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A Happy and Faithful Life: How to Live in the Moment—and How Not to!

Focus: For truly to see your face, brother, is like seeing the face of God—Genesis 33:10

For Oedipus excites his soul too much with all sorts of things: he does not judge the present from things past, as a man of sense would, but is at the mercy of whatever is in front of him.—
Oedipus the King, Sophocles

For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which [God] has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them.—*The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis

Work as if you were to live 100 years, pray as if you were to die tomorrow.—Benjamin Franklin,
Poor Richard's Almanac

First Scripture Lesson: Genesis 25:29-34

Esau, I think, gets a bum rap. I'm talking about Esau in the Bible, the twin brother of Jacob. Despite their being twins, the Bible tells us that they were very different, polar opposites in fact. More than that, they were the very picture of sibling rivalry. The Bible tells us that they were born tussling with one another; in fact, even before they were born, they were tussling, much to their mother's, Rebecca's, discomfort.

And this opposition continues as they grow up.

One commentator, representing the view of many, characterizes Esau as “a happy-go-luck, not-too-intelligent sportsman—the proverbial dumb jock.”

Now I have to tell you: I just don't think that's fair. Esau is not dumb. Yes, he makes some dumb mistakes. In fact, in this passage, he makes a famously dumb one—trading his birthright for a mess of pottage (pottage being a kind lentil stew). But that's not because he's dumb; it's because . . . well, it's because he's impulsive, impetuous, thoughtless—he wants what he wants when he wants it and that's all he wants—at least in that moment.

The last verse of this passage, the conclusion of the story, in the New Revised Standard Version, reads: “Thus Esau despised his birthright”; but a better translation would be “Thus, Esau thought little of his birthright.” And *that's* Esau's problem: it's not that he's dumb, it's just that he doesn't always think. Genesis Chapter 25, verses 29-34. Listen now for God's Word . .

Second Scripture Lesson: Genesis 33:1-12

The Bible is right: Esau and Jacob are polar opposites, at least while they're growing up, but that is not to say that Esau is dumb and Jacob, smart.

Jacob is clever, sometimes too clever by half. He's a schemer—he's always up to something, for example that stew that just happened to be ready when Esau came in famished from the fields—"just happened" yeah, right. Jacob's always thinking ahead, always has a plan, a stratagem, a trick up his sleeve: in fact, soon enough Jacob will literally roll up his sleeve and trick his blind and infirm father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing he intends for his firstborn Esau ("A hairy arm—yes this must be Esau"; a paternal blessing like a birthright meaning a lot at that time).

So yes: Jacob and Esau are opposites: one is all connivance and contrivance, whereas the other is what you see is what you get, or rather, what he sees in the moment is what he wants right at that moment: *"Gimme some of that red stuff; I'm starving!"*

And after Jacob tricks Esau out of his father's blessing, all that Esau wants at that moment is to kill his brother. So Jacob hightails it out of there.

You may remember what comes next in the story. At the direction of his mother, Jacob travels to the home of some distant relations where he immediately falls in love with Rachel, which means he must negotiate for her hand in marriage with her father, Laban.

Laban is like Jacob only more so—a pure schemer. In fact, if anything can make you sympathetic to Jacob, it's Laban: at least Jacob has a certain roguish charm and really does seem to love Rachel, which is more than you can say for Laban.

Of course on the surface, it's all decorum and diplomacy. But underneath? . . . It's like watching two snakes face off—you're never sure who's going to win, but you know it's going to be vicious—and venomous. And it goes on for 20 years!—they make deal after deal after deal with each one conniving to, and often succeeding in, getting the better of the other. But eventually, over time, Jacob wins out: he has married both of Laban's daughters and owns most of his livestock to boot. The Bible says:

"So Jacob grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, many retinues of servants, and camels and donkeys. And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him favorably as before."

That last being a fine example of Biblical understatement.

So once again Jacob is running for his life under cover of darkness, only this time with all his wives and children, male and female servants, sheep, goats, rams, ewes, bulls, donkeys and camels. And as he does, he receives word that—who should be waiting on the road up ahead? His brother Esau—with 400 armed men!

So what does Jacob do? Run away? Try to reason with Esau? Plead? Beg his forgiveness? No, no, no, and no. He takes all his sheep, goats, rams, ewes, bulls, donkeys and camels, and his male and female servants, and his wives and children, and he divides them all into separate groups, and sends each group, one by one, before Esau.

Now at first that may seem puzzling, but *not* if you think about Jacob as a schemer and what he remembers about Esau from twenty years ago. Jacob is trying to do with Esau just what we try to do with Jersey, our Labrador Retriever puppy: distract him with interactive toys.

You put Jersey outside—“Just stay outside for ten minutes Jersey, *please*”—but Jersey doesn’t want to stay outside for even a minute. So he starts yipping and yapping—the vet calls it “alarm barking”—this incredibly annoying, incessant, screechy, squeaky, fingernails-on-the-chalkboard, grating to the ears, mind-numbing and soul-jarring yipping and yapping.

And he won’t stop. He wants what he wants when he wants it and that’s all he wants—at least in that moment, and what he wants is to be inside with us.

Now you can try to reason with Jersey—believe me I’ve tried (“Now Jersey, you and I both value good relations with our neighbors, and while I know this might come as a shock to you, it is just possible that a few of our neighbors might find your yipping and yapping, well . . . perhaps millldddlllyyy, well . . . annoying”).

But if I do that, you know what that does, don’t you? That’s right: he yips and yaps even more.

So what do you do? Well, you give him “interactive treats.” But you don’t just give him the treats—they’d be gone in two seconds. No: you put the treats in a bright, shiny, bouncy, rubber-plastic interactive toy, which you then toss into the back yard: he has to work the toy for a while to get the treats out. But you don’t just give him one interactive toy (he’d be through with that in three or four minutes) you give him a whole series of interactive toys, tossing one after another after another, with the hope that he’ll be distracted long enough to forget what he was yipping and yapping about in the first place.

That’s what Jacob is doing with Esau.

Only Esau’s not a puppy anymore. He’s grown up. He has learned how to live in the moment.

Listen to the conversation between the two brothers, and you’ll see what I mean. Genesis 33, verses 1-12. Listen now for God’s Word to us . . .

Sermon:

“Living a Happy and Faithful Life.”

Today is the first in a series of occasional sermons on that topic. I want to do this because all kinds of books, TV shows, celebrities, motivational speakers, and now websites and twitter feeds, are out there dispensing advice on this—it’s clearly something people care about.

And I want to do it because I think the Bible, as well as our theological, philosophical, literary and cultural traditions have wisdom on this subject; and I want bring that wisdom forward in an

accessible, enjoyable way. But most of all I want to do this because I believe God wants us to live happy and faithful lives.

And one piece of advice you hear a lot for living a happy and faithful life is the importance of living in the moment. Here's a typical book: "1001 Ways to Live in the Moment," a title that echoes the words of the old poet: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old time is still a flying," which harkens back to the Bible: "This is the day the Lord has made let us rejoice and be glad in it."

And we certainly say such things to one another:

Early this past Thursday morning I was out in the front yard with Jersey, and our neighbor came out onto his front porch followed by his seven-year-old daughter. She was dressed in her new school uniform, wearing new color-besotted sneakers, with a new, almost-as-big-as-she-is backpack on her back. First day of second grade. Dad taking her picture. And she had this great big, I'm-really-excited-but-I'm-also-a-little-scared smile on her face, complete with a great big gap right here where just a few months ago, at the end of last school year, she had four front teeth.

She was precious. So you know what I said to him, don't you? That's right: "Enjoy the moment, they grow up so fast."

But **how** do we do that? How do we enjoy, how do we live—and live well—in the moment?

Well, not the way the young Esau did. Not by being impulsive, impetuous, thoughtless (I want what I want when I want it and that's all I want—right now: **"Gimme some of that red stuff; I'm starving!"**)

That only leaves us at the mercy of whatever is in front of us at the moment or whoever has spoken to us last. "Eat, drink, and be merry"—for tomorrow we die," is not a good rule for a happy life or even a pleasure-filled one: it's really an expression of despair combined with a wish to distract ourselves from that despair by indulging in pleasures that, in the long run, won't even be pleasurable.

But if the young Esau doesn't have the recipe for happiness, neither does the young Jacob: He's so busy worrying about the future—scheming to get what he wants in the future—that the present seems to be nothing more than a means to that end.

And of course there are plenty of other ways to live too much in the future: not by scheming, but by anxiety and worry. The danger of which Jesus clearly recognized:

"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto this day is the evil thereof."

And it's not just anxiety. Another way is to indulge false hopes and empty wishes for the future. Jeremiah warns:

“Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD.”

And there are plenty of ways to dwell too much in and on the past, too: either by nostalgia or bitterness or both. The Bible sees the danger here, too:

“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

All well and good. Forewarned is forearmed. But still it’s a fair question: **How** do we live—and live well—in the moment?

Answer: By recognizing that the temporal and the eternal are not mutually exclusive but mutually inclusive. “Time,” the philosopher said, “is the moving image of eternity.” And the image participates in the reality. The eternal is present in the temporal present. Or as C.S. Lewis put it: “the Present is the point at which time touches eternity.”

It was true from the moment of creation: “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”

It is true in the redemption of creation: “And he the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.”

And it is true in the sustaining of creation: “In him all things hold together In him we live and move and have our being. ‘

It is when we are alive—**both** to our living in time **and** to eternity touching the present moment—that we are living in the moment.

All well and good. And I warned you I was going to appeal to wisdom of the theological, philosophical, literary and cultural traditions, as well as to that of the Bible. But still it’s a fair question: what does that look like?

Well, go back to my neighbor’s front porch.

In that child standing on the front porch we can see a beauty, a goodness, and a life that could come only from God, that is a gift from God. She is precious, made in the image of God, and therefore an image, a moving image, of eternity. To see her on that porch is to become aware that in this moment—and in every moment—time touches eternity.

Or go back to Esau greeting Jacob. Running to meet him, he embraces him, falls on his neck and kisses him; they weep together. At that moment, Esau sees Jacob for what he truly is: precious, made in the image of God. He calls him, “my brother.” It is a moment when time touches eternity. And we know this because Jacob says to him: “truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

We all have these moments: moments when we become aware that time always touches eternity in every moment. A sunset, a sunrise, the way the evening light cast shadows across

the hills; at the end of a good meal or during a good conversation with a friend; the end of a wonderful piece of music, or when you team scores the winning run.

In Bucket-List Books, reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we called them "raft moments." Moments when Huck and Jim experienced friendship and peace, beauty, goodness, and life together on the raft. "It's lovely to live on a raft," Huck says.

We all have our raft moments—whatever they are and wherever they occur—moments when we become aware that time always touches eternity in the moment. That's what it means to live in the moment. And we want those moments to last forever. How many times, in one of those moments have you said or thought to yourself, or simply breathed with whatever breath you have, "Oh, how I wish this moment could last forever!" Maybe that's why we take pictures: to try to make the moment last forever. But we know it can't. Because the moment is in time, and we live in time.

That child standing on the front porch needs to go to school for her mind to learn and her heart to grow, to become the person God wants her to be. She lives in time, so she needs to grow up. And those front teeth need to grow in.

Esau too knows that, as wonderful at this moment is—to see your face, brother, is like seeing the face of God—they must continue on their journey in time: He says to Jacob, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you."

It is when we are alive—**both** to our living in time **and** to eternity touching the present moment—that we are living in the moment. And God can—and does—give us these moments, on our journeys, in the best of times, but also, surprisingly, maybe especially, in the worst of times.

Our American sage Ben Franklin got it right when he said in *Poor Richard's Almanac* (which was to 18th-century America what twitter is to us today) "Work as if you were to live 100 years, pray as if you were to die tomorrow."

In other words, plan and work today knowing that tomorrow and the day after and the day after that will come. Don't sell your birthright for a mess of lentil stew. But also remember that, although life is short and its duration uncertain, God is with us. In this moment and in every moment, God is with us.

God calls us to live in this moment. This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.