

Precious Oil

Genesis 33:1-20

God values one thing, perhaps more than any other, among his people. Unity, or the absence of divisions. Paul's opening exhortation to the church at Corinth is a timeless reminder of that high value.

1Cor. 1:10 "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

Or, as it is positively stated in the sweet poetry of, Ps. 133:1 "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity! 2 It is like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments. 3 It is like the dew of Hermon, Descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the LORD commanded the blessing—Life forevermore."

Unity among God's people is like precious oil poured on the head. It is like the refreshing dew upon the grass. It is the Lord's blessing, the very evidence of our salvation. We see an example of that precious oil being poured out this morning, in the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. It's a reconciliation you would have thought impossible after reading Genesis 25, 27 and 28. Those two boys had been fighting since they were both in their mother's womb. They entered this world struggling with each other for position. One was worldly, the other deceptive. And they were separated. Jacob's deception had provoked Esau's fury, and Esau's vindictiveness threatened Jacob's life. So he was sent away.

Twenty years passed. Jacob married, twice, agreeing to work

14 years for his father-in-law Laban in order to marry Lean and then Rachel. He had 12 sons, and at least one daughter. He worked for Laban another six years for wages, but finally left at God's command. He headed back to his father's home, realizing that he had to come to terms with Esau. And he expected the worst, especially after hearing the report that Esau was approaching with 400 soldiers.

But he prays earnestly.

Gen. 32:9 Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': 10 I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. 11 Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. 12 For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.' "

What we see in chapter 33 is the answer to that prayer. Jacob asked, and God answered. We see the precious oil of reconciliation. Indeed,

I. GOD BRINGS ABOUT RECONCILIATION AMONG BROTHERS.

Again, Jacob had expected the worst.

v.1-2

He seems to be arranging the family in order of priority, the ones he loved the most were put to the back, obviously therefore given the most likelihood of escaping if this encounter turns out to be a slaughter. Each mother stands with her own children, even

the handmaidens are presented with the children they bore. The beloved Rachel and the favorite son Joseph remained at the back.

Forward they went to greet Esau. And Jacob himself led the way, outwardly demonstrating both his courage in facing Esau and his obvious desire to bring about reconciliation.

v.3

Bowing down to the ground seven times was the acceptable cultural method of honoring a king. By bowing, Jacob indicates his deep respect and courtesy toward his brother, recognizing Esau's authority in that region and showing him all due consideration. There is no reason here to question Jacob's sincerity or to doubt his motives. The spirit of deception which had previously dominated his relationship with Esau seems to be gone. Indeed, realizing that he had stolen the birthright and Isaac's blessing from Esau, this humble submission to Esau seems to indicate genuine repentance.

And the same attitude is reflected in the actions of his whole family.

v.5-7

Jacob's states his honorable intentions.

v.8

If Jacob is speaking truthfully, and I believe that he is, if his intentions are to seek reconciliation with his brother, then we have to see in Jacob true repentance for his sins. A repentance demonstrated by this almost incredible humility. Jacob can't change what he has done, but he can change the way in which he approaches Esau. And he does, for...

A. We see the repentant humility of Jacob.

Jacob is such a different man, for he had been such a rascal, such a deceiver. He had been so self-centered and focused upon his own needs and desires that he would lie to his own father to steal the blessing from his own brother.

But here he is different. Here, with gentle respect and humble submission to the authority of his older brother, he seeks reconciliation knowing obviously that he had sinned greatly. No self-justification, no excuses, no rationalizations, no attempt to point out Esau's sinfulness. Just his own.

It is such a glorious picture of the attitude necessary for reconciliation to take place among brothers. And it is a worthy example for us. If you have a relationship that is unreconciled, that is, where there is division or hard feelings, and if your sin even in part has brought that about, then let Jacob's example be an exhortation unto repentant humility! Approach those against whom you have sinned in the same way as Jacob did.

And if someone else approaches you in that way, then respond the way Esau did! Esau is incredibly receptive to Jacob, much to Jacob's surprise and delight.

B. We see the exuberant graciousness of Esau.

v.4

I don't need to explain those words to you at all, though let me urge you to visualize the encounter which I just read. Visualize this meeting, the humble but apprehensive Jacob. And the joyfully emotional Esau.

v.4

Esau saw Jacob's actions, and immediately saw his humility.

He saw the respect and honor which Jacob was affording him, and whatever anger or resentment might have been left after 20 years melted away. All thoughts of vengeance evaporate. To put it mildly, he was overjoyed.

We see that graciousness further down, in verse 9. Jacob offers Esau his impressive gift, those 580 animals, and Esau doesn't want to take them.

v.9

Such a reversal from the occasion when Jacob bought the birthright from Esau for a bowl of stew. Both men were foolishly selfish then. Now, neither of them is. Jacob's offer is generous. Esau refusal is so gracious. He has the only gift he needs, which is his brother's reconciliation. He doesn't need a gift, for as he himself says, "I already have plenty." But Jacob insists.

v.11

This, too, was a cultural expression of reconciliation. The one seeking reconciliation would bring a gift, and when the other person accepted the gift, the reconciliation was final. The offering, and accepting, of the gift, served as the strongest proof of thorough reconciliation. Indeed, it would have been an offense to Jacob had Esau rejected the gift. It would be a great personal favor to Jacob if Esau would accept it. Still, it was to Esau's credit that he accepted the gift only reluctantly.

At this point, both men are acting honorably. And, let me emphasize, God has brought this about. For only God can change the heart of man.

Now, I won't get into the debate of whether or not Esau has become a believer at this point. The text just doesn't indicate. Certainly, as a man, Esau represents those who are not saved,

those who are not elected unto salvation. Just as Jacob represents those chosen according to God's purpose in election.

But that doesn't necessarily mean that Esau personally couldn't ever be brought to salvation, for God certainly could do that. And it is possible that he did. But it is also possible that he didn't. It is very possible that this reconciliation was on a personal level only, and doesn't indicate that Esau was thus reconciled to God.

So I'm simply not going to conjecture whether or not Esau was saved. That just isn't the point. The point is that God brings about reconciliation between brothers. And if he can bring that reconciliation about between Jacob and Esau, he can bring it about between anyone.

And we ought to ask him for it, in wherever it is possible.

Rom. 12:17 "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. 18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men."

Sometimes it isn't possible, and I certainly don't want to blame the victim of a sinful offense to bear the blame for the consequences of someone else's sin. But still, in the desire of the heart, there ought to be the desire for reconciliation. Ask God for it! And consider this example of both these men. Be humble in your repentance seeking to be reconciled to someone. And be exuberant in your graciousness to accept a reconciliation someone else offers to you.

Ps. 133:1 "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity! 2 It is like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments."

Let's keep going in this text though, and dig a bit deeper below the surface. Let's study more fully Jacob's attitude. What we see in Jacob is an overwhelming awareness of God's rich blessings. Jacob's own words testify that,

II. GOD GRACIOUSLY POURS OUT HIS RICH BLESSINGS.

Jacob knew that, expressing it three times in his brief encounter with Esau. This is such an edifying way to look at life, to see and identify God's blessings, to count them, one by one. We see, first, that,

A. Jacob knew that his children were a blessing from God.

v.5

There is no boasting in that. Nothing self-centered at all. Just the impulsive answer to the question. "Why, these are the children God has given me." "...Graciously given me!"

Jacob knew those children were a gift, a gift of God's grace, and we need to be encouraged by that as well. This is where it must begin, that children are a blessing from God, a gift which God graciously gives to us.

Then, Jacob realizes that God had worked in Esau's heart to soften him and put away his anger.

B. Jacob knew that Esau's attitude was a blessing from God.

Notice what he says, v.10

Now, certainly Jacob does not intend to mean that he somehow thinks that Esau is God. Certainly he isn't implying that Esau's face is somehow to be worshiped, or that it somehow

reflects the glory of God. But he does just as certainly mean that the peacefulness of Esau's countenance, the friendliness he sees beaming from Esau's face, reflects God's favor and blessing.

Jacob sees in Esau's face the work of God. He sees in Esau's attitude a blessing from God, for it was an answer to prayer. A specific answer to prayer. God had been gracious to turn Esau's heart. Jacob knew that was God's blessing. And Jacob knew that something else was a blessing from God.

C. He knew that his own wealth was a blessing from God. v.11

He successfully urges Esau to accept his very generous present, not because he wanted to buy Esau's favor with some sort of bribe, but because the gift simply reflected upon God's graciousness to give him such abundant wealth in the first place.

What makes this gift genuine is the awareness of God's blessing. What makes this gift praiseworthy is the fact that Jacob gives glory to God. He is not boasting of his own wealth, as people today might do by giving expensive gifts. He is not manipulating Esau, nor flattering him. He's not buying Esau's favor nor attaching any strings to the gift.

Now, Esau's reluctance to accept this gift is understandable, after all, in our culture as well as theirs, accepting a gift often makes you feel obligated. Doesn't it? For some people who give gifts, that is the intention. They do attach strings. But in reality that sense of obligation attached to gift giving destroys the whole value of giving gifts in the first place. It contradicts the very nature of a gift. If by receiving a gift, you are obligated to return the favor, well, it isn't a gift any more, is it? That's good food for thought as we begin to think about the Christmas season!

Esau likely might have thought that such a large gift would somehow obligate him to Jacob. But he also realized that the gift would be the symbol of their reconciliation, and he graciously received, no doubt impressed with the measure of God's blessing upon Jacob.

We should work hard to imitate Jacob's example here, in recognizing the richness of God's blessings poured out upon us so graciously. And we should communicate that sense of God's blessings in our normal conversations of life. What a great testimony that would be for others. What a great encouragement it would be for all of us. And what a great witness it would be to non-believers

Yet many people simply cannot accept grace! They cannot accept a gift. They feel, in the depths of their own heart, that they have to do something to earn it. Even in terms of salvation, some people don't come to God until they feel like they have atoned for their own sins, which, of course, they can't.

They don't come to God because they feel like they don't deserve it, which, of course, they don't. They don't come because because they don't feel worthy, which, of course, they aren't. They don't come to God because they just don't understand the nature of grace. So they try to work for their salvation, being good and doing right, but are left with a guilty conscience when they fail.

Or they do come, but under false pretenses. They come deceiving themselves, thinking that they are worthy, thinking that they have been a good person, and haven't sinned too badly. That is called "works-salvation." And it is a counterfeit salvation, a false hope. The truth is that the gospel, by definition, is gift.

Eph.2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast."

May you learn to understand God's grace in your own life from as well as Jacob did in his.

Well, let's finish the story. What happens now? The two brothers have reconciled, and Esau presumes that they will return together to their father Isaac's at home in Hebron, south of where the brothers have met. Esau's home in Seir, or Edom, was farther south yet.

v.12

Jacob, however, graciously declines the invitation. He knows that he can't go with Esau, likely realizing that he can't join forces with Esau because God had separated them. They must live their own separate lives and accomplish their own independent purposes, for Jacob's plans would be directly connected with God's purposes for the whole nation of his people that was being established.

Perhaps there was also a sense of independency necessary to be fully dependent upon God, also, similar to Abrahams refusal to accept gifts from the King of Sodom, which we read about in Genesis 14. Whatever the reason, they separate. And the overriding lesson from that is that,

III. GOD LEADS HIS PEOPLE IN THE WAY THEY SHOULD GO.

God had previously told Jacob to return from where he came.

Gen. 31:3 "Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you."

Following God's later instructions, Jacob would actually go back to Bethel, where he had taken that oath that the Lord would be his God.

Gen. 35:1 Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother."

So here,

A. Jacob demonstrates great wisdom by refusing Esau's invitation.

But notice what reason he gives Esau. It is a practical reason, relating to the slow speed at which he is compelled to travel with his large family and the weariness of their animals.

v.12-14

He even rejects Esau's gracious invitation to leave behind some of his men to help.

v.15-16

But that raises some immediate questions. Was Jacob's answer a mere pretense? That is, was he back to his old deceptive ways. After all, he didn't go south to Seir, he went north to Succoth.

v.17

Why didn't he say he had to go somewhere else? Why did he tell Esau he would meet him in Seir, when he didn't? Well, the commentators are divided. Some are particularly harsh on Jacob. One accuses Jacob of untruth and deception, but partially justifies it by saying that "few of us could cast the first stone at him for failing to combine grace and truth in refusing an embarrassing invitation." He goes on to say that "none the less, some of the deviousness of the old Jacob comes out."

Another commentator goes out of the way to say that Jacob

was, in fact, heading toward Seir as he promised Esau, but that he simply stopped "for considerable intervals at both Succoth and Shechem." That commentator writes further that those stops were temporary resting places, where Jacob ended up staying longer than he originally anticipated.

But that minimizes the fact that Jacob stayed YEARS at those places. We'll see next week that when Jacob reached Shechem, his daughter Dinah was violated and sought after as a wife, indicating she was physically mature, at least 12, perhaps as old as 15. But she would have been about 7 when Jacob left Laban. So that means that they had stayed 5 to 8 years at Succoth!

Years passed, as they had done with Jacob working for Laban at Paddan Aran. You certainly can't accuse Jacob of moving to impulsively during this stage of his life!

The most satisfying explanation here to his answer to Esau about meeting him in Seir, I believe, is to give Jacob the benefit of the doubt, that his words to Esau were true, as the whole context implies, and therefore to presume that he did in fact visit Esau at Seir from time to time, visits not recorded for us in Scripture. It seems to me, either that is what happened or Jacob was, in fact, being deceptive with Esau.

Still, it would seem that Jacob's explanation to Esau was legitimate, for the animals were weary, and the children did take a lot of care. After all, there were twelve of them under 13 years of age! And, as a result, Jacob would remain independent of Esau and the families would stay separate, but having reconciled, they would be free to visit with each other from time to time with no hard feelings. And Jacob was wise to maintain his independence from Esau. So I find this example to be one of wisdom, not deception.

Then what?

v.17-20

As I mentioned, Succoth was just a bit north of where Jacob and Esau had met. It was east of the Jordan River. And Shechem was west of the Jordan, actually in the land of Canaan. Interpretations of these verse do vary. To be critical of Jacob, some say that it was a step backwards to go to Succoth, and to tarry so long there, including building the shelters for his livestock. Further, in criticism of Jacob, it is said that he shouldn't have purchased the land at Shechem, for his calling, like Abraham and Isaac, was to be a pilgrim and a stranger, a wanderer with no permanent home in the promised land.

But I think a more positive evaluation is in order, for I believe that Jacob was actually following God's guidance in all of this. In fact, I believe that,

B. Jacob demonstrates great piety in following God's guidance.

The primary example of that piety is the altar built at Shechem, for Jacob demonstrates again his priority for worship. And actually, his safe arrival in Shechem does seem to correspond to the specific request he placed before the Lord at Bethel,

Gen. 28:20 "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, 21 so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. 22 And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

The Lord had promised,

Gen.28:15 "Behold, 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 spoken to you."

And the Lord was faithful. Jacob had returned safely to the land of Canaan! And in expectation of permanent possession of all the land, because it had been promised to him, he purchases the portion where he encamped from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. Hamor was the chieftan of the Canaanite tribe of Hivites.

v.20

His priority was to worship. His first project was to build an altar. And its name was so significant. El Elohe Israel. Translated from Hebrew into English, that becomes, God, the God of Israel. Here, he uses his new name for the first time. And that full name for the altar embodies the sum of Jacob's spiritual experience, which he sought to transfer to coming generations. That name refers to God's power, for the name El means "a strong one" or perhaps, "a mighty God." It is a very common and frequent name of God, who is a personal God. Elohe is just a lengthened form of "el," and in the plural, it becomes the most common Hebrew word for God, "Elohim." And he is Jacob's God, who had kept his promise to the man he named Israel. He is the mighty God, the God of Israel.

And he would be worshiped. So there, right in the center of an idolatrous land, Jacob established a new center of worship of the true God. Jacob is demonstrating great piety and sincere devotion. In that context, his example is of great encouragement to us as a worthy priority to preserve for ourselves. Our first order of business must be to assemble ourselves for worship. Not Sunday School, not Bible studies, not fellowship, and not even ministry and service or evangelism. All those things have their place.

But worship comes first. We don't have altars any more, for there are no more sacrifices to be made to atone for sin. Jesus' sacrifice once for all accomplished our salvation and satisfied God's wrath for us. Thus we have no animal sacrifices, and no priests interceding for us. Instead we have the worship prescribed for the NT church--singing, praying, reading and hearing the Word read and preached, giving offerings, taking vows, and celebrating the sacraments.

So this morning, may there be nothing more important to you, nothing with a higher priority than what we are doing here in this place. And let me remind you, and encourage you, maybe even challenge you, to return again this afternoon, to demonstrate this great priority of worshipping together as God's people. What could possibly be of greater priority than that?

So delight your soul as you worship God together, remembering God's blessings upon your life, and worshipping God as our father Jacob worshiped many years ago at that altar in Shechem.