Book 3

Sunday January 27, 1974

"ESAU STILL LIVES!" Genesis 25:27-34

One of the most tragic stories in the Bible is the one we just read concerning Esau.

Esau was the twin brother of Jacob. Jacob, you may remember later became the father of 12 sons after whom were named the 12 tribes of Israel. Esau, however, had been born first of the twins, and was thus the oldest and was supposed to be the one through whom the family name would be carried on. But it didn't work out that way.

Although Esau and Jacob were twins, they were quite different in a number of ways. Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors, full of physical vigor and energy--the "he-man" type. Jacob, on the other hand was smaller in stature, more quiet, and liked to stay around the house. Thus it was that Jacob became his mother's favorite, while Esau became his father's favorite.

As Isaac the father grew older, he came to lean more and more on Esau. He knew that if he wanted anything done, Esau could and would do it. When Isaac was old and blind, the rough Esau was gentle with him and quick to respond to everything he wanted. If Isaac had a wish for something special to eat, it was Esau who would go and get it.

The point is that Esau had many good qualities. He was a warm-hearted person. He was forgiving and loving. Even after his brother Jacob had defrauded him, after his temper had cooled, Esau was forgiving. He was not the kind of man who would hold a grudge.

In any time or place, a man like Esau would be lovable. He was the kind of person who had sympathy for people and would try his best to help them.

What then was the matter with Esau? Why did he not play a greater role in Israel's history? Today and through the years, Christians and Jews often speak of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, but Esau's name is not often mentioned or remembered. With all of his good qualities, what was his major weakness and caused his downfall and what can we learn from his mistakes?

I. Esau's basic problem was that he was a man who lived primarily by his appetites--he usually gave in to his animal nature. He lived primarily for the satisfying of the whim of the moment. He didn't often think about the consequences of his desires.

Esau was heir to the birthright, and the birthright in those days meant a great deal if you looked far enough. It meant the privilege of being the head of the household, the family's chief representative. It may have been an exaggeration to say that Esau despised his birthright, but he did disregard it.

Its benefits were intangible and seemed a far way off. The important thing to him was that he was hungry now. The birthright did not fill his stomach at that hour. So one day when Esau came in from a hunting trip, so famished that he thought he would faint, he smelled some food that Jacob had cooking. At that moment, with his stomach craving food, the birthright seemed very insubstantial in comparison with the steaming pottage that Jacob offered. What Esau wanted was something to eat and he wanted it immediately.

Now it's not bad to want to eat or to satisfy our hungers, but when that takes precedence over everything else in our life at that moment, then we have become slaves to our appetites. There was surely other food around the house that day for Esau, and certainly there would have been other food to eat if he had been willing to wait for an hour or more. Then he could have been fed without selling his birthright.

The point is that Esau showed that he did not care enough for life's great possibilities to pay the price of present discipline. He lived by his feelings of the moment. He had to have what he wanted, when he wanted it, regardless of the cost or consequences. That was the critical weakness of Esau and was his downfall. He lost tomorrow because he snatched so thoughtlessly and greedily at today.

In a sense we can say that Esau was a glutton. He let his desire for food at that moment take control of everything else and thus he lost control of himself. He let his appetite control him. He became a slave to his feeling.

Now you may be saying to yourself, I'm glad that I'm not a glutton like that. But let's not fool ourselves,

gluttony is not only confined to food. Any exaggerated desire can be described as gluttony. Idleness; too great a love for one's bed and for sleep; or there is the intellectual gluttony of those who revel in ideas and never use their hands or their feet; there is the gluttony of sentimentality, of self-pity, or of sex. There is the gluttony of ambition with its greed for fame which imposes on so many people a life of overwork that is all out of proportion to their capabilities and their temperments.

You see, Esau still lives in many of us and in many ways.

Or think of it in this way: A sick person will fairly readily take medicine. But how many prescriptions about a persons' manner of life are followed? How many smokers are capable of doing without a cigarette? I'll just die if I don't have a smoke. Have you heard that statement? I'll just die if I don't have a drink. And how many of us who are always rushing about, can stop rashing about?

You see, like Esau, we often live more as animals rather than as human beings--we become slaves to our most basic instincts and desires. We live as if God had not given us a brain to think and reason and consider the consequences of our actions.

I guess one of the most difficult things we have to learn as we grow up, and the point is that some of us never seem to learn it, is that we cannot forever be living our lives; we cannot always completely base our actions and decisions, on the feeling of the moment, on what our stomach tells us or our sex appetite or any other of our whims and desires. We cannot trust our judgment or our religious faith for that matter, to our feelings and appetites all by themselves--to our immediate and often superficial emotional responses.

When a baby is small, he lives almost entirely on the basis of his feelings and appetites. If he is hungry, he cries until he is fed. If he is the least bit uncomfortable, he makes noise until he is taken care of. And so it is with all of his purely physical wants and needs. But as he grows and matures, one of the things he needs to learn is to control his basic appetites and instincts. If he is hungry, he may have to wait. If he feels later on the urge to hit someone, he may have to re-consider. Part of being human is to learn that we are not to live our lives on the basis of our appetites and feelings of the moment.

Esau had not learned this lesson very well, in spite of all of his other good qualities. And as we know, Esau still lives today and he lives in many of us.

Consider his decendants in every generation--the young who cannot let any long range dedication stand in the way of appetite, sex or otherwise. The frivolous girl who says of something trivial, "I'll just die, if I do not get it." The alcoholic, or the person, man or woman who for the sake of the sex appetite and temptation of the moment sells his birthright. We don't always think ahead of the consequences. Of course we never can know all the consequences, but we can know enough. Yet we still often charge blindly ahead as if satisfying our appetites of the moment were the whole basis of life.

You see, I'm convinced that a large part of the problem in our culture today is that many of us do attempt to live our lives; we base our decisions, our attitudes, our actions, on the feeling of the moment, and not much else. Many of our popular songs talk mainly about feeling. If a person is asked why he has done something, we're likely to get the answer, "I just felt like it." Or someone will say, "I'm a man and have to satisfy my appetite."
Pay attention to feelings, but not necessarily give in to them!
But let;s look at a few of the ways in which Esau still lives in us in more detail.

1. Esau is alive in the person who in our time quits school to take a job so that he can earn money to buy a car or some other object in order to satisfy his desire of the moment. Any time, we feel that we have to have something right now, this very minute, then we are Esau. Really, when you stop to think about it, what is there in this world that we need right now, this moment? Is there anything that can't wait for a little while? Now of course if we've been on the desert for many days without water, then that's a different story--but that's not the case with' us.

2. A second and more prevalent way in which Esau still lives in our time and in many of us, both young and old is in this whole matter of sex. Here again, persons often given in to the feeling of the moment without much thought.

And people excuse their actions by saying--"Aren't the

desires of the body supposed to be satisfied? Shouldn't I take advantage of what is available? Why is it a sin to use what God has made?

Well, of course sex is no sin. Our desires, our thoughts, when seeing a beautiful girl or a handsome man are not yet sin. Neither it is sin if one feels attracted. We cannot avoid physical desires any more than we can avoid having birds fly around our head. But we can certainly prevent them from building nests in our hair.

Indeed, sexual desires, like our other basic appetites are created by God. They are a gift of God. But the existence of a desire does not justify its immediate satisfaction. The presence of a power does not imply that one should be guided by it, blindly and without restraint. To do so is to misuee God's gifts.

What would we say about a fellow who stands in front of the window of a butcher shop in a big city and reasons as follows: "Now that I see this meat, I'm hungrier than ever. The meat arouses my appetite. That proves it's meant for me and that I should have it. Therefore I have the right to smash the window and help myself.

Or just imagine that a friend of mine becomes a policeman. For the first time in his life he possesses a revolver. Now, he says to himself: "I didn't acquire this revolver myself, it was given to me. Because it was given to me it should be used. Therefore I must shoot somebody with it--no matter whom."

Now what often happens to us, in the case of sex and in other instances as well, is that we play tricks on ourselves--we fool ourselves so as to justify our actions. Thus one will say--"I really love that person, so that gives me the right." But what is really usually meant is something like this--"I want something, not you really, but something from you. I don't have time to wait. I want it immediately, without delay. My appetite has to be satisfied. Well, that Esau talking. It doesn't matter what happens afterward. Whether we remain together has nothing to do with it. For me it's right now that counts.

We fool ourselves so easily--we rationalize, we excuse ourselves and in so doing we mis-use our minds as well as our bodies. We say that we felt sorry for the person. What a cover-up! We can't even be honest with ourselves.

Esau said that he was about to faint and thus tried to excuse himself and Jacob probably also excused himself by trying to say that he was really helping his brother.

It's so difficult to be honest with ourselves. Usually the honest fact is that we are simply gratifying an apetitite and in so doing are being less than a man or woman--less than a human being.

You've heard me speak of the alcoholic who taunts his wife until she begins to nag him and then he goes out and gets drunk and says he has a right to get drunk because he has a nagging wife. What utter nonsense! Even if the wife were actually a nag all the time without being taunted, that doesn't give him the right to be a slave to his appetite for alcohol. He's simply trying to escape the blame for his own lack of control.

Far better it would be if the man were honest enough with himself to admit that at that point he was powerless to deal with his appetite and seek help and that his wife had actually nothing to do with it.

Or in the case of an affair, no matter how sorry we say we are feeling for the other person we are involved with, we are simply fooling ourselves if we think this is the whole truth or even if it were the truth, that it excuses the action or justifies it in any way.

Sometimes a person will say--I'm just a man and I'm acting like a man. But you see, he really isn't acting like a man who is a human being. Esau wasn't acting like a man. He was acting like an animal. A man does not let himself be pushed around by his appetites and desires. He is his own master. He has control of himself.

I remember a friend of mine who took his youth group on a long hike. After many hours, they all became very thirsty and they came to a spring of clear, cool water. The leader made the group wait beside it for half an hour before they could drink. He did that to teach self control.

According to our Christian faith, to be truly human, to be truly a man or a woman is to not give in and satisfy every desire the moment you feel it. Or to put it another way--If you want to prove that you are a man or a woman and not just an animal, then as in driving a car, you must learn first of all how to use the brakes and the steering wheel.

The gas pedal is easy enough to manipulate. The brakes are something else again. Not to simply always let go, but rather to be in control, that is to be a man or a woman and to be truly human.

Yes, Esau still lives and he lives within each one of us in different ways. But what then are some very practical ways to help us overcome the Esau which still lives in us?

Let me mention several which come directly out of our Christian faith and understanding.

1. Attempt always to be honest with yourself. Do not always trust your feelings and emotions. They will often mislead you. If we did everything we felt like on the spur of the moment, this world would be utter chaos.

2. Secondly, think! God has given us a mind and reasoning power. Think ahead, Think of the consequences of a particular action. Think of what it will do to others. How many lives will my irresponsible action affect? Remember we are our brother's keeper--you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

3. Thirdly, hold on to your basic commitment, inspite of your changing moods. Faith itself can be defined as the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods and appetites. We all know how often our moods and our feelings change and that they are very ficke and untrustworthy. We have to teach our moods and feelings where to get off.

4. Practice controlling your most difficult appetites and desires. But practice with a smile. I always get amused when someone tells me that they have quit smoking, but that they got so crabby that their wife or husband told them to start in again. If that isn't fooling one'self I don't know what is. Pick out some habit or uncontrollable temptation and work on it. You can be sure that your whole life can suddenly develop richly both physically and spiritually from the day you become liberated from being a slave to a particular appetite. And whatever discipline is found to be most difficult, that is the battleground on which the reformation of a person's life must be fought out.

As Paul said to the Galations--Walk by the spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

5. And finally, the good news of the Christian faith is that we do not have to handle our problems and temptations alone. We have a helper in our Christian life. God's power and help comes to us in several ways. God works through our Christians friends, whose with whom we can talk things over and get our reasoning straigthened out again. Then we can see where we have been fooling ourselves. We can get it off our chest and start over. Our purpose is not to condemn but to help.

God also helps us as we continually turn our will over to him and admit that we cannot do this job of living alone, that we cannot handle our appetites by ourselves. God knows that our moods change and that our feelings vary. However, before God we are responsible for the set of our will. So if we see to it that our intentions are right, our motives, and our set of will, we can trust God to see to the results.