

Genesis 33:1-20

Reconciliation

It is likely that each of us has offended someone. Such is the reality of being a fallen, sinful person living among other fallen, sinful persons. So, I am certain that at some point, each of us has said something thoughtlessly, done something selfishly, or in some other way acted unkindly toward another. Perhaps what we did was relatively insignificant and easily forgiven and quickly forgotten. Perhaps, though, what we did was deeply and lastingly hurtful. Perhaps what we did was so impactful, that the relationship between the offender and the offended was ruined. Being mindful of this, we can better understand the dynamics of this passage.

Jacob was preparing to meet his brother, Esau. This was the brother whom he had tricked out of his birthright and from whom he had stolen the patriarchal blessing. To prepare the way, Jacob had sent in advance several servants to inform his brother that he was returning home. There was no reason to make the situation worse by simply surprising Esau. But when these servants returned from meeting Esau, they informed Jacob that his brother was already on his way to meet him, and Esau was bringing with him a small army (Genesis 32:6). Jacob's response to this news was understandable. Assuming the worst, Jacob did three things. First, he divided his caravan into two groups, hoping thereby to save one from the anticipated attack of Esau and his force (Genesis 32:8). Second, he sent Esau a generous series of gifts in the form of breeding stock (Genesis 32:13-18). Finally, and almost as an afterthought, Jacob ferried his family and remaining possessions across the Jabbok river so that he might be alone (Genesis 32:22). As it happened, Jacob was hardly alone, as an angel of the Lord wrestled with him throughout the night.

The Meeting

Now filthy from wrestling in the dirt, tired from a sleepless night, and limping from a dislocated hip, Jacob made his way across the Jabbok River. Wearily he "lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him" (v. 1). We cannot imagine what Jacob felt. Perhaps he still felt the exhilaration from his battle with the angel and the empowerment of a new name. Perhaps he feared that he was about to have returned upon him the frustration and bitterness of twenty years of resentment. Probably, Jacob experienced a bit of both.

Rejoining his family, "¹he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ²He put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last" (v. 1-2). The parties were divided in descending order of their importance to Jacob. First the maids Bilhah and Zilpah and their offspring went forward. Then Leah and her children. And, finally, his beloved Rachel and Joseph. We can pause to enjoy the fact that since Joseph was the only child mentioned by name, the author foreshadowed a future struggle between Jacob's eleven other sons and this particularly favored child (Genesis 37:3-4).

Yet, though it might appear so, Jacob was not hiding behind his wives and children. For, as the party approached Esau, Jacob "himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother" (v. 3). Here in this one sentence we can see the immediate impact of the encounter at Peniel the night before. Before that night, Jacob had sent the others in advance. He had

sent servants, animals, and even prepared to send his wives and children to encounter Esau first. But now it was Jacob who put himself forward. He would bear upon himself whatever reprisals Esau might have been prepared to unleash. Thus, Jacob had moved from the rearguard to the vanguard. Now, like any good leader, Jacob went first.

Because he was limping, Jacob must have approached Esau slowly. And as Jacob approached, he bowed to the ground. Ironically, his father, Isaac, had once blessed Jacob stating,

“May peoples serve you,
And nations bow down to you;
Be master of your brothers,
And may your mother’s sons bow down to you” (Genesis 27:29).

But now it was Jacob who was bowing before his brother. He prostrated himself. Some commentators, among them John Calvin, have argued that Jacob was bowing to worship the Lord prior to encountering his brother, Esau, but such an interpretation does not seem to be consistent with Jacob’s address to Esau when he calls himself “your servant” (v. 5, 14) and Esau “my lord” (v. 8, 13, 14, 15). The action of prostration which Jacob displayed was the very definition of humility and submissiveness. Consider,

“Now Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land.
And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground”
(Genesis 42:6).

“⁸Then Boaz said to Ruth, ‘listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. ⁹Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw.’ ¹⁰Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, ‘why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?’” (Ruth 2:8-10).

So, Jacob was behaving just as he should have done. He knew he was the offending party, and he came upon his offended brother with meekness and contrition. In response, and no doubt much to Jacob’s surprise, “Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept” (v. 4). As Esau ran to meet Jacob, the latter must have been filled with terror. Did this seemingly aggressive action precipitate the attack Jacob had long expected. That Jacob was limping meant he would not have been able to evade Esau’s attack even if he had tried to.

But Esau had come to Jacob in peace. In fact, the reader can be overwhelmed by the quick succession of verbs that describe Esau’s actions. He ran to Jacob, embraced him, fell upon his neck, kissed him and wept with him. The narrative evokes the same emotions and draws comparisons with the father of the prodigal son upon that wayward son’s return (Luke 15:20). These emotional responses, such as weeping and kissing, were emblematic of strong familial feelings in the Hebrew culture.

“So when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister’s son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house” (Genesis 29:13).

[“]¹⁴Then he [Joseph] fell on his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. ¹⁵He kissed all his brothers and wept on them, and afterward his brothers talked with him” (Genesis 45:14-15).

But these actions could hardly have been expected from Esau. And mysteriously, Scripture gives us no accounting for this change in his attitude. Twenty years before, Esau had been provoked to murder Jacob. Now he welcomed his brother home as if he had long been missed. Esau, is not recorded as having received some dream or vision from God, as had Abimelech or Laban before, warning them against harming God’s elect (Genesis 20:3-7; 31:24). And Esau’s actions belied any grudging act of forgiveness or faked, forced reconciliation. Still, though Esau may not have received a direct command from God not to injure his brother, the change in Esau’s heart, as in anyone’s, can only be attributed to the work of God.

The Reconciliation

Curiously, Esau may have been equally surprised at their meeting. While it is impossible to believe that for twenty years Esau had received no news from his brother in Paddan-aram, we may recall that the last time Esau had seen Jacob, the latter was quite a bit younger, quite a bit poorer, and in much better health. Passing over the limp without commentary, Esau asked his brother about his family. “He lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said, ‘who are these with you?’” (v. 5). In response Jacob made no mention of his wives. Perhaps he thought that to do so might remind his brother of his own departing some twenty years before, ostensibly to find a wife from his distant relatives. Jacob was not eager to resurrect the past. So, instead, Jacob focused on his children. “So he said, ‘the children whom God has graciously given your servant’” (v. 5). We see, here, Jacob sensing that his recent prayer had been answered, “deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children” (Genesis 32:11).

With a nod from Jacob to assure them that it was safe to approach, his wives came forward, again in descending order of affection. “⁶Then the maids came near with their children, and they bowed down. ⁷Leah likewise came near with her children, and they bowed down; and afterward Joseph came near with Rachel, and they bowed down” (v. 6-7). As the children passed, and some of them were young men by now, Jacob must have been reminded of God’s grace to him. These were “the children whom God has graciously given” (v. 5), and they proceeded in orderly fashion to present themselves to their uncle.

Much is omitted here in the narrative. No conversation is recorded between any of these family members and Esau. But perhaps they simply stepped forward and bowed silently to the ground. Also we can again see that Jacob did not divulge much biographical detail regarding the sordid and complicated relationship between Leah and Rachel and their maids. Nor was Jacob willing to reveal how he had been tricked by his uncle, or how he had tricked his uncle in return. Jacob still played his cards close to his vest. And we must also acknowledge that Jacob never apologized to his brother for the past events. Yet, clearly his offering could not have been interpreted by Esau as anything else.

But Esau still was confused. The introductions complete, he asked Jacob, “what do you mean by all this company which I have met?” (v. 8). It seemed like a fair question, though Jacob’s messengers had undoubtedly delivered the message Jacob had instructed (Genesis 32:4-5). It is difficult to believe that

even if Esau had forgiven his brother, Esau could not have expected Jacob to have assumed that would be the case, and thus Esau must have known that Jacob would have been at least a bit afraid at their first meeting. And the number of animals Esau had received was too generous. Surely, he must have wondered, not all of these beasts were intended as a gift.

Here, Jacob answered honestly. For once he did not resort to deceit or subtlety. Repeating the statement with which Jacob had charged his messengers, he replied, “to find favor in the sight of my lord” (v. 8). And then the dialogue became one of the courteous, but somewhat rehearsed, negotiations in which each party tried to be more gracious than the other.

“⁹Esau said, ‘I have plenty, my brother; let what you have be your own.’ ¹⁰Jacob said, ‘no, please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably. ¹¹Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have plenty.’ Thus he urged him and he took it” (v. 9-11).

Notice that while Esau could refer to Jacob as “my brother,” Jacob could not yet reciprocate. Instead he continued to refer to Esau as “my lord” in a sign of deference. Apparently, Jacob was still not certain that he had received Esau’s complete forgiveness. And again we must notice that while Laban required direct interference from God to keep him from retaliating against Jacob (Genesis 31:24), Esau needed no such motivation. Scripture seems to give no other indication for Esau’s behavior than his own goodwill towards his estranged brother.

Esau’s preliminary refusal to take the gift from Jacob was not rude, but rather may have been intended as a demonstration of the fact that, though he had been cheated out of his portion as first-born (what would have been a double-share of Isaac’s inheritance), he had not become impoverished. Indeed, he, too, had flourished during the twenty year interval. Nonetheless, Esau eventually relented and graciously received Jacob’s gift.

Notice that Jacob had made two points when he persuaded Esau to take his gift. First, the gift was placed in the context of reconciliation. “If now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present” (v. 10), Jacob pleaded. The acceptance of the gift was to be the sign of Esau’s forgiveness. Second, like Esau, Jacob had also been blessed by God. He had plenty to spare and was willing to part with these possessions if it meant that there would finally be peace between himself and his brother. Finally, we might also consider that Jacob referred to himself as one God has blessed perhaps to discourage Esau from any planned attack.

We must pause here, though, to remind ourselves of Jacob’s wonderful perspective on being blessed. Recall that Jacob was dirty, tired, unkempt, and sore. Yet, he called himself blessed. It is a wonderful reminder that our sense of being blessed by God is not related to our worldly circumstances.

And it is clear that Jacob was not hiding his joy. To see Esau smiling at him, Jacob said, was as one “as one sees the face of God” (v. 10). This was obviously a reference to Jacob’s encounter at Peniel the night before (Genesis 32:30). Thus *Peni-El* had become *Peni-Esau*. But this is not to suggest, however, that

Esau had undergone some metamorphosis and had glory reflected in his countenance. Rather, just as Jacob had “seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (Genesis 32:30), so now Jacob had seen Esau face to face and lived as well.

Having begun to reconcile with each other, Esau apparently assumed that their reunion would lead to the usual social conventions of hospitality common in the culture, if not joint settlement, as had Abraham and Lot had lived together once (Genesis 13:5). “Esau said, “let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you” (v.12). Thus, Esau offered to accompany Jacob and his caravan, indeed to lead the way, providing the use of his four hundred men, perhaps to protect them during the remainder of their journey.

But Jacob courteously refused. “¹³He said to him, ‘my lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴Please let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir’” (v. 13-14).

Jacob’s point was valid. To travel too quickly would not only be a burden to the children, some of whom were still quite young, but also prove hazardous to the young of the flock, who would not be able to keep pace with their mothers, who provided the nourishment they desperately needed on such a journey. Jacob had traveled at least a few hundred miles from Paddan-aram, and everyone, both man and beast, in his caravan must have been fatigued. So, Jacob suggested that Esau go on ahead, and that he would join him eventually. To put Esau’s mind at ease, in case he still distrusted his once devious brother, Jacob made no mention of settling anywhere in Canaan outside of the sight of Esau. Jacob and his people would go to Seir.

Esau accepted Jacob’s point, indeed surrounded by the bleating and bellowing of the animals it would have been difficult to ignore it, but graciously offered to provide assistance during the remainder of his brother’s journey. “Esau said, ‘please let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.’ But he said, ‘what need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord’” (v. 15). Unlike his first refusal, Jacob here offered no counterarguments. He simply appealed to Esau’s favor. Perhaps he did so because there was no logical reason why he would not accept the extra physical help and protection Esau’s men would have provided. Perhaps, Jacob recognized that with Esau’s men as an escort, he would indeed have to journey to Seir and live with his brother Esau, something, as we will see, Jacob had no intention of doing. So Jacob demurred. He was still capable of being deceptive, and Esau, since he made no reply and apparently conceded to his brother’s wishes, was still capable of being tricked.

The Parting

The brothers parted on friendly terms, something Jacob could not have expected even a few hours before. “¹⁶Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named Succoth” (v. 16-17). Note that no treaty was made. They had been able to reconcile without resorting to formal



diplomacy. But nonetheless we cannot miss the fact that Jacob had misled his brother. He had no intention of journeying all the way to the southern border of Canaan. That was not his land. That was not the land of promise. Instead, Jacob remained in the north. The brothers had no further conversation, at least none is recorded in Scripture. And they are not to be seen together again in the Biblical account until they buried their father, Isaac, years later (Genesis 35:29).

Scripture is, in this narrative at least, silent as to why Jacob misled his brother. One could argue that Jacob was, in fact, merely being obedient to God, Who had commanded him “return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you” (Genesis 31:3). But why did Jacob not simply tell Esau that such was his command? Perhaps he did not trust that Esau had forgiven him sufficiently to allow him to return to Canaan unsupervised. In a later account, it was explained that

“⁶then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. ⁷For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock.

⁸So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom” (Genesis 36:6-8).

Thus, it may have been that the brothers recognized the impossibility of their living in close proximity to each other (we can remember Abraham and Lot), and their conversation at their encounter was a mere social convention.

It is not clear how long Jacob remained at Succoth, but clearly he did not intend to make it his permanent place of residence. For one thing, it was not in the land of Canaan itself. Rather, Succoth was a staging area for the crossing of the Jordan river into the promised land. So, Jacob made temporary dwellings there, ‘booths’ (2 Samuel 11:11), and likely used the time to allow his flocks, herds, and family to rest after the long journey and the tense moments with Esau.

But eventually, Jacob moved on from Succoth. “¹⁸Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city. ¹⁹He bought the piece of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem’s father, for one hundred pieces of money. ²⁰Then he erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel” (v. 18-20). Shechem, we can remember, was the place Abraham had stopped briefly on his original sojourn to Canaan (Genesis 12:6-7) and where Abraham had built an altar.

Shechem was about forty miles north of Jerusalem and in the hill country. It was at a crossroads of trade routes that ran north-south and east-west. Jacob, no doubt, took the east-west route as he crossed the Jordan river and entered Canaan. Since the time of Abraham, it had become a small city and was currently under the control of “the sons of Hamor,” a people from whom Jacob purchased some land for a more permanent dwelling. The amount of money Jacob paid is impossible to determine, but it is clear what Jacob did with the land he acquired. He built an altar upon it. This was something he had learned from his father (Genesis 26:25) and his grandfather (Genesis 12:7, 13:18, 22:9) and something he would do again (Genesis 35:7).

But we cannot pass over the name Jacob gave to that place, for the name represented the coming full circle of Jacob's journey, both physical and spiritual. He called it "El-Elohe-Israel" which means "God is the God of Israel." Such a title marked the fulfillment of the original promise, given to Jacob in a dream at Bethel two decades before,

"¹³And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants.

¹⁴Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you'" (Genesis 28:13-15).

And also the promise made by Jacob to God that next morning,

"²⁰Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'if God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ²¹and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God'" (Genesis 28:20-21).

Thus the reconciliation in this passage is not only between Jacob and Esau, but also, in a sense between Jacob and God. The God of Abraham and the God of Isaac was now the God of Israel.

Takeaways

We may find ourselves, at this moment, thinking of a relationship that needs reconciliation. We may even be reflecting on the fact that we are the cause of the disagreement or dissension. If so, we should be quick to apologize. If, on the other hand, we are the offended party, then we should be equally quick to forgive, even if no apology is made. Esau has not been a biblical character of whom much good has been said thus far, but here his character and godliness demands attention.

But also, let us reflect on our relationship with God. In this case, it is only us who can be the offending party. He is always faithful, always in the right. If this relationship is broken let us be quick to ask forgiveness, to receive His grace and mercy, and to be restored to harmony with our Heavenly Father.