, "Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed." (Matthew 25:14, 20, 22, 24)

Not all are expected to produce the same results, but all are expected to be equally faithful to the gifts God entrusted to them. Interestingly, the one who was unfaithful to what God gave him failed to produce based on his reasoning that God is unfair. Like so many people today, he felt victimized.

We see, then, that Jacob was not inherently a better person than Esau was. He was simply gifted in a way Esau was not. God probably chose to use twins to illustrate this vitally important lesson to draw attention to how He works and to His grace. In this way, God is never indebted to man.

What makes this so important to us? We have the same advantage over those not called as Jacob had over Esau. We also learn that those who judge themselves among themselves are not wise because not everyone is gifted in

exactly the same way. Finally, we learn that each bears his own responsibility to edify the body according the measure of what God has given him.

## **Whom He Wills He Hardens**

Paul takes this another step further in Romans 9:18, 21-24:

Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. . . . Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

God not only gives gifts to those He favors, but He also hardens and/or blinds (Romans 11:7) some so that they become enemies of those He favors. Witness what He did to and with Pharaoh when He redeemed Israel from Egypt. That God would actually harden someone's heart so that he would become an enemy of Himself or His people is sometimes even more difficult for us to comprehend than His bestowing of favor on one over another. Because God is invisible in exercising His sovereignty, people often put far too much weight on a person's works and far too little on God's grace toward us in the outworking of His plan.

At times, this leads people—who are confidently oblivious of their woefully insufficient wisdom—to judge Almighty God on either what they think He does or does not do. In principle, this is precisely what some did concerning the calendar issue that recently swept through the church. Those advocating calendar change were calling God into account, blind to the fact that they were doing so. When this happens, faith goes out the window to be replaced by sight. They devise a calendar of their own creation, and the result is trusting in their own works.

Another aspect of disregarding God's right to do as He pleases with His creation involves the clear biblical statement that God sets up and deposes the rulers of the nations according to His purpose. On the other hand, I Timothy 2:1-2 admonishes us to pray for them:

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings, and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

We may be puzzled why we in the United States should have been subjected to such an immoral president, a congenital, serial liar with an extremely ambitious and aggressive wife. In addition, his vice-president also possessed a strong urge to tell tall tales and reinvented himself with every speech. What do church members say about these facts? They shrug their shoulders, saying it must be God's will for it to be this way. They are correct.

While members willingly accept this as a reality, they fail to apply the same level of God's will to the church. It is somehow unthinkable that God would allow intelligent and charming false ministers to invade His church, preach false doctrines, destroy the faith once delivered and drive the church into its scattered condition! In the Parable of the Wheat and Tares, however, Jesus warns that tares would come into the church, and Paul, Peter, Jude and John all confirm that it indeed occurred. The church's recent history provides clear evidence that God has greatly favored us, yet He has also prepared enemies to test us, just as He loved Jacob but hated Esau.

In Ephesians 1:3-14 the apostle Paul gives a much more complete rendering of our advantage:

1. God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing.
2. He has chosen us.
3. He has bestowed His grace upon us.
4. He has adopted us into His Family.
5. He has given us wisdom and insight into His plans for the future.
6. He has revealed to us that we will share in the coming

reconciliation of all mankind.

7. He has made us His special treasure.

8. He has granted us His Holy Spirit.

All of this began with Jacob and Esau, a bowl of stew, and a bad choice of when to eat by a man who had no vision and badly underestimated what he was forfeiting through his desire for immediate gratification. It was such a simple thing, a family matter, but it produced a choice with such long-lasting and painful consequence that its effect reverberates to this day. It continues to provide the sons of God with a profound lesson even in these end times. Will we, like Jacob use our advantages, or will we, like the likeable Esau, fritter them away in the world?

It is through these advantages that God is shaping our lives for salvation and entrance into the Kingdom of God. Our advantages do not lie in anything we have inherently or have done to earn, but they come to us entirely because of God's choice. The reason some are accepted and some are rejected is because God wills it. Therefore, we need to understand that there is no valid reason why we should fail. We need to dig in and take care of the business at hand—God's business. We are His workmanship, being created for good works. Our work in this creation of God's is to yield our lives to His persuasions as Jacob did.