



Part 65 – Jacob and Esau at Peace

Genesis 33:1-20

The last section ended with the dawn rising after Jacob's night of wrestling with the God-man (32:31). Having been chastened and renamed, Jacob was now ready to face his brother Esau. The long-awaited confrontation was one, not of violence, but of affection and reconciliation; Esau greeting his estranged brother with tears. After

delicately declining Esau's offer to settle in his land, Jacob instead settled in Shechem and there built an altar.

The radical change of Esau's orientation toward his brother from hatred to affection is not explained. Ultimately, we can conclude that this is to be taken as the Lord's grace exercised through the means of Jacob's own prayers. Should we be surprised that the LORD honored the prayers of his servant Jacob? Once again, God granted favor to his chosen servant.

Jacob's choice to settle in Shechem is an unfortunate one which was likely driven by the region's fertility and proximity to trade routes. The problem is that Jacob had vowed to return to Bethel and build an altar there. While that may seem to contemporary readers as an inconsequential compromise, for the patriarch the question of vows and sacred space was of enormous importance. Jacob's decision to settle in Shechem rather than Bethel represented, at best, halfway obedience. This reassertion of Jacob's stubborn willfulness will have grave consequences. Later, Jacob will return to Bethel, chastened further. In the end, God will have his way. This is grace to suborn sinners like us who often believe we can bend the will of God to fit our own. But God, in all his gracious tenacity, will not leave us to ourselves.

The brothers reconcile (vv. 1-11)

Vs. 1 – The suspense is great as the narrator has not revealed what Esau plans to do.

Vs. 2 – Jacob arranges his family beginning with those best loved placed closest to him.

Vs. 3 – At that time, bowing down seven times was a well attested practice of a servant before his lord. "Jacob greets Esau as a vassal greets a patron with the ceremony of a royal court: the solemnity of approaching as becomes rank."¹

Vs. 4 – "Ran...embraced...threw...kissed...wept" – Esau abandons all ceremonial solemnity in favor of familial love. The reconciliation was deeply felt by the brothers. It was heartfelt as Esau's eagerness and posture demonstrates. While Jacob addressed Esau as his lord, Esau embraced Jacob as his brother.

Vs. 10 – "like seeing the face of God" – Though we must be careful, there is a clear case for typological interpretation here. Jacob treats Esau as one who stands in God's place. Notice how Jacob bows down and pleads for grace. He compares Esau's pacified face with the face of God. He brings offerings. In a way, Esau's loving reception of Jacob foreshadows God's acceptance of his people who, through the offering of Christ, receive the LORD's love and blessing.

The brothers part ways (vv. 12-17)

Vs. 12 – Esau asked Jacob to return with him to Seir, that is to Edom. But Jacob had been told by the Lord to return to the Promised Land. Not wanting to put any strain on their new-found peace, Jacob courteously declined his brother's offer. It was nevertheless true that he must travel slowly.

Vs. 14 – The brothers would meet again at least once (35:29) but otherwise we hear nothing of any further interaction between them.

Vs. 17 – As soon as Esau left for home, Jacob turned and headed north to Succoth, where he stayed for some time.

Jacob settles in Shechem (vv. 18-20)

Vv. 18-19 – It was at Shechem that Abraham built an altar when he first arrived in the Promised Land (12:6-7). Now Jacob arrives in the same region and builds an altar.

¹ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) p. 453

Vs. 20 – Here we have a summary statement that takes Jacob on to his more permanent settlement later in the Promised Land. “El Elohe Israel,” is literally *God, the God of Israel*. Israel, of course, is also Jacob’s new name. Remember, Jacob had made a vow to the Lord at Bethel, at the time of the vision of the staircase leading up to heaven, that if God brought him back to the land of his fathers, the Lord would be his God. Jacob was fulfilling that vow. On the other hand, he had also promised the Lord that he would worship at Bethel. It would take him ten years to fulfill that vow. Sadly, the years that followed were ones of spiritual idleness; not what we expect of Jacob after Peniel. More on that next in the next section.

Theology Applied:

1. There is a close connection between our relationship with God and others.
 - It was a spiritual necessity for Jacob to be reconciled to his brother. Geographically, he could have avoided Esau. But spiritually he could not. We cannot separate our relationship with God from our relationships with others. This connection is demonstrated in God’s moral law. The first 4 Commandments deal directly with our relationship with God. The second 6 Commandments deal directly with our relationships with others. Indeed, the law of God is summed up in the commands to Love God and then to love our neighbor. Having encountered the Lord at Peniel, Jacob must now encounter his brother and he must do so before he goes forth to build an altar. Our worship of the Lord will be hampered, and perhaps done entirely in vain, if we reject or otherwise refuse our brother.
2. In all your ways acknowledge the Lord.
 - In relation to God, there is a radical distinction between the speech of Esau and that of Jacob. For Esau there is no acknowledgment of the Lord. After all these years, he seems to have not changed his orientation toward the Lord. He remains unbelieving. For all of the evidence of the Lord’s work in his heart, what is missing is what is most necessary: faith. Jacob on the other hand repeatedly references the Lord. He credits the Lord for his children (vs. 5), for sparing his life (vs. 10), and for his property (vs. 11). And again, we see that the most distinctive characteristic of the people of God is faith.
3. Humility is a necessary Christian virtue.
 - Jacob’s entire approach to Esau is one of submission. Though he does not reject the covenant blessing (which would have been a sin), he nevertheless postures himself before Esau as a servant. Jacob’s years in exile have worked humility into his heart as hardship tends to do. Though God chose to make Jacob the heir of the covenant and not Esau, Jacob nevertheless chooses the posture of a servant toward his brother. There is nothing in the passage which suggests that this is anything short of genuine sincerity. Humility tends to come by way of humiliations. Do not despise the Lord’s work in developing your humility.
4. Partial obedience is disobedience.
 - Jacob commits a significant offense by breaking his vow to build an altar at Bethel. Contemporary Christians may have a hard time understanding why this was a problem. At the heart of Jacob’s sin was that he believed he could offer partial obedience to the Lord as an acceptable sacrifice. As chapter 34 reveals, this move almost costs Jacob his household. God is holy and must be worshipped in the ways that he commands. Jacob believed that he could make a house for God outside of the place that God had determined. “One cannot worship God as one pleases. Jacob builds an altar, but in the wrong place. Because he is not in the place where he is supposed to be, he brings a sword, not a blessing, upon the nations.”²
5. Grace is still the sinner’s only hope.
 - The Bible portrays reality as it truly is. God’s people move with heart-breaking ease between faithfulness and failure. No sooner do we celebrate God’s faithfulness in sanctifying our lives than we turn away and stubbornly insist on having our own way. Nevertheless, when we are faithless God remains faithful. We have no merit of our own to plead the blessing of God. Rather we are entirely dependent upon God’s sovereign grace. God saves sinners in the only way that sinners can be saved: by grace alone, through faith alone, in the finished work of Christ alone. This was the ground of salvation for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and every other sinner who has been saved since Adam.

² Waltke, 468