

A moment's reckless folly...

Intro: Some of you football fans will immediately recognize the name Darren Carrington. Carrington is a freshman wide receiver for the Oregon Ducks; and recently made headline when he was ruled ineligible to play in the national championship game with his fellow teammates because he had tested positive in a random NCAA drug test. If Darren were like most young athletes, he would have dreamed for many years of the opportunity to play with his team in a national championship and help them win. All year he had helped his team to a conference championship and a place in the title game. But all of those dreams came crashing down. For what? Apparently nothing more than the pleasure of smoking marijuana a day before the biggest game of his life! Most people would say that Carrington made a very foolish choice to exchange something so great for something so small. For a moment's folly he missed the game of his life; and without his help, his team also lost the national championship.

That young man was not the first person to make such a choice; and if you have been reading your Bible in Genesis you may remember the story of another young man who made a similar choice--Esau. The Hebrew writer urges us to learn from this OT character who, for a moment's reckless folly, lost a great blessing:

“See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.” (Heb. 12:15–17)

Esau's godless exchange

Esau was one of the twin sons of Isaac. Though only born a short time before his twin brother Jacob, Esau, as the first-born son, was entitled to important privileges of his birth position. These included what was apparently a double portion of his father's inheritance (Deut. 21:17) and the place of honor in the family. Presumably the status of first-born would also qualify him for a special blessing at the end of his father's life. However Esau apparently thought very little of such things. One day he came in from a hunting trip very hungry and found that his brother had made a red lentil stew. He asked his brother to share it with him; but Jacob sensing an opportunity, proposed a swap. Let's listen in Moses' report the event:

And when Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, “Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.” Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” And Esau said, “Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?” And Jacob said,

"First swear to me"; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Gen. 25:29–34)

Esau's willingness to make such an exchange is truly amazing. From his point of view maybe it seemed like the right call.

First he got what he wanted when he wanted it.

Second it was probably the best tasting stew he had ever eaten in his life!

Third he had ostensibly saved his own "life" by the price of his birthright, a price not too great to stay alive!

Yet from Moses' point of view Esau had made a great mistake.

He lost a huge amount of wealth in the transaction (1/3 of his father's estate). Esau's reasoning was ludicrous--What good is my inheritance if I am dead? Was he really that close to death? Or was that just a justification for doing what he wanted to do anyway? (People are pretty good and coming up with "reasons" to do what they want to do anyway.)

Even Moses' language hints at the inequity of the trade. Esau is said to "sell" his birthright, but Jacob "gave" him bread.

His actions reveal the shallowness of the whole transaction--"he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way." Any serious thinking going on? Apparently none.

He revealed contempt for a blessing from God. It is rare that Moses comments when he tells the stories of Israel's past; but in this case he cannot resist a moral observation. In essence Esau not only despised his birthright; he despised himself and the Lord as well.

The Hebrew writer is even more critical. He considered Esau's actions just another example of a man who could not control his desires.

By inspiration he calls him "immoral and godless."

Lane thinks that "immoral" (Gr. pornos) is used here figuratively (i.e. Esau was spiritually adulterous or apostate); and certainly there are texts that are intended that way. But there was also a long tradition in Jewish thought that indicated that Esau apparently had no more control over his sexual desires than he did over his craving for stew. If Esau could justify selling his birthright for a "single meal," could he not just as easily justify sexual misconduct on the same basis? Had he been attracted to Canaanite women for that very reason? Eventually he would marry two of them, both of which would have been idolaters without the slightest respect for the God of Abraham or his father Isaac!

And this is why Esau was also called "godless" or "profane." The Greek word "bebelos" conveys the oppositeness of holiness (one who is secular, profane.) Esau apparently could not see that his status and blessing as firstborn was bound up with his family's relationship with God who had promised His blessing and inheritance to them! Such spiritual ideas were beyond his way of thinking.

I am especially intrigued by Moses' commentary since he too was confronted with a similar situation. In contrast to Esau's godless exchange we can also see:

Moses' godly exchange

If the Hebrew writer would strongly denounce and encourage God's people not to be like Esau, then he would likewise commend and encourage them to be like Moses. Listen to his description:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. (Hebrews 11:24–26)

Like Esau, Moses too had a choice to make. He could have gone for immediate gratification (what he wanted when he wanted it); but instead he chose what many would have considered foolish:

He rejected status and prestige--"refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter." The reference is probably not to some formal denunciation, but rather the practical choice that Moses made when he went out to his brethren and defended them during their time of mistreatment. He rejected a sensual lifestyle--"He rejected the passing pleasures of sin."

Why did he do it?

Because he considered the reproach of the Messiah to be a thing of greater value to him than the treasures of the Pharaoh of Egypt.

Just as Christ suffered reproach in identifying with the people of God, so did Moses. Yet to Moses that was a thing of greater value than all the treasures of Egypt.

Such a statement astounds us until we realize that the reproach of Christ itself has its reward as well, eternal life with God!

In a word Moses was a man of faith, who believed in God and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Looking at the choices we make

Every day we may find ourselves in the same position as these two men.

We can choose to live sensually or spiritually.

We can choose immediate gratification or delayed but eternal bliss.

We can avoid the pain of struggled against sin or we can experience it with a view to living holy lives.

Conclusion: Probably everyone who makes a bad choice could wish that could go back and undo what they did.

Maybe Carrington wept as he watched his teammates play the greatest game of their lives without him.

Certainly Esau wept when he realized that he had made irrevocable choices that could not be retrieved. The Hebrew writer observed:

For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.” (Hebrews 12:15–17)

What Esau realized too late is that he had made an irrevocable decision.

If there's something you're being tempted to do that is wrong, don't go down that path! Don't let one moment of reckless folly ruin your reputation and your eternity.