

Getting Our Priorities Straight

A Sermon by the Rev. Kurt Ho. Asplundh

"Two nations are in your womb,
Two peoples shall be separated from your body;
One people shall be stronger than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger" (*Gen. 25: 23*).

These words are the Lord's answer to Rebekah when she wondered why her unborn twins struggled within her.

Our text predicts the rivalry between the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau.

This rivalry pictures our struggle with priorities. Much of our life we seem to be pulled along by the demands of the day. We may look back on a week wondering where the time went and asking, "When will I get to the important things of my life?" It is important to consider our priorities-to get our priorities straight, as we say.

What can we learn from the rivalry for priority between Jacob and Esau that will help us in our own struggle to "get our priorities straight?" This is a question to be considered in the church program called "Shift" which is beginning here this week.

The twins, Jacob and Esau, sons of Isaac and Rebekah, were by no means identical. They were very different and grew up to live very different lives. Even before their birth the children struggled in the womb of Rebekah. So much so that she inquired of the Lord about it.

The Lord said to her: "The older shall serve the younger." This was the prophecy of Jacob's ascendancy over Esau.

The Writings reveal that the struggle between the twin sons is about whether good or truth takes priority in life:

"...or what is the same, whether charity which is of good, or truth which is of faith, is prior. ... It is said that the "sons struggled within her," and by this is signified combat...(AC 3289).

People in the church often seem divided over this question and struggle with it. Many say that **love** should prevail. Isn't this what the Lord has taught? "Love your neighbor. Do good to others, even those that hate you." The church is about charity and forgiveness. But others say we must give priority to the **truth**. Didn't the Lord say "the truth shall make you free?" That "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (*Matt. 4: 4*). And "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (*John 14: 15*). And this leads to differences of opinion about how we should lead our lives. And so the conflict goes on.

How can there be a combat between good and truth? They should work together rather than against one another.

That is the eventual goal. But at first it is not so. The following teaching from the Heavenly Doctrine explains why:

Man is nothing but an organ, or vessel, which receives life from the Lord. ...In consequence of the hereditary evil into which man is born, and of the actual evil which he acquires, these vessels are in a contrary position within him relatively to the inflowing life.... [T]herefore before they can be rendered compliant and fit to receive anything of the life of the Lord's love, they must be softened. ... This is the reason why man is regenerated, that is, made new, by temptations; or what is the same, by spiritual combats; and that he is afterwards gifted with another nature; being made mild, humble, simple, and contrite in heart (AC 3318: 2-4).

We can see this change literally taking place in Jacob over the years of his life. At first, he is ambitious, scheming, and arrogant. At last, after years in exile, tending the flocks of Laban, Jacob returns to his homeland, married, enriched, but humble before his older brother Esau.

Since the Lord cannot reach us through His inflowing good, He has provided another means by which we can be led: through His truth. Here, Esau represents the corrupted will, the vessel of good; Jacob represents the human understanding, a vessel capable of receiving truth. And this must at first take priority.

"before a man has been regenerated he does good from truth," we are told, "but after he has been regenerated he does good from good; or more clearly, before a man has been regenerated he does good from the understanding; but after he has been regenerated, from the will (AC 3295).

In ancient times, the law of primogeniture favored the firstborn son in a family. This son had the birthright, that is, the right to inherit the primary leadership and wealth of the family in the next generation.

Esau was born with this right. But Jacob was born immediately after Esau, his hand grasping Esau's heel at birth, ready to take his place. Therefore he was named Jacob, a name that means "Supplanter," one who takes another's place.

In the matter of Esau's birthright Jacob was indeed the supplanter. For he bought Esau's birthright for a meal of stew—"a mess of pottage." Later, Jacob boldly deceived his father and even stole for himself the blessing intended for Esau. Jacob took all the rights of the firstborn.

This rivalry for supremacy between the brothers has an interesting signification that has been revealed for the New Church (AC 3296). The struggle has to do with what has priority: Is truth first or good? We are told that "...it was a matter of controversy and dispute [even] among the ancients, which one of the two should be first, and which therefore is by right to be called the firstborn. Some of them said that truth is first and consequently faith; and some good, and consequently charity...."

Relating this to the text about Jacob and Esau, the one son, Esau, signifies good or charity. He was the firstborn. However, Jacob, who signifies truth and faith, supplanted Esau by obtaining his birthright and blessing. This represents the ascendancy of truth and faith in the mind over good.

Does this mean that priorities have changed? Doctrine teaches how this controversy is to be resolved. Truth or faith is "first in time; while charity, by which is also meant good, is first in end. That which is first in end is actually first," we are told, "because it is primary, therefore also it is the firstborn, while that which is first in time, is not actually first, but only apparently so" (*True Christian Religion* 336).

In considering the matter of priorities, then, we have the principle of "first in time" and "first in end." Esau signifies that which is first in end. Jacob, who takes Esau's birthright, signifies that which is first in time.

The Writings illustrate this. What Jacob represents "...is like...the foundation upon which a house is built in which one is to dwell.... [H]abitation in the house is the first in end, but the foundation is the first in time..." (*Apocalypse Revealed* 17). The Writings go on to say that it is similar with the understanding which is formed in man first, but to the end that what a man sees with his understanding, he may do.

How does this help us get our priorities straight? We must identify what is "first in end," the good ends, the primary purposes of our life, and nurture these. But we must also recognize that steps to these ends will come first in time. These, temporarily, must have the birthright. The life of charity is first in end but learning how to live that life is first in time.

There are two possible dangers. One is to hold high priorities for a good life without ever taking the steps that must be first in time to attain them. An example of this would be a marriage in which partners believe that their love for each other will conquer all their problems. Another example is an organization seeking to perform some good work in which the officers are unable to exercise fiscal responsibility or run an efficient operation.

The opposite danger is to remain in those activities that are first in time without moving toward any higher ends. An example of this is a person who continues to study without making any application of what he has learned. Another example is a person who continues to acquire and accumulate wealth simply for its own sake.

As we pass through life and its changing states, our priorities seem to change. The Writings say that truth has the dominion with a person in the beginning. That is, Jacob rules. This, we are told, is "chiefly because in his first state there are delights of the love of self and of the world which he believes to be good. All these things excite this affection of truth in him, and also enkindle it; and yet they are not good, but evil. Nevertheless" we are told, "the Lord permits that such things should influence him in that first time, because otherwise he could not be regenerated" (AC 3330).

It is notable, that the story of Jacob confirms this doctrine. Jacob returned to Canaan after a twenty year exile in the house of Laban and bowed himself before his brother Esau. The Word describes their reunion after all those years. "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept" (Gen. 33:4). This touching reunion of the brothers signifies the culmination of a spiritual development that each one of us can experience.

The priorities of life do not change but we come to recognize them more truly as we pass through our life stages.

What can we learn from the account of Esau and Jacob that will help us understand ourselves and the priorities we set for ourselves?

We learn that we are unaware at first of the Lord's priorities for our lives. Like the blind Isaac, father of Jacob, we give our blessing to a pretender, apparent priorities. At first, our lives are not motivated by the Lord's loves because we are incapable of receiving them.. We are driven instead by loves of self and the world. These stimulate our affections for truth. Our youthful priorities are self-centered and materialistic. However, as we learn and strive for success in the world, as Jacob did in his years with Laban, we build a foundation of knowledge which the Lord can use.

At some point in our lives, the Lord can touch our heart, causing us to think about use and to reflect on the knowledge we have from the Word. He awakens us to a new and glorious realization of priorities for our lives we had not even dreamed existed. It is like a new birth. Not the birth of Esau or of Jacob, but the birth of the Lord in our lives.

The Lord is called the Firstborn in the Word (Rev. 1: 5) "for He is good itself, and from His good is all truth." (AC 4925: 7).

Like Jacob, we can be made into the image and likeness of the Lord by a life of regeneration. Gradually, through our ages and states of life, we put aside the motivations driven by self love, allowing the Lord's good and His ends, to become our first priority.

Isaac said to Esau his son, "I have made [Jacob] your master... [But] it shall come to pass...that you shall break his yoke from your neck" (Gen. 27: 37, 40). Twenty

years later, a repentant Jacob returned to Canaan. He bowed himself to the ground seven times as he came near his brother Esau. They embraced and wept together, and Jacob said, "I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me."

A happy reunion. A miraculous transformation. "This is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes" (*Mark 12: 11*). **Amen.**

Lessons: *Genesis 25:20-34; Matthew 20:20-28; AC 4925:1-3, parts*

Arcana Coelestia 4925. ...It has been a matter of dispute from the most ancient times which is the firstborn, whether the good which is of charity, or the truth which is of faith; and as good does not appear while man is being reborn and made a church, but conceals itself in the interior man, and manifests itself only in a certain affection which does not fall clearly into the sensation of the external or natural man, until he has been reborn - whereas truth makes itself manifest, because it enters through the senses and stores itself in the memory of the external or natural man - therefore many persons have fallen into the error of thinking that truth is the firstborn, and at last even into that of thinking that truth is the essential of the church, and so essential that truth, which they call faith, has power to save without the good which is of charity. [2] ...In consequence of holding this doctrine they at last do not know what charity is, nor do they care for it; and finally they do not believe there is such a thing, nor consequently that there is a heaven or a hell. The reason is that faith without charity, or truth without good, teaches nothing; and the more it recedes from good, the more foolish it renders a man. For it is good into which and through which the Lord flows and gives intelligence and wisdom, thus a higher mental view, and also perception as to whether a thing be so or not so. [3] All this shows how the case is in regard to primogeniture - it actually belongs to good, and to truth only apparently.