

FAILING THE MARSHMALLOW TEST

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Genesis 25:19-34

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Service for the Lord's Day

Have you heard of the marshmallow test? I imagine many of you have. The Stanford Marshmallow experiment is a fairly famous psychological study about delayed gratification that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Recently, the leader of the experiment has published a book about it called, well, *The Marshmallow Test*. The way the experiment worked was this: a child was offered a choice between a small reward provided immediately, or two small rewards if the child waited for a short period of time—usually about 15 minutes—during which the person administering the test left the room. Sometimes the rewards were pretzels, sometimes cookies, but the famous ones were the marshmallows. One marshmallow if you ate it right away, two marshmallows if you were able to wait until the researcher reappeared. In follow-up studies, researchers found that children who were able to delay gratification, who were able to wait to receive two marshmallows, tended to also have better life outcomes as measured by things like SAT scores, other kinds of educational attainment, and other kinds of life measures.

Some of the things that the researchers observed were that the children who were able to delay gratification often used some strategies to help themselves do so: they would cover their eyes or turn around so they didn't have to look at the marshmallow, or they would distract themselves by kicking the desk or playing with their hair, or they would even play with the marshmallow like it was a little stuffed animal.¹ It is fun to watch the hidden video footage of the children as they wait—or don't wait.

When I read today's story from Genesis, the marshmallow test was one of the first things that came to mind. If Jacob and Esau had taken the Stanford Marshmallow Test as little boys, I'm betting that Jacob would have gotten his second marshmallow, and Esau would have failed. He would have eaten his marshmallow right away.

This story that we read this morning is a well-known story, at least to many of us who have grown up in the church. It's a Sunday school kind of story—the story of twin brothers and their struggle against one another. It's one that is easy for young people to imagine—the idea of conflict in a family and especially sibling rivalry. And as we tell this story, we usually tell it from the position of Jacob. Because Jacob is the hero, although not a perfect hero, but the hero nonetheless, of the story. It is Jacob who God has chosen to carry the lineage of his people. There are certainly some unanswered questions in this text—some things that may be hard for us to understand about why God works things out the way God does. But while the *whys* may be hard to understand, the choices are certainly consistent with God's character. Because throughout scripture God is always choosing the younger one, the weaker one, the unexpected one. That we see over and over again. And while every time we read it, it is delivered like a surprising twist, we shouldn't be surprised. Because that is who God always seems to choose.

This choosing of the weaker one, the younger one, the smaller one—this would have been a comfort and a reassurance to the ancient people of Israel. As the people of Israel heard this story, they would recognize themselves. Because as a nation, they would have known that they were comparably

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford_marshmallow_experiment

weaker and smaller than the much stronger nations surrounding them. So they could easily identify with their forefather Jacob, and the fact that God had chosen him. God had chosen unlikely Jacob, and God had chosen unlikely Israel.

But the thing is, you and I are not really so small. We actually take up quite a bit of space here on the planet. If we are honest with ourselves, and we take a good hard look at the world, most all of us are among the mighty. We certainly use a larger percentage of the world's resources than the rest of the world. So I wonder if you and I ought to take a look at Esau. Because most of us sitting here are among the world's top tier. We are generally people of privilege, whether we like to admit it or not. As I look around, among us I see people who are wealthy, some of us are wealthy by U.S. standards, and all of us are among the wealthiest people in the world.

But there's more than that. Here you and I are in a place with all the opportunities in the world available to us to grasp hold of our faith. We are invited, week after week, Sunday after Sunday, into this (relatively) comfortable place. (Ok, the pews aren't that comfortable—but your property committee has even tried to accommodate that for those of us with back trouble by offering pillows.) And right now it's summer time, so we're a little laid back around here—but it won't be that long until we're gearing up again for the start of our education programming. And there will be a variety of Bible studies and Sunday school classes available so that you and I can grow in our faith. And actually, we haven't been that laid back—we just completed a four night VBS open to the whole congregation. The musically inclined among us have available to them a variety of music programs through which they can both express their faith and grow in faith. All of it right here for us. And though I don't really want anyone to leave, if this place doesn't strike your fancy, there are at least a dozen other flavors of church right here in High Point, all ready to do the same thing. A blessing, I would even call it, that has been bestowed on us. All of it designed so that we can grow in our faith. All of it designed so that we might lay hold of God's grace.

We are practically guaranteed an inheritance, we are the ones who are blessed without having to do anything because it is simply going to just be handed to us by virtue of our position in the world's family.

And then what do we do with it? Our inheritance. It's the Good News of God's grace, demonstrated for us in Jesus Christ. It's right there for us. We are offered God's grace and the opportunity to grow in it day by day. And then you and I so often squander it. We just sell it off for nothing. For a bowl of lentils. For a marshmallow. We despise our birthright.

It seems to me that one thing that makes God's grace so easy to abandon is that grace is not an instant gratification game. There are so many things that serve as quick fixes to the problems we face—I don't have to enumerate them, you know what they are for you. And I wonder if we haven't gotten to the point where we are so comfortable that we can't bear to wait for anything. But grace means that a lot of times we have to take the long view. In our story today both Jacob and Esau are looking for a blessing, but the difference between them is this understanding of the long view. Jacob seems to understand why you might want to wait for God's deferred blessing while Esau wants the immediate blessing of food. Jacob is prepared to wait on God.² I wonder if you and I ever get impatient with God?

And I also wonder if we are a people who like to control things. Who like to make all our own decisions—we really like words like ownership, independence, self-determination. Grace means giving up control. That's another distinction between Jacob and Esau. On first glance it may appear that Jacob is the one trying to control the situation. But look again. There is a contrast here between blessings that

² Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 219.

can be taken, managed, controlled and those that can only be received as a gift. Esau is the one who seeks the blessings he can control—the ones he can literally put in his mouth and consume. Jacob is the one who depends upon the sureness of God’s promise. This doesn’t mean that Jacob is a great person—it doesn’t mean he is good or honest or respectable—those moral questions aren’t even really engaged in this story. But what is clear is that Jacob believes in a future which is open, guided and directed by God, and Esau does not.³ I wonder if we are willing to let our future be guided and directed by God?

And closely related to relinquishing control, grace means taking risks. It means following God faithfully even when the outcome of doing that is unclear to you. Jacob is willing to take a risk, but Esau can’t stand to be hungry even for a minute. I wonder what risks we’re willing to take for the sake of grace?

Esau was so hungry, he was willing to give it all away. “I am about to die,” he says, “of what use is a birthright to me?” What is it that you and I are so hungry for that we think we’re going to die? Are we hungry for safety? For financial security? For good health? For time with our family? And are we willing to throw away our inheritance of grace to satisfy those hungers?

What is it that makes us willing to despise our birthright? To abandon the grace that we’ve been given? Maybe it’s not a sense of hunger... Maybe we’re so scared we’re about to die? So worried we’re about to die? So angry we’re about to die? So bored we’re about to die? So jealous we’re about to die? So exhausted we’re about to die? And does this make us willing to trade it in? Trade in our inheritance to satisfy ourselves. To get whatever it is that we long for.

When you’re Esau, and everything is laid out in front of you for the taking, sometimes it’s hard to see what you’ve got. A little discomfort can become impossible to bear. Waiting for something seems intolerable. And sometimes that can seem like the time to throw in the towel.

And sometimes, the sibling rivalry that existed between Jacob and Esau shows up in the human family, and that’s what gets in our way. Sometimes we abandon grace because we don’t like the fact that receiving it means we also have to share it. Sometimes it seems more important that we teach somebody a lesson than offer them grace. Sometimes we abandon grace because we’d rather see someone earn their way. Sometimes we abandon grace because it doesn’t seem fair—and it isn’t, by the way. Sometimes we abandon grace because rules just feel more solid, like something we can hold onto and grace feels so—*unattainable*.

I’ll admit this has been sort of a downer of a sermon. But it’s kind of hard to find an upbeat message when the last sentence of the text is “Thus Esau despised his birthright.” But even in a downer sermon, there is still Good News. There’s always Good News. And the Good News is that no matter how many times we despise our birthright, no matter how often we abandon the grace that has been given to us, grace doesn’t abandon us. It never does. We might let go of grace, but it doesn’t let go of us. We might toss grace aside, but it doesn’t toss us aside. It always gives us another chance.

Even so, when you and I faced with the marshmallow test, we ought to do our best to press on through it. Even if we feel so hungry we think we’re going to die, or so anxious we think we’re going to die, or so angry we think we’re going to die, or so anything we think we’re going to die. Don’t go for the marshmallow. The marshmallow isn’t going to keep us from dying, anyway. Wait on the grace of God instead.

Amen.

³ Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 219.