

## ***Reconciliation*** ***Genesis 33: 1-11***

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From the story of Jacob and Esau, we have been learning that God has a plan for each of our lives. We saw that this plan is for the long term and that our Triune God of grace will not stop working in us until he has made us like his Son. We discovered that if God can work with the raw material of these two very imperfect men, then he can work in our lives as well. Today we will focus on one very crucial part of our growth and transformation: reconciliation in relationships.

When we left him last week, Jacob had awakened from his vision in the desert. He had seen angels ascending and descending a ladder connecting heaven and earth. The LORD I AM had spoken to Jacob. He reiterated the promise of land, family and blessing which had been given to Abraham and Isaac. The LORD promised Jacob that he would be with him. He said, "I will not leave you until I have done that which I have promised you."

Now Jacob had tricked his older brother Esau out of both birthright and blessing. Esau was so furious that Jacob fled for his life. This child of promise was a self-centered, deceiving scoundrel. But the LORD was on the long term plan with him.

Jacob made it through the desert to his uncle Laban's country. Here we condense two decades and three wonderful chapters from Genesis 29-31. Jacob worked hard tending his uncle's flocks for 20 years. The young, immature man became a responsible adult. He married both of Laban's daughters, then had a large family: twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel and one daughter. He amassed a great deal of wealth in livestock. Jacob became a man of maturity and means.

Then the time came when the LORD told him to return to Canaan. As he journeyed, he remembered his brother Esau. Jacob would have to face the brother he had betrayed and risk his righteous anger. When he got close, Jacob sent messengers ahead of him. They reported that Esau was on the way to meet him, surrounded by four hundred men. Jacob feared the worst. His brother was on his way to do battle.

Jacob was terrified that he would soon be paying in blood for his sins. He began to make preparations for this meeting. We see that after all these years, he was finally thinking of someone besides himself. He divided his people and his flocks into two groups and sent them apart. That way, if Esau came and attacked one group, at least maybe the others would get away.

Then Jacob prayed to the LORD. Here we see evidence of a transformation. No longer did Jacob lace his prayers with “if” clauses: If you bless me, if you protect me, then I will honor you. Now Jacob cried out with humility, “I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.” Jacob acknowledged that the LORD, not his own wits or skill, was the source of all he had. Moreover, he reminded God of his promises, and begged for protection. He prayed for the mothers and their children. He was more concerned for them than himself.

Jacob prayed. Then, he got practical. That’s important to remember. Only God can save us, but God does that by means of our participation. Jacob sent gifts of goats, camels, cows and bulls, a small fortune in livestock. The servants received instructions to say on behalf of Jacob, “These are gifts to my Lord Esau from his servant Jacob.” In that way, he hoped to pacify his brother.

I guess it’s hard for a bargainer ever to stop bargaining. It’s hard for a trickster ever to stop tricking. Did he think his twin brother would buy that line? Jacob the servant and Esau the master? This from the guy who swindled his own twin not once but twice? Is it possible that there was enough humility in Jacob after all these years that he meant it?

Well, the gifts and the servile words had no effect on Esau. He was a simple man, as he had always been, as was not to be distracted from his intent. Esau made his way with his four hundred men toward his brother. Esau presented a formidable front. He had become a powerful man.

Jacob was desperate. He had women, children and servants with him. So he put the servants and their children in front, followed by Leah and her children, then his beloved Rachel and Joseph in the back, in the safest possible place. Jacob arranged them, and then went ahead to meet his brother. All pride gone now, he made ready to plead for his life. Jacob bowed to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. He scraped the ground like a slave. Jacob expected the worst.

Esau wanted none of it. He wanted to get his brother. So he hitched up his robe and ran to meet Jacob. Esau threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. The twins, decades estranged, wept in each other's arms. Esau wanted his brother all right—he wanted to be reconciled.

Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. He asked with all the joy of a big brother seeing his little brother grown up, “So, who's this? Come on, introduce me. It looks like you've been busy!”

Jacob still couldn't believe this acceptance, so he kept on with the humility. “These are the children God has graciously given your servant.” It was something that Jacob had learned even to think that way—to see what he had as a gift, not as something won by cleverness. But it was clear he was missing the point.

Esau asked, “What do you mean by all these droves of animals I met?”

“To find favor in your eyes, my lord,” Jacob replied.

I can hear Esau laughing. “I already have plenty, my brother! Keep what you have for yourself!” Esau did not need or even want what Jacob had given him as a pacifying gift. He had all the cattle and flocks, servants and land he needed. Esau was a free man.

Esau no longer needed or wanted what Jacob had taken from him. Do you remember what had happened all those years earlier when the broken-hearted Esau had asked his father Isaac if he had only one blessing in him? Had he no word for his other son? Isaac replied that “You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.” It seemed that Isaac was dooming the young man to be forever in the shadow of his younger twin, able only to serve, however unwittingly, his brother's schemes. Only when he grew restless enough would he ever break free—Isaac seemed to predict a bloody end to the conflict.

But Esau had conquered another way. He indeed lived by his sword, by the might of his arm. But in doing so, he amassed a great deal of wealth on his own, without the family inheritance or the blessing. He became his own man. Eventually he threw off his brother's yoke, not by slaying him in revenge, but by no longer being defined by how his brother had hurt him. Esau became his own man, a man of family and wealth, stature and maturity. He no longer needed or wanted what Jacob had taken from him. He was free. All he wanted now was to

clasp his brother in reconciliation, to inquire about his life, and bless him along his way.

Jacob, though, hadn't gotten so far. He was still haunted by the past, still trying to placate an anger that no longer existed. He needed to give his gift. God had blessed Jacob, too, and Jacob wanted to bless the brother from whom he had once stolen a blessing. He insisted, and Esau seemed to understand that his brother needed to make this repayment, so Esau, wealthy and content as he was, accepted the gift.

Now Jacob said something very interesting to his brother. "To see your face, Esau, is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably." The night before Jacob had wrestled with that mysterious man all night long. He had wrenched a blessing from the man just before daylight, then had his hip thrown out of socket. At dawn, Jacob named the place Peniel, saying, "I saw God face to face, yet my life was spared." To look on God is to die, because the light of God's holiness burns our sinful frail humanity to cinders. But Jacob had wrestled with God in the form of the angel, and lived. Mercy had been shown him. Now he appeared in all his sinful, scheming shame before a brother who, if he had exercised righteous anger, would have slain him in hot justice. But Esau looked on Jacob and forgave him. Esau absorbed the loss and the pain, and forgave. For Jacob, it was like meeting God and being forgiven. Forgiveness has that power. It points another person to God like nothing else.

Now that we think of Esau this way, acting in God's place, absorbing the wrath due his brother's injustice into himself, we notice other parallels. Jacob comes limping and bowing to meet the brother he has wronged. His brother, very undignified, rushes to meet him, falls on his neck in tears, and welcomes him. It sounds a lot to me like the father in the story of the prodigal son. Imagine the boy Jesus hearing of Esau's forgiveness and thinking to himself, "That sounds like my Father in heaven." So the seed of his most famous parable was planted. The younger brother was not worthy, and his sins were not overlooked and dismissed as trivial. They were paid for, absorbed by the wealth and grace of the father who took him back in. Esau welcomed back his prodigal brother because he had already paid the price of forgiveness. To Jacob, this brotherly love was like seeing God and being set free to live again.

Within this wonderful story, I think we can find at least four key principles:

- 1) *Forgiveness begins with the person wronged*, not when the offender

decides to repent and ask for mercy. If you and I are waiting until the person who hurt us comes to her senses and apologizes, we will be waiting a long time. And, we will be giving that person more power, more control, more influence than he or she deserves. As long as Esau was bound by his anger towards his brother Jacob, he would be Jacob's servant. It didn't matter whether Jacob was hundreds of miles away or what he was doing. As long as Esau was ruled by the anger that came from the shame and pain he received at Jacob's hands, he would be a slave to Jacob. Healing began when Esau grew restless enough to throw off Jacob's yoke and find life not defined by the harm Jacob did to him. Forgiveness and healing begin here, in my heart, in my life, not in waiting for someone else to come apologize.

2) *Healing and wholeness come when we put aside the demand for revenge.* I'm astounded by the rise of revenge as an acceptable motive for harming people in our culture. It's so crude and ignorant. "You cut me with those words, now I'm going to make sure you get cut back. It's my right." Christians have bought into this law of the jungle, the pride of always having to save face. We've become so weak we can't take anything—just like nonChristians. It's pitiful. And it doesn't work. Revenge never works. It does not heal the wound. It does not bring back what is lost. It does not fill the void. Don't go there. Whenever you feel yourself acting out of an impulse to get even, back off—you're not in God's will. Back down—you're on a road to ruin.

3) *Forgiveness comes from no longer demanding what the other person took from you.* Esau lost an inheritance to his brother, and a blessing. But when he got his own fortune and became a patriarch capable of blessing others, he no longer needed or wanted what Jacob had taken from him. Such a change takes all the power away from the one who has harmed us. Sometimes this is easy. I no longer need the parking place you so rudely took from me—I found another one. So I can let you go. It took longer to get over the thousand dollars a man in Delaware gyped me out of by being a weasel. But look, I don't need that thousand—God has blessed me abundantly. But that's fairly easy, too. In cases where love, trust, or intimacy have been stolen, it takes a long time for forgiveness to occur. How can I no longer need the love you twisted and marred which I do desperately need? How can I no longer care about the knife wounds of your words in my heart when the doors of my soul were once wide open to you? Certainly not in my own strength.

4) *We find this freedom by tapping into the source of life and love itself.* Esau

made up for what was stolen by creating new wealth from the sweat of his brow. In wounds to the soul, we have to go to a deeper source. Only our dear Father in heaven has the inexhaustible stores of healing love that we require. When you take my sense of worth from me, when you batter my heart, when you pound me down, I can only stop needing what you took if I have a better source. The triune God of grace is the fountain of life. All our fresh springs are in him.

Sin cannot be dealt with simply by overlooking it and saying it's not so bad. All wrong, all harm, all sin must be paid for. I pay for it when I absorb your wrong into my body, into my life. For some offenses, I have enough resources in myself to take the blow and let you go. But for real harm, real sin, only God can absorb it, pay for it, own it as his own in his infinite justice and return it to us as a debt paid, a sin cancelled, a righteousness restored.

There are wrongs we cannot forgive on our own, blows we cannot carry, and storms we cannot weather. The only path to freedom, though, is to no longer need from that one who harmed us what was stolen. That means we must, in faith, go to the cross of Jesus Christ. There, God himself took upon him the blows of sin, the price of harm, the rage of injustice. He took it all. He paid for it. He absorbed it in his own body until it killed him.

Jesus took what has been done to you by others on the cross. He took your blows on himself so he could provide the forgiveness you cannot. Give your rage, your true sense of injustice done, to him. Receive his forgiveness, forgiveness bought in blood for yourself, and for another. You don't have to carry the burden alone. It is not meant for you. Leave off revenge. Leave off waiting for someone to come to his senses. Start in your heart with faith. Embrace the cross where all sin was paid for and ask Jesus to meet the needs created in you by those who harmed you. In the community of Christ, in the glory of worship and the wonder of his Word, with his Spirit within, you and I, like Esau can become free of the harm done to us. Free to live and prosper and forgive. Free to be the loving face of God towards others and so bring about healing in their lives as well.