

Making Peace in a World of Conflict:
Finding the Face of God
Genesis 32-33, selected verses

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INTRODUCTION

Between now and the Lenten Season our focus will be on a topic that could not be more relevant: Making Peace in a World of Conflict. When I initially began my planning for this, I had no idea that as we began this new year our nation would be embroiled in a conflict with Iran. Thankfully it appears that the situation there has calmed somewhat; however sadly, conflict is an ever-present reality—between nations, between groups within nations, within families. Fortunately, the Bible has a lot to say to us on this topic and in particular, on the topic of forgiveness and reconciliation.

PRAY.

Charlie Brown is seated in front of Lucy's psychiatry booth, and for once, with a smile on his face, he says to her with some confidence: "Sometimes I actually feel that I'm solving some of my childhood problems."

Lucy replies: "That's good, Charlie Brown, because then you'll be ready for teenage problems, young adult problems, marriage problems, middle-age problems, declining-years and old-age problems..."

In the next frame, Charlie is silent, stunned, with a look of total dismay on his face. In the last frame he responds: "Let's get back to those childhood problems..."

Ah yes. Sometimes we yearn for simpler times, when life and life's problems were not so complex!

Today we are going to consider the relationship of two brothers: Jacob and Esau. (You can read their entire story in Genesis 25-35). I am going to summarize parts of their story, and read aloud Genesis 32:9-12, 24-30, 33:1-10.

Their parents are Isaac and Rebekah. (You remember Isaac is the son of promise, born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age.) It appears that this couple also struggles with infertility, so Isaac prays that they will conceive (25:21). Soon, Rebekah is expecting twins. But one could say she had a "high risk pregnancy" because before the twins—before they are even born--are fighting within her!

She prays and God responds: ²³ *“The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son.”*

This is troubling news, to say the least!

When the boys are born, they are very different in obvious ways.

Esau the first born is covered with red hair, who becomes a skillful hunter. Jacob the second born is grasping at Esau’s heel; he becomes a good chef.

Esau becomes Isaac’s favorite, Jacob is Rebecca’s favorite—this adds another layer of complexity to the family dynamic, and not a particularly helpful one!

Esau trades his birthright—the privileges that are his as the first born—to Jacob for a bowl of stew! Later when Isaac is old, his eyesight and health are failing, he decides to give Esau his blessing before he dies. Rebekah overhears, and conspires with Jacob to deceive his father in order that he/Jacob receives the blessing. (ch27)

When Esau realizes what has transpired, he is inconsolable. He seethes with anger and vows to kill Jacob, after his father dies. Once again Rebekah overhears, and warns Jacob. Having received the blessing of Isaac, Jacob runs off to Haran.

One-night Jacob has a dream in which God speaks to him, essentially renewing the Covenant that began with Abraham and Isaac and now comes to Jacob. The covenant involves the gifts of land, descendants, blessing that will come to the whole world, as well as the promise of God’s presence.

Genesis 28: 15: ¹⁵ *What’s more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you.”* V 20 *Jacob’s vow*

Having fled in fear of his life, Jacob will never see his parents again. He makes a life in Haran with his Uncle Laban (Rebekah’s brother). He falls in love with Rachel, Laban’s daughter, which is the beginning of more family drama that you can read about in chapters 29-31.

Our focus today is on the relationship of the two brothers. Fast-forward 20 years. Jacob is encouraged by God to head back home, taking his wives, his children and his livestock. (Ch. 32)

Now let's pause here for a moment.

Esau was the firstborn son. In ancient Hebrew culture, this was the favored position. He would get all the goodies. BUT Esau himself had traded his birthright for a bowl of stew! (Not too bright). Later through the deception of his mother and his brother, he'd lost out on Isaac's blessing which was rightfully his as well. He was furious! He had every right to be! His brother had taken from him everything of any value within that culture. Esau wants revenge!

Now 20 years have passed.

There was a lot of water under the bridge between these two brothers.

Does time alone heal? Does time numb the pain of deception and betrayal, or help us forget the pain? Does time help or harm the process of healing?

Think about your own life...is there a situation in which broken relationships have been helped or harmed by the passage of time?

Jacob did not have the benefit of Facebook or Instagram. He had no idea what might have happened in Esau's life during those 20 years. But he wants to return home. So he sends a messenger on ahead, testing the waters, hoping against hope that he will find favor with Esau.

The messenger returns with good news: "Your brother is coming to meet you", and bad news: "He's not alone, he's got 400 men with him!"

Jacob is scared. He divides up his family and livestock into two groups and sends them across the river, in hopes that they will arrive safely, avoiding a confrontation with Esau. He also prepared a present for his brother: of goats, ewes and rams, camels, cattle, and donkeys. He sends these ahead with servants and a message to his brother, again in hopes of finding favor in his eyes.

Then Jacob settles in for the night. Alone.

Now put yourself in Jacob's sandals... he has treated his brother badly, to say the least. He has been a liar, a cheater, a betrayer. He does not deserve his brother's favor. He has sent his family ahead. He is alone. Night has fallen. Somehow, I doubt that he is going to get much sleep.

Have you ever been there? Maybe the circumstances were different, but you knew you bore some responsibility for the brokenness of the relationship, and you are apprehensive, if not downright fearful. The day of reckoning is coming.

What does Jacob do? He prays (what is the longest recorded prayer in the book of Genesis).

“O God of my grandfather Abraham, and God of my father, Isaac—O LORD, you told me, ‘Return to your own land and to your relatives.’ And you promised me, ‘I will treat you kindly.’ ¹⁰I am not worthy of all the unfailing love and faithfulness you have shown to me, your servant. When I left home and crossed the Jordan River, I owned nothing except a walking stick. Now my household fills two large camps! ¹¹O LORD, please rescue me from the hand of my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to attack me, along with my wives and children. ¹²But you promised me, ‘I will surely treat you kindly, and I will multiply your descendants until they become as numerous as the sands along the seashore—too many to count.’” 32:9-12

Suddenly, Jacob is jumped by a man and they wrestle until daybreak. Genesis 32:24-30

²⁵When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

²⁷The man asked him, “What is your name?”

“Jacob,” he answered.

²⁸Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

²⁹Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.”

But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.

*³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because **I saw God face to face**, and yet my life was spared.”*

As the new day dawns...

“Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men....³He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

⁴But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept....

⁸Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?"

"To find favor in your eyes, my lord," he said.

⁹But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself."

¹⁰"No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. **For to see your face is like seeing the face of God**, now that you have received me favorably. ¹¹Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it." Genesis 33:1-10

As Jacob perseveres in his struggle with the man, he insists on receiving a blessing. He receives it, along with a new name "Israel" (which means "he struggles with God"). In addition, his hip is dislocated, leaving Jacob with a limp that will stay with him to the end of his days. That limp is an ever-present reminder not only of his blessing, but of his greatest encounter with God. Afterwards he names the place "Peniel (which means "face of God"), saying, "***It is because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared.***" (Gen 32:30)

Five times in two chapters (Gen. 32:22-32, 33:1-17), there is in the Hebrew, a play on words, which is not obvious in the English translation.

The word for "face" and the word "before" are identical in Hebrew. Jacob says, speaking of Esau: "I may appease his **face** with the present/gift that goes **before** me, and afterward I will see his **face**; perhaps he will lift my **face**. So the present/gift passed **before** him."

The implication is that Jacob is unworthy to look upon the **face** of his brother. Yet he hopes that his elder brother Esau, now in a position of power, will pardon and receive him, that he will "**lift his face**" in recognition and reconciliation.

Jacob has done everything he can to orchestrate an amicable meeting, and to play upon the sympathies of his brother. He has prayed, he has entrusted himself into Yahweh's care. Now he waits. He is not in control! Jacob feared the worst: retribution. He knew he was deserving of it.

Three times Jacob repeats variations on the expression of "finding favor in your/Esau's eyes" (33:8,10,15). Jacob cannot have his way by force, so he approaches his older brother with appropriate deference.

*“No, please!” said Jacob. “If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. **For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably.**” (33:10)*

What does this mean??

To see in another’s face, the face of God, is to remember that every person is indeed made in the image of God. Each person—apart from any action or attitude—is one of God’s beloved, one for whom Christ died and rose again. This means that each and every person has implicit value and dignity. No exceptions.

Reconciliation will not happen unless one gets close to the “enemy”—close enough to make eye contact--to look each other in the eyes, **“face to face”**. Only then, only there, can true connection begin. It requires intentionality. It requires risk. It requires vulnerability.

Friends, conflict in varying degrees is a reality in each of our lives. No need to sugar coat it. Conflict and disagreement is present in our families, in our churches, in our nation and between nations. We know it all too well.

As prevalent as conflict is, is our most frequent response: Avoidance.

I know of no one who likes conflict or seeks it out. Jacob fled. Avoidance does nothing to address the cause of the conflict, it simply postpones dealing with it. Jacob stayed away for 20 years! How long has it been in your family?

The journey to reconciliation for Jacob and Esau was not a straight line. It is a journey of ups and downs...one fraught with struggle (both internal and external). It involves risk, vulnerability, uncertainty. There are no guarantees.

God’s deepest desire for us is not a mere cease-fire. Peace or Shalom is so much more. Reconciliation is not simply tolerating another. God’s desire is that those who were once enemies, become friends—that relationships are restored.

Think for a moment about your own situation. Is there someone with whom you have a broken relationship? What steps might need to happen...what attitudes and behaviors need to change on both sides?

Time may dissipate the tension or cool the heat of the moment.

What are the practical steps that Jacob took?

First, he prayed. That's always a good place to start! God can work on our hearts and attitudes, as well as those of the other parties, before we even attempt a reconciliation.

Jacob's next step? Trust God

Make amends--action--deeds--(gifts) behavior/body language and words communicated a sincere desire to bridge the gap or mend the fence. There are lots of ways to signal to another person that we are ready and desirous of working out past differences.

Friends, time has a way of passing too quickly. Life is short.

A close friend of mine and had differences with a parent that had escalated to full blown disagreement/misunderstanding. Time went by, one moved out of state. Fast forward several years. The daughter decided it was up to her to take the initiative to mend the relationship. She did. It was not easy or painless, but it was worthwhile. Recently, after a short illness, the parent died. It was a comfort to both of them, that they had reconciled. There was no unfinished business between them. They were both at peace.

I get it. When we have been hurt, disrespected, misunderstood and maligned, it is tempting to flee and avoid all future contact with the one who has harmed us.

Reconciliation is a tall order. It is not realistic to think we can accomplish it on our own. We need God's help. I trust that in the weeks ahead as we consider God's word together that we can find hope for the most hopeless situations and help in building bridges not walls.

¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12: 17-18

Perhaps most of all, we need our vision corrected; we need to put on new glasses, to see our "enemy" through new lenses.

By God's grace, when we look into the face of yes, even our adversary, may we be able to say with Jacob: "I have seen the face of God."

This is the beginning of reconciliation!

PRAY.