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MY BIRTHRIGHT IS NOT FOR SALE!

- a) **“And Jacob said, sell me this day thy birthright. And Esau said, behold, I am at the point to die; and what profit shall this birthright do to me? ... and he sold his birthright unto Jacob” [Gen. 25:31-33]**
- b) **“Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ” [1 Pet. 1:18-19]**

*In Mark Twain’s literary classic, **The Prince and the Pauper** [1881], a story set in 16th Century England, a boy (Tom) was born to a poor family that could not afford an extra mouth to feed. On the same day, another boy (Edward) was born heir [Prince of Wales] to the throne of the king of England. All the people of England greeted Edward’s birth with relief and joy. One day, while still a kid, Tom, ‘the Prince of Poverty’ providentially found himself in the palace gardens where he met the Prince of Wales. Soon, the king-to-be realized that the pauper was like himself in everything but social status [the poor boy had also studied Latin, the then language of the elite, from the scrap books in the family junkyard]. Since they also looked quite alike, the prince offered to change clothes with the pauper just for a moment. Unfortunately, the palace guards came in soon after and kicked out the ‘pauper,’ that is, the actual prince now in the pauper’s clothes! In not too distant future, the king would die and the Prince of Wales was expected to succeed him. By the time it was cleared up, the actual prince had suffered enormous hardships and humiliation.*

That story gives us an idea of what it can mean to give up one’s birthright. Birthright refers to legal rights inherited by birth. Although it is generally associated with birth order [especially firstborn], it can be extended to family status (as in the story above) or social class. In many cultures, the firstborn child, especially a son, enjoys special privileges. God told Moses to inform Pharaoh, “Israel is My son, even My firstborn” [Ex. 4:22]. Later, He commanded Moses to “sanctify unto Me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of men and of beast; it is Mine” [Ex. 13:2]. Jesus Christ has been called “the firstborn of every creature.” He is “the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the preeminence” [Col. 1: 15, 18]. When we are born again, we become sons of God [Jn 1: 12] and joint-heirs with Christ [Rom. 8: 17]. Therefore, we are supposed to enjoy the privileges attached to the birthright that Christ has conferred upon us. But what have we done with it? Have we thrown it away carelessly or sold it for transient gains like Esau?

In today’s lesson, we shall study the subject so as to know what pitfalls to avoid.

1. Background: Esau and Jacob

Esau and Jacob were the twin-sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah. Unfortunately, she was barren. Isaac prayed earnestly to God for her and their prayer was answered after 20 years! [Gen. 25: 19-21, 26]. It was a troubled pregnancy. So, Rebekah sought the face of the Lord to know why it was so. The Lord told her that she was expecting twins, “two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger” [Gen. 25: 22-23].

Esau was a hardworking man, “a cunning hunter, a man of the field,” while his twin-brother was a spoilt brat, “a plain man, dwelling in tents” [v. 27]. Understandably, therefore, Isaac loved Esau more, but Rebekah, being in full knowledge of their future, loved Jacob more [v. 28]. Apparently, Rebekah had kept the prophecy away from her husband but Jacob knew about it.

One day, for a change, Jacob was preparing a pot of lentils [beans] for himself. His doting mother might have gone out that day! Esau came in tired and very hungry, and asked his younger brother to give him part of the food to eat. Tricky Jacob cashed in on that opportunity to ask his elder brother to sell him his birthright. Esau did not hesitate to do so because he apparently did not know the traditional and spiritual significance of it. Moreover, he might have thought that it was one of those pranks played by youngsters for immediate gains. He sold his birthright to Jacob and in return got the pot of lentils [vv. 30-34].

The human scheme embarked upon by Rebekah to get Jacob his father’s last blessings due to the firstborn [Gen. 27] will be examined in our next class. For now, it is sufficient to know that Esau lost the blessings that he was entitled to by his birthright that he had sold to his brother, Jacob. Let us analyse what such blessings could be.

2. What is my birthright?

As we had said earlier, birthright refers to our legal rights inherited by birth. When Jesus told Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, that only those who are born again can see the kingdom of God, he replied, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” [Jn 3:1-4]. Therefore, birth can be either natural or spiritual.

a) *Natural birthright*

By virtue of birth, we enjoy certain legal rights, some of which are as follows:

i. Seniority

Birth order influences our family position, inheritance, etc. In most cultures, the *firstborn* occupies a special position. For example, when Joseph's brothers ate with him in Egypt, "they sat before him, *the firstborn according to his birthright, and the youngest according to his youth*" [Gen. 43:33]. When Joseph brought his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (the firstborn) before his dying father, Israel, for blessings, the old man put his right hand on the head of the younger one (Ephraim). Joseph protested, saying, "not so, my father; for this [Manasseh] is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head" [Gen. 48:17-18]. Also, in spite of Joseph's special place in his father's heart, the dying man blessed Reuben, the firstborn, before everybody else, and Joseph was the eleventh [before Benjamin] in accordance with his birth order among the 12 sons of Jacob [Gen. 49:1-27].

ii. Inheritance

The firstborn succeeds his father when the latter dies and receives the greatest portion of what he had in proportion to the rest of the family. God commanded Moses as follows:

If a man have two wives, one beloved, and another hated, and they have born him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated; then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn; but he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his [Deut. 21:15-17].

Jephthah was Gilead's firstborn by a harlot. To prevent him from inheriting their father's estate, his brothers by Gilead's legitimate wife forced him to flee. In due course, the elders of Gilead needed help against the children of Ammon. They had no choice but to send for Jephthah, and "the people made him head and captain over them" [Judges 11:1-11].

iii. Royal succession

Unless commanded by God, as in the case of Solomon after David [1 Chron. 28:5], the firstborn succeeds his father as king in most cultures. Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, is expected to succeed his mother, Queen Elizabeth. That is why he cannot marry his present sweet heart (since Princess Diana died), a divorcee,

because the King of England is also the head of the Anglican Church! When Jonathan, King Saul's firstborn, demonstrated his love and support for David, his father reminded him "for as long as the son of Jesse [i.e., David] liveth upon the ground, thou shalt not be established, nor thy kingdom" [1 Sam. 20:31]. Age is no exception to this rule. For example, Josiah was only eight years old when his father, Manasseh, was killed by conspirators, "and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead" [2 Kgs 21:23-24; 22:1].

b) *Spiritual birthright*

By virtue of being the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ enjoys the legal rights of that birthright, for whom God "did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" [Rom. 8:29]. In that capacity, Jesus Christ is the head of the church "who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the preeminence" [Col. 1:18]. In authority, His Father has made Him "My firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth" [Ps. 89:27]. Therefore, through Jesus Christ, we have come "unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect" [Heb. 12:22-23].

This spiritual birthright comes to us when we become born again. We become sons of God [Jn 1:12] by adoption, "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" [Rom. 8:14-17]. Then we become changed creatures [2 Cor. 5:17], "that henceforth we should not serve sin" [Rom. 6:6]. This new life, holy [1 Jn 3:9] and righteous [1 Jn 2:29] is demonstrated in love [1 Jn 3:10] and victory [1 Jn 5:4-5]. In other words, God has made up for us what our natural birthright or the lack of it has denied us, for "when my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up" [Ps. 27:10].

3. But we can lose our birthright quite easily!

We can lose our birthright through any of the following ways, among others:

a) *By father's will*

Most fathers now make their wills before they die and such documents are legally binding on their families. Therefore, a father can exclude his firstborn from inheriting his estate, or give a bigger share to the other children, and so on. For example, Hosah had many sons but he made Simri

the chief, “for though he was not the firstborn, yet his father made him the chief” [1 Chron. 26:10].

b) *By Divine will*

God does not owe us any explanation for how He dispenses His blessings and love, but certainly He “seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” [1 Sam. 16:7]. He made Israel, the smallest of nations His firstborn [Ex. 4:22], and David, the youngest of the sons of Jesse, king in succession to Saul [1 Sam. 16:1-13].

c) *As punishment*

When we abuse the privileges of our birthright, losing all the legal rights attached thereto may punish us. For example, Reuben was Jacob’s firstborn. During their journey back to Canaan, he slept with Bilhah, his father’s wife and mother of his brothers, Gad and Naphtali, and his father heard that it was done right on his own bed [Gen. 35: 22,25; Gen. 49:4]. As a result, he lost his birthright. Even though “he was the firstborn, but, forasmuch as he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph the son of Israel; and the genealogy is not to be reckoned after the birthright” [1 Chron. 5:1]. It is, therefore, not surprising that after Joshua’s death, God commanded the leadership of the children of Israel, now settled in the Promised Land, to pass to Judah, the fourth in rank among the twelve sons of Israel [Judges 1:1-2].

d) *By selling or carelessly giving it away!*

Some of us do not even know what they have. Therefore, they may not also know when they lose it. Esau sold his birthright for a mere meal of lentils! Each new day, many of us sell our birthright to Satan for free, “for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” [1 Pet. 2:19]. Here is how Peter sees such people:

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them [1 Pet. 2:20-21].

4. Conclusion: So, how then can I protect my birthright?

Here are some suggestions:

a) *Know your Father*

I have often heard people say that God is the father of us all. Is He also the father of the atheist who does not believe in His existence? How can a non-existent entity be my father? Therefore, God is not the Father but the Creator of us all! In order to know who God is, we need to know who are His children.

When Jesus was twelve years old, He went with His earthly parents, Joseph and Mary, to the temple in Jerusalem. On their return, both parents discovered that Jesus was missing. They went back to the temple only to discover that He was discussing scripture with the church leaders. His mother said to Him, “Son, why hast Thou thus dealt with us? Behold, Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing.” He replied, “How is it that ye sought Me? Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?” [Lk 2: 41-50]. The teenager knew His true Father and went after His work for “the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth His Father do: for what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise” [Jn 5:19].

Since nobody can come to God except through Jesus, and He has gone to His Father’s house to prepare a place for us [Jn 14; 1-5], then, the *only way to know the Father is through His Son* [Jn 1:12]. Therefore, *it is only those who believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God that can claim God as their Father* [1 Jn 5:1].

b) *Know your responsibilities as a son of God*

When Jesus was told that His mother and brothers and sisters were looking for Him, He replied, “whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is My brother, and My sister, and mother” [Mk 3: 31-35]. There is no better summary of our responsibilities to God than that. How can we lose our birthright when we are doing God’s will? That is why the Psalmist has said, “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed [children] begging bread” [Ps. 37:25]. The righteous is the one who believes in God [Gen. 15:6] and walks by that faith [2 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 11:6].

c) *Then, let God protect your birthright*

Once you have done your bit, leave the rest to God, for as Paul has put it, “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day” [2 Tim. 1:12].

Guard your birthright jealously because Satan is all out to snatch it from you!