

**THE GENEALOGY OF A ROOT OF BITTERNESS
GENESIS 36**

NEED: FREEDOM FROM BITTERNESS

**PROPOSITION: DESTRUCTIVE BITTERNESS CAN PASS FROM
GENERATION TO GENERATION TO THE ETERNAL
HARM OF THOSE INVOLVED.**

**OBJECTIVE: TO LEAD GOD’S PEOPLE TO FREE THEMSELVES
FROM THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS.**

INTRODUCTION:

E. Stanley Jones said of resentment: “One of the most virulent germs which can attack the human mind is resentment and it is all the more dangerous because it often does its deadly work without being isolated and being recognized for what it is. It is one of the most evil things in the world.” Another name for such resentment is bitterness.

Esau is a constant reminder to the student of Holy Scriptures of the power of bitterness.

We come to the chapter that has the genealogy of Esau. Twice in this chapter he is referred to as, “The father of the Edomites.” This tribe of Edomites was a constant thorn in the side of Israel throughout their history. You will not understand their constant antagonism to Israel unless you remember that they were descendents of Esau. The genealogy of bitterness can be traced through the attitudes and actions of these Edomites against the descendents of Jacob. The Edomites are the heritage of Esau – his major contribution to the world.

It is worth remembering that this bitterness toward Israel worked its way down through history until it finally expressed itself in enmity against the son of Jacob – the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not often remembered that Herod who was such a threat to the life and ministry of Jesus was an Edomite. He could trace his genealogy back to Esau, the son of Isaac. The genealogy of bitterness should remind each of us that it should be avoided at all cost. Any one who allows bitterness to remain in their heart is setting himself up to leave a heritage of evil. The writer of Hebrews used Esau as an example to warn us about the “root of bitterness”: “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one shall see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause troubles and to defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.” (Hebrews 12:14-17) Let’s look at the life of Esau as recorded in Genesis and see what we can learn about the genealogy of bitterness.

I. THE BEGINNING OF BITTERNESS.

The experience of Esau is a reminder to us that bitterness usually begins over a small matter. It will grow out of what is perceived as a wrong or an injustice. The person who is the object of the injustice will harbor within himself resentment and bitterness toward the person who did the injustice. Unless it is dealt with it becomes a root of bitterness within and in time will affect the whole of the life.

In the case of Esau it could be traced back to the day when in great hunger he came to his brother, Jacob, to find something to eat. Jacob was preparing some vegetable stew and Esau wanted a bowl of it. Instead of responding to the need of his brother with generosity, Jacob demanded of him his birthright for a bowl of soup. Being the kind of person he was Esau was quick to sell his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. The selling of the birthright indicated that Esau lacked the spiritual perception that one needs in life. He was willing to treat something that was supposed to be very sacred as though it was a trivial matter. But the thing that Esau would remember through the years was the apparent injustice that Jacob had done to him. After all he was his twin brother and he had a right to expect something better from his twin brother than this kind of action. That became in Esau a streak of bitterness that ran through the whole of his life.

Most bitterness begins over a small matter. John Claypool tells the story about another set of twin boys. They were identical and from the beginning of life, inseparable. They dressed alike, they did everything together. As a matter of fact, they never married. After college they came back home and took over their dad's business. They worked so harmoniously that everybody in the community pointed to their relationship as a model of created cooperation.

On one particular morning, however, a customer came in to the store and made a little purchase. The brother who served him took the dollar bill, put it upon the cash register, walked with the customer to the front of their establishment and after he left went back to

deposit the money but the dollar bill was gone. So he asked his brother, “Did you put a dollar bill in the cash register?”

His twin answered, “I didn’t see any dollar bill.”

The first brother was surprised. “That’s funny, I distinctly remember I put it on the cash register.” A little later he asked again, “Didn’t you take that dollar bill and put it in the cash register?”

His twin replied testily, “No! I told you before I didn’t see it.”

Tension developed between those brothers over that dollar bill. Every time they discussed the matter there were charges and counter charges. The charges and counter charges never solved anything but rather became more and more violent. Eventually they broke up their partnership. As a matter of fact they split the store right down the middle, each brother owning his own half. The community was drawn into the quarrel. For twenty years the business, the two men and dozens of other people were troubled by dark resentment and deep, smoldering rage.

Then, one day, a stranger drove into town. He came to the store that had been divided down the middle, walked into one side and asked the white-headed proprietor, “How long have you been in business here?” The brother told him, “Well,” the stranger replied, “Then I’ve got something I must square with you.” Twenty years ago he explained,

unemployed and homeless, he had been wondering around the country. One morning he had dropped off the freight train in that little town and walked down the back alley hoping he could find something to eat. Through the open door of the store he had seen a cash register with a dollar bill on top. Nobody was there; only two men up at the front. He sneaked in and stole the dollar bill but brought up as a Christian, he had been bothered by guilt, so he finally decided to return, confess his theft, and pay what ever the store owners thought was due to them.

As he talked the white-haired man listened with tears running down his cheeks. When he was able to recover his composure he said, "Please come with me. I want you to tell the same story to my brother." They walked into the half of that divided store and before long the white-haired twins were weeping in each other's arms. Twenty years of hostility! Twenty years of resentment! Twenty years of cold silence and lingering loneliness and it all began over a dollar bill.

Do you have bitterness in your heart toward someone or some group of people? Where did it begin? Can you trace it back to its beginning?

II. THE TRANSMISSION OF BITTERNESS.

This is the sobering lesson that we need to learn from this genealogy of bitterness. Bitterness can be passed from one generation to another generation and to another generation and to another generation. It has the power to perpetuate itself in one life after another. This is the lesson that we learn from Esau and the Edomites.

We first become aware of this transmission of bitterness from one generation to another as we read the rest of the history of Israel. You may recall that when Moses was leading the people of Israel out of Egypt and back toward their Promised Land that they need to pass across the land of Edom. When Moses sent a messenger to the king of Edom requesting the privilege to cross through their land, the request was angrily rejected. Not only did the King of Edom reject the request, he threatened all out warfare if Israel set one foot upon his territory. The bitterness that was in him toward the people of Israel traced its way back to that little incident that took place between Esau and Jacob. The people of Israel had been in Egypt 400 hundred years so there had been no opportunity for any kind of wrong or injustice for four hundred years. Yet, there is still an intensity of bitterness that actually has produced hatred in the hearts of the Edomites toward Israel.

There is another piece of historical evidence in the Old Testament of this transmission of bitterness from one generation to another. In the list of the chiefs among Esau's descendents you find a name that occurs a number of times later in the Old Testament. It is the name of Amalek. When Saul was crowned king of Israel one of the first opponents he had to face was the Amalekites. Most Biblical scholars believe that the Amalekites are descendents from Esau. They are still trying to get even for what Jacob did to Esau centuries and centuries later. There is a tremendous capacity to pass from one generation to another generation bitterness. The root of bitterness is not genetically transmitted, but it is spiritually transmitted.

This should cause us to take a careful look at some of the resentments and bitterness' we may have toward other people, and especially, toward people of other nationalities, or races. Did you receive this bitterness toward people from other nationalities from your parents or grandparents, or is it based on some wrong or injustice they have done to you? It may well be that you have received from your parent's bitterness that they received from their parents who received it from their parents. The bitterness may actually be traced back for generations. There is a tremendous power to transmit our prejudices, resentment, and bitterness' to our children and our grandchildren.

Most of the wars that are going on in the world tonight are rooted in this reality. Whether it is the tribal conflicts in Africa, the ethnic conflicts in Europe, or the Protestants/Catholic conflicts in Northern Ireland, the reality is still the same. For generations they had passed to their children and their grandchildren their bitterness' just like the descendants of Esau that last from generation to generation. The heritage of Esau is the Edomites with their bitterness toward the descendents of Jacob.

This makes it urgent that we deal with bitterness in our hearts. We don't want to transmit on to our children and grandchildren something that is so potentially destructive.

III. THE FRUIT OF BITTERNESS.

This evil root of bitterness bears evil fruit. It may not prevent the person harboring the bitterness from knowing a relatively successful life. This chapter is about the prosperity and the enrichment of Esau and his descendants but there is something greater at stake.

1. There is exclusion from God's purpose.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that Esau in his bitterness sought a way to reclaim what he had lost when he had sold his birthright but he was never able to find a way to do it. He was never willing to pay the price that would have been required to find the place in God's redemptive purpose. For all of his day and all the days of his descendants their heritage would be a continual enmity to the activity of God.

It may well be that your bitterness can be passed to your children and grandchildren in such a way that it not only keeps you from knowing the blessing of God, but it prevents your children from ever knowing it. Just how deeply this exclusion of Esau from the purpose of God is indicated by the statement you find in the prophet Malachi. "Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated." God and Esau found themselves on different sides of every issue.

The writer of Hebrews describes Esau as a "profane" person. This word literally means that he was a person who lived as though there was no God. In contrast to his brother, who had so many deficiencies, Esau never gave God the time of day. He was not interested in God, nor concerned about what God thought about anything. Bitterness put a wall between him and the God of the Covenant that nothing could ever tear down.

2. There will be final destruction.

When you take a concordance and you look to the references to Edom and the Edomites and the rest of the Old Testament it is a story of unfolding judgment. For example, the

little prophecy of Obadiah in its entirety is addressed to the Edomites. It is a promise of destruction and judgment. That's all that you can anticipate if you continue to harbor in your heart bitterness which separates you from God. The only thing to look forward to is the judgment and destruction of God.

A man came to Abraham Lincoln one day with a story of bitterness and revenge which he unfolded out of his own hate-filled heart. Lincoln responded to him quietly with a definite understatement. "You have more of that feeling of personal resentment than I have. Perhaps I have too little; but I never thought it paid." Of course, it never pays. One reason is that hatred and bitterness exposes us to God's destructive judgment. It puts us on the wrong side. It brings us in opposition to the Lord God whose purposes will prevail.

Some times the bitterness is rooted in a feeling that God had dealt unjustly with you. The famous Methodist pastor W. E. Sangster told about people he has known that for one reason or another had bitterness in his heart toward God. Sometimes it was because they had been born illegitimately or maimed, or facially disfigured, or crippled, or odd in some other way. In their minds they may carry resentment toward God for what they believed God has done to them. But, some of the great saints of the past has been people who had such experiences in their lives and did not become bitter. Alexander Whyte, the great Scottish pastor, was born to an unmarried mother. In that day it carried a tremendous stigma with it. Yet, he allowed it to be something that drew him to God in humility and dependence rather than something that became a source of bitterness in him. Even Paul had his thorn in the flesh that God had placed upon him, yet it became a source

of blessing in his life instead of bitterness. If someone has done you wrong, the way to avoid bitterness is through forgiveness. If you think God has done you wrong the way to avoid bitterness is trust. But know this, all bitterness develops a genealogy. Kill it! Kill it now! Kill it before it is able to pass from you to others with its destructive power and influence.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that there is plenty of grace available to keep you free from this destructive power of bitterness. Choose to allow the grace of God to do its work in your heart. You will bless generations to come by your decisions. You will not leave the world with a tribe of Edomites!