

Genesis 32:1-21

Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau

Around the time of Christ's birth, a Greek writer with a decidedly Latin name, Germanicus Caesar, wrote a story about a rabbit that was running away from a dog that was trying to eat him. In desperation, the rabbit ran into the sea, only to be eaten by a "sea-dog" lurking there. Thus originated the concept that eventually became the saying "out of the frying pan and into the fire." Had he been of a more literary nature, Jacob might have come up with the idea himself some 1750 years earlier, as he contemplated facing his angry brother Esau, having at last disposed of his conniving uncle Laban.

I expect that Jacob watched Laban and his party depart for Paddan-aram. After all, there was no love lost between the uncle and his nephew, and I am confident that Jacob wanted to be certain Laban really did leave once the treaty between the two of them had been concluded. So, as Laban's caravan disappeared over the horizon, Jacob was left to contemplate his next step. And that step was to continue on to Canaan, and face his estranged brother Esau.

Meeting the Angels

With Laban gone, Jacob probably thought that all of the drama was behind him, or at least far enough ahead that he would have time to carefully consider what he would say when he met Esau. Little did he expect that "as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him" (v. 1). Jacob had expected to meet Esau; he had not expected to encounter heavenly visitors. So, like his first encounter with God at Bethel this, too, was unanticipated. Through the years, though, Jacob began to suppose that these were angels who had accompanied him throughout his twenty years in Paddan-aram. That is to say that though surely Jacob may have felt so at times, he was never alone nor out of the sight of God. Such at least, Jacob seemed to believe at the end of his days.

“¹⁵He [Jacob] blessed Joseph, and said,
‘the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,
¹⁶The angel who has redeemed me from all evil,
Bless the lads;
And may my name live on in them,
And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac;
And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth’” (Genesis 48:15-16).

But unlike that first encounter, Scripture is remarkably silent on what transpired next. The Bible does not give the usual account of the astonishment and fear of the recipient of the angelic visitors. There is no record of what the angelic visitors said, if they said anything at all. We are not even certain if they came to Jacob in a dream while he slept, in a vision, or even encountered him face-to-face, as had those who dined with Abraham many years before. All we have recorded is Jacob's response, "Jacob said when he saw them, 'this is God's camp.' So he named that place Mahanaim" (v. 2).

There is a pattern there, though. When angels first appeared to Jacob, he had had a similar reaction. “¹⁶Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.' . . .

¹⁹He called the name of that place Bethel” (Genesis 28:16, 19). That is, in both cases, Jacob recognized that he was in the presence of the divine, and in both cases he gave the place of the encounter a name. Bethel meant “the house of God.” Mahanaim meant “two camps” or perhaps “two companies.”

Mahanaim was located east of the Jordan River, in what would eventually become the border between the tribe of Manasseh and the tribe of Gad (Joshua 13:26, 30). In the future it would serve as the capital of Ishbosheth, Saul’s son (2 Samuel 2:8), and David, after Absalom’s rebellion (1 Samuel 17:24, 27). We are left to speculate on the meaning of the name, though. What are the two camps? Is the reference to Jacob’s camp and God’s camp? Is it to the camps of Jacob and Laban? Or perhaps even to the camps of Jacob and Esau?

The word translated ‘camp’ can refer to either a military encampment, where it is usually translated ‘army,’ or simply to a peaceful gathering of people.

“²³Then the Egyptians took up the pursuit, and all Pharaoh’s horses, his chariots and his horsemen went in after them into the midst of the sea. ²⁴At the morning watch, the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion” (Exodus 14:23-24).

“¹³So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground” (Exodus 16:13-14).

If the term implied a military encampment, though, it would be in keeping with the promise of God to protect Jacob during his sojourn (Genesis 28:15). For, as the psalmist wrote many years later,

“The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him,
And rescues them” (Psalm 34:7).

Preparations

Though Scripture does not record any message the angels gave to Jacob, we might infer that they encouraged, maybe even commanded, him to initiate relations with his estranged brother. In any case, that is exactly what Jacob did. Jacob had received messengers, now he sent them. “³Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴He also commanded them saying, ‘thus you shall say to my lord Esau: “thus says your servant Jacob, ‘I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; ⁵I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight’”” (v. 3-5).

It is clear that Jacob did not think Esau had forgotten and forgiven. We can also infer that there must have been some communication between the lands of Paddan-aram and that of Canaan, if not specifically between Jacob and Esau themselves, since Jacob had a general idea about where to send the servants to find Esau and deliver his message. The destination of the servants is given as Seir, a word that meant ‘hairy’ and was previously used to describe Esau both at his birth and after he had grown to manhood

(Genesis 25:25, 27:11). The land of Edom, likewise, reflected the earlier physical description of Esau at his birth (Genesis 25:25).

The message Jacob sent was clear and forthright. The servants were to begin by emphasizing that their master, Jacob, was Esau's servant (v. 4). This was not merely diplomatic pleasantries. Jacob was hoping to benefit from, indeed from an earthly perspective he was dependant upon, Esau's goodwill. Remember that when Joseph's brothers realized that the missing cup of the second in command of all Egypt was found among their possessions, "¹⁶Judah said, 'what can we say to my lord? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; behold, we are my lord's slaves, both we and the one in whose possession the cup has been found . . . ³³Now, therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers'" (Genesis 44:16, 33). To begin a conversation in such a way was to begin with humility and submission.

Jacob then condensed twenty years of personal history into one sentence. He emphasized that he had 'sojourned' in Paddan-aram, that it had never been his home. Implied here also was that Jacob had never renounced either the birthright or the blessing. He gave no details of his time there and, quite shrewdly, neither did he reference the reasons for his precipitous departure from either Canaan or Paddan-aram. The latter was unknown to Esau, and the first was better forgotten. And it is important to note that while Jacob let Esau know that he had become a wealthy man in his absence, Jacob did not flaunt his riches by rendering an exhaustive account of his holdings.

Jacob's servant was also to relate the purpose for their visit. It was their master's hope that he "may find favor in your sight" (v. 5). Jacob was acting the part of optimist. He tried to continue his flattery by calling Esau his 'lord' although, as we have mentioned, the word cannot be understood to acknowledge any renunciation on the part of Jacob of either the birthright or the blessing. Jacob was using all of the conciliatory skills at his disposal to appeal to Esau's goodwill.

Jacob waited impatiently. We have no idea how long the emissaries were gone, but if Jacob was still near Gilead, and Esau was somewhere in Edom, the distance may have been as much as one hundred miles. Thus Jacob certainly must have waited for a few weeks at least. Finally, he saw his messengers returning. Nervously, Jacob wondered how their meeting had gone. However he phrased the question, the answer to Jacob's query was brief and to the point. "The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, 'we came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him'" (v. 6). In a classic case of selective hearing, Jacob ignored the fact that the messengers referred to Esau as "your brother" (a good sign) and heard only that "he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him" (v. 6).

Jacob clearly interpreted Esau's approach as violent and vindictive in nature. Four hundred men were not necessary to greet a long lost brother, Jacob reasoned. He no doubt remembered the family narrative about the time Abraham had taken three hundred eighteen men to attack the four invading kings and rescue Lot (Genesis 14:14). The messengers apparently gave no reason for Esau's coming, though perhaps this was because Jacob cut them off prematurely as he began to panic and plan.

There was nothing in the language to suggest that Esau's coming was intended to be confrontational. At times, the wording used in the Hebrew for "coming to meet" someone can imply a military action, as in the case of the Aramean war, when "the sons of Israel were mustered and were provisioned and went to meet them; and the sons of Israel camped before them like two little flocks of goats, but the Arameans filled the country" (1 Kings 20:27). At other times, though, no malicious action is intended, as in the case of the meeting between Isaac and Rebekah. "She said to the servant, 'who is that man walking in the field to meet us?' And the servant said, 'he is my master.' Then she took her veil and covered herself" (Genesis 24:65).

Clearly, then, it was Jacob's feelings of guilt, rather than the report of his emissaries, that motivated his thinking. And we can appreciate this. We all have the tendency to assume the worst. And we must remember that after all, though he did not say it to Jacob personally, Jacob knew very well that, after their last encounter, Esau had been angry enough to murder Jacob, a response taken seriously enough by the twins' mother, Rebekah. "⁴¹Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, 'the days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.' "⁴²Now when the words of her elder son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she sent and called her younger son Jacob, and said to him, 'behold your brother Esau is consoling himself concerning you by planning to kill you'" (Genesis 27:41-42).

Jacob even overlooked an obvious implication of this report. If Esau had violent intentions, why would he have let the messengers return to Jacob to tell him Esau was approaching? That would not have proved a very sound military strategy. But his fear had the better of him, and with the information at his disposal, Jacob quickly devised a plan. "⁷Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; ⁸for he said, 'if Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape'" (v. 7-8).

Jacob's plan was simple. He wanted to divide his forces and thus preserve whatever group Esau did not attack. That Jacob was acting defensively was clear from the fact that he split his forces in two parties, something a person preparing for battle would never do. As for Esau's intentions, we cannot know why he came to greet his brother with a small army. Was it to assert his power over his younger brother? Was it, perhaps to scare Jacob, and thus get some measure of retribution for past deeds? Scripture is silent on the matter.

It is interesting that Jacob acted first, and then he prayed. "⁹Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, "return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you," ¹⁰I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. ¹¹Deliver 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. ¹²For You said, "I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered'" (v. 9-12).

Jacob began his supplication by acknowledging the God of his ancestors. This was a standard format for initiating a prayer to the Lord, and it invoked the Lord not as Jacob's God only, but as the God of the

patriarchs, that is, the God of the chosen line. Then, Jacob was quick to remind God of His promises to him. Jacob claimed that he was acting in obedience and doing only what God, Himself, had commanded when He told him to leave Paddan-aram and return to Canaan. God, in fact, had promised to bless Jacob, “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. . . ³Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you” (Genesis 28:14-15, 31:3). Thus, Jacob appealed to the promises of the past in this time of present challenges.

The prayer also showed that Jacob accurately recognized his own position before the Lord. He was “unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness” (v. 10) which God had shown him. That word translated ‘unworthy’ actually meant “I am little” and was a wonderful word picture of how Jacob saw himself in relation to his God. It is a character quality common among men of God.

“But Moses said to God, ‘who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?’” (Exodus 3:11).

“Saul replied, ‘am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak to me in this way?’” (1 Samuel 9:21).

“Then David the king went in and sat before the Lord, and he said, ‘who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far?’” (2 Samuel 7:18).

“Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in” (1 Kings 3:7).

Jacob was equally undeserving of any mercy on Esau’s part as well, though, in a prayer where the element of confession is distinguished by its absence, we are not surprised to find that Jacob did not mention that in his supplication. Still, the language is reminiscent of the Psalms.

“Make Your face to shine upon Your servant;
Save me in Your lovingkindness (Psalm 31:16).

¹Deliver me from my enemies, O my God;
Set me securely on high away from those who rise up against me.
²Deliver me from those who do iniquity
And save me from men of bloodshed” (Psalm 59:1-2).

“Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies;
I take refuge in You” (Psalm 143:9).

What Jacob implied in this prayer, though, is that it was only within the power of God to preserve him. Esau's change of heart toward him must be an act of God. Only God could save Jacob now.

Plan

Having planned and prayed, Jacob rested, "he spent the night there" (v. 13). Then, the following morning, put his plan into action. He supported his prayer with pragmatic diplomacy. ¹³He selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau: ¹⁴two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, 'pass on before me, and put a space between droves.' ¹⁷He commanded the one in front, saying, 'when my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, "to whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?"' ¹⁸then you shall say, "these belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present sent to my lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.'" ¹⁹Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, 'after this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; ²⁰and you shall say, "behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.'" For he said, 'I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me'" (v. 13-20).

The list was both specific and extensive. At least five hundred and fifty animals were listed (we do not know how many colts of the camels there were, though we might expect one for each female). Of these four hundred ninety were female, thus providing Esau with ample breeding stock for the future. This was a significant gift and showed both Jacob's wealth, for surely he did not impoverish himself, as well as his fear of Esau.

We must also clarify that Jacob was not offering Esau tribute, but rather a gift. That is, Esau was not compelling Jacob to offer these animals to him. Jacob did so of his own free will, though he did have an ulterior motive in mind. He was hoping that the gifts will soothe Esau's anger. A parallel example is from the life of David. When the wealthy and foolish Nabal rudely treated David's men,

¹⁸Abigail hurried and took two hundred loaves of bread and two jugs of wine and five sheep already prepared and five measures of roasted grain and a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs, and loaded them on donkeys. ¹⁹She said to her young men, 'go on before me; behold, I am coming after you.' But she did not tell her husband Nabal. ²⁰It came about as she was riding on her donkey and coming down by the hidden part of the mountain, that behold, David and his men were coming down toward her; so she met them. . . . ²³When Abigail saw David, she hurried and dismounted from her donkey, and fell on her face before David and bowed herself to the ground. ²⁴She fell at his feet and said, 'on me alone, my lord, be the blame. And please let your maidservant speak to you, and listen to the words of your maidservant. ²⁵Please do not let my lord pay attention to this worthless man, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name and folly is with him; but I your maidservant did not see the young men of my lord whom you sent'" (1 Samuel 25:18-20, 23-25).

So, Jacob instructed each of his servants with what to say to presumed questions Esau might have. Esau would want to know who owned such a vast herd of beasts and men. He would also likely want to know

the eventual destination of this traveling party. Therefore, the first servant was to be more specific than the others, clearly because there would be no need for repetition. The gifts themselves would speak for the matter. Also, the fact that Jacob was coming to Esau, would mean that Esau need not pursue Jacob. Hopefully, Jacob reasoned, Esau would stop his advance and wait patiently and peacefully for Jacob to arrive.

Scripture does not go into detail on how the flocks were organized. That is, there is no mention of the precise number of flocks, and so we are left to speculate how these were grouped. So many animals may have been arranged in smaller numbers so that they might be arriving around Esau's camp all throughout the day. This would make sense, since water and pasturage would need to be found for all of the animals and, if they all arrived at once, it might be more aggravating than pleasing to Esau and thus undermine all Jacob's plans.

Throughout this episode, though, we might consider Jacob to be something of a coward. He was always in the rear. He always let others go before him. Jacob would send offerings to Esau, but clearly he did not want to face him personally. He was hoping that his gifts might propitiate Esau, a wording that in the Hebrew means literally "to wipe the face." Thus Jacob wanted to have Esau's countenance toward him change as a result of his offerings. His hope was that the anger of Esau would have changed to a warm-hearted smile by the time the two brothers meet.

But before that encounter, God had another rendezvous planned for Jacob. It was one which he would remember the rest of his life as he limped around massaging his aching hip.

Takeaways

Jacob understood that God had done "far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). He had become rich (Genesis 31:9-13, 33:11), but he was still vulnerable. But Jacob was beginning more and more to rely upon the Lord. It is a valuable lesson to use our worldly possessions wisely, but always to place our trust in God.