**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GENESIS-033. POTTAGE VERSUS BIRTHRIGHT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Esau despised his birthright."*

*Genesis 25:34*

Broad lessons unmistakable, but points strange and difficult to throw oneself back to so different a set of ideas. So

**I. Deal with the narrative.**

Not to tell it over again, but bring out the following points:--

**(a)** Birthright.--What?

None of them any notion of sacred, spiritual aspect of it.

To all, merely material advantages: headship of the clan. All the loftier aspects gone from Isaac, who thought he could give it for venison, from Esau, and from the scheming Rebekah and the crafty Jacob.

**(b)** The Bargain.

It is not clear whether the transaction was seriously meant, or whether it only shows Jacob's wish to possess the birthright and Esau's indifference to it.

At any rate, the barter was not supposed to complete Jacob's title, as is shown by a subsequent piece of trickery.

Isaac's blessing was conceived to confer it; that blessing, if once given, could not be revoked, even if procured by fraud and given in error.

The belief would fulfil itself, as far as the chieftainship was concerned.

It is significant of the purely secular tone of all the parties concerned that only temporal blessings are included in Isaac's words.

**(c)** The Scripture judgment on all parties concerned.

Great mistakes are made by forgetting that the Bible is a passionless narrator of its heroes acts, and seldom pauses to censure or praise--so people have thought that Scripture gave its vote for Jacob as against Esau.

The character of the two men.

Esau--frank, impulsive, generous, chivalrous, careless, and sensuous.

Jacob--meditative, reflective, pastoral, timid, crafty, selfish. Each has the defects of his qualities.

But the subsequent history of Jacob shows what heaven thought of him.

This dirty transaction marred his life, sent him a terrified exile from Isaac's tent, and shook his soul long years after with guilty apprehensions when he had to meet Esau.

All subsequent career to beat his crafty selfishness out of him and to lift him to higher level.

**II. The Choice.--Birthright versus Pottage.**

**(a)** The Present versus The Future.

Suppose it true that to both brothers the birthright seemed to secure merely material advantage, yet even so the better part would have been to sacrifice material present for material future. Even on plane of worldly things, to live for to-morrow ennobles a man, and he is the higher style of man who spurns delights and lives laborious days for some issue to be realised in the far future.

The very same principle extended leads to the conviction that the highest wisdom is his who lives for the furthest, which is also the most certain, Future.

**(b)** The Seen versus The Unseen.

However material the advantages of the birthright were supposed to be, they then appealed to imagination, not sense. There was the pottage in the pan: I can see that and smell it. This birthright, can I eat it? Let me get the solid realities, and let who will have the imaginary.

So the unseen good things, such as intellectual culture, fair reputation, and the like, are better than the gross satisfactions that can be handled, or tasted, or seen.

And, on the very same principle, high above the seeker after these--as high as he is above the drunkard--is the Christian, whose life is shaped by the loftiest Unseen, even Him who is invisible.

**II. The grim absurdity of the choice.**

The story seems to have a certain undertone of sarcasm, and a keen perception of the immense stupidity of the man.

Pottage and a full belly to-day--that was all he got for such a sacrifice.

This their way is their folly.

**III. How well the bargain worked at first, and what came of it at last.**

No doubt Esau had his meal, and, no doubt, when a man sells his soul to the devil (the mediaeval form of the story), he generally gets the price for which he bargained, more or less, and oftentimes with a dash of vinegar in the porridge, which makes it less palatable.

What comes of it at last. Put side by side the pictures of Esau's animal contentment at the moment when he had eaten up his mess, and of his despair when he wailed, Hast thou not one blessing?'

He finds out his mistake. A sense of the preciousness of the despised thing wakes in him.

And it is too late. There are irrevocable consequences of every false choice. Youth is gone: cannot alter that. Opportunities gone: cannot alter that. Strength gone: cannot alter that. Habits formed, associations, reputation, position, character, are all determined.

But there is a blessed contrast between Esau's experience and what may be ours. The desire to have the birthright is sure to bring it to us. No matter how late the desire is of springing, nor how long and insultingly we have suppressed it, we never go to our Father in vain with the cry, Bless me, even me also.

What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?