

Genesis 33:1 – 17

¹ Then Jacob lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ² He put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. ³ But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. ⁴ Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵ He lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said, 'Who are these with you?' So he said, 'The children whom God has graciously given your servant.' ⁶ Then the maids came near with their children, and they bowed down. ⁷ Leah likewise came near with her children, and they bowed down; and afterward Joseph came near with Rachel, and they bowed down. ⁸ And he said, 'What do you mean by all this company which I have met?' And he said, 'To find favor in the sight of my lord.' ⁹ But Esau said, 'I have plenty, my brother; let what you have be your own.' ¹⁰ Jacob said, 'No, please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably. ¹¹ Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have plenty.' Thus he urged him and he took it. ¹² Then Esau said, 'Let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you.' ¹³ But he said to him, 'My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴ Please let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir.' ¹⁵ Esau said, 'Please let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.' But he said, 'What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.' ¹⁶ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷ Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named Succoth.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Embracing or Wrestling?* Esau 'embraced' Jacob: Embraced (*tabaq*) is a rare verb in the Hebrew Scriptures, occurring four times (Gen.33:4; Pr.4:8; Song of Songs 2:6; 8:3). It is very close in sound to 'wrestle' ('*abaq*') and 'Jabbok' (*yabboq*). Thus, before further clarification, there is ambiguity in what Esau's 'embrace' meant.
- *Is Jacob One or Two?* The day before, Jacob wanted to find favor (*hen*; 32:5) in Esau's sight. Jacob selected a present/gift for Esau (*minhah*; 32:13, 18, 20, 21) of 200 female and 20 male goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 milking camels with their colts, 40 cows and 10 bulls, and 20 female and 10 male donkeys (32:13 – 14). But just in case, he also divided his household into *two* companies (*mahanim*; 32:7 – 8) so if Esau attacked one, the other might escape. He was going to come last (32:15 – 20). In summary, Jacob offered Esau a gift (*minhah*) to find favor (*hen*) in Esau's sight. Notice that Esau describes it as *one* company/camp (*mahaneh*) in 33:8.

Questions

1. Is this encounter what you thought it would be?
2. Why do you think Jacob orders his family in this way, in v.2?
3. Why didn't Jacob go last, in v.3?
 - a. Is that what you thought Jacob would do?
 - b. Is that the result of wrestling with God in ch.32?
4. How does Jacob treat Esau?
 - a. He bows seven times, returning the blessing that God gave to him through his father Isaac, 'may nations bow down to you' (Gen.27:29).
5. How does Esau treat Jacob?
 - a. The suspense builds when he runs
 - b. Even the word 'embraced' is ambiguous. 'Falls on his neck'...to do what?
 - c. He kisses Jacob's neck, even though Jacob had deceived Isaac with goatskin on his neck. Esau kisses the place on Jacob's body that Jacob had used to betray him.
 - d. Notice that Jesus used the same sequence of verbs in his parable of the prodigal son, when the father 'ran...embraced...kissed' the youngest son (Lk.15:20). This means Jesus thought highly of Esau's reconciliation.
 - e. He asks Jacob, 'What is this company (*mahaneh*)?' Jacob must have been humbled and touched by this. For he had divided his household into *two companies*, just in case Esau attacked one of them. For Esau to say that there is *one company* acknowledges Jacob's vulnerability but also God's favor and the unnessariness of Jacob's fear.
6. What do you notice about the titles Jacob and Esau use for each other?
 - a. Jacob calls himself 'your servant' (33:5) and Esau 'my lord' (33:8, 13, 14a, 14b)
 - b. Esau calls Jacob 'my brother' (33:9)
 - c. Jacob calls Esau's face 'the face of God' (33:10)
 - i. What does Jacob mean when he says, 'For I see your face as one sees the face of God'?
 - ii. Where did he just see the face of God? Wrestling with God the night before (Gen.32:30)
 - iii. What if God's face looks like the one to whom God wants to reconcile us? Both friend and enemy, a brother and an adversary?
 - iv. Twice Jacob says that his family and livestock are because 'God has dealt graciously' with him. He also says, 'I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably' (33:10). How does Jacob see God's goodness to him?
 - v. Starting in Genesis 1, where did we see the word 'face'? When God called forth life from something. He 'looked it in the face' so to speak:
 1. The surface (face) of the deep, the surface (face) of the waters (Gen.1:2)
 2. God watered the surface of the land (Gen.2:6)
 3. Implicitly, God looked Adam in the face to breathe into him (Gen.2:7)
 4. Cain was alienated from the face of the ground and removed himself from before the face of the Lord (Gen.4:14)
 5. This suggests that Jacob experiences the life of God in reconciliation with Esau.
7. What do you think happened to Esau in the last twenty years?
 - a. He seems to have become very prosperous, if he could muster a force of 400 men in short notice!
 - b. He seems to understand and appreciate vulnerability
 - c. He has become generous and forgiving
 - d. Jacob believes that God has been at work in his brother's life. He wants to give the gift to Esau because, in truth, Jacob knows that God wants to bless Esau as well. He saw that God wanted to bless both Leah and Rachel, making peace between the two sisters. Now he sees that God has wanted to bless both Jacob and Esau, making peace between the two brothers.
 - e. Illus:
8. Why do the brothers part for now?
 - a. Jacob's camp is not a military force, like Esau's, and must travel at a different pace.
 - b. Jacob has become a shepherd, and travels at the pace of the weakest and youngest animal.
 - c. Application: One can be reconciled and yet have a different calling from God.
9. What do we learn about reconciliation from this?
 - a. Reconciliation is the work of God to make one camp (*mahanim*): Esau was willing to unite his armed guard with Jacob's camp. There is a gesture of unity. God wanted reconciliation between

the two brothers, Cain and Abel (Gen.4). Now, he achieves reconciliation between the two brothers, Jacob and Esau. God is undoing the fall and the consequences of sin.

- b. Reconciliation is not just forgiveness but restoration, with gifts (*minhah*): Jacob had stolen Esau's birthright and blessing. Now, he offers what he can to Esau, to honor him as 'my lord' and share with him a large portion of the blessings that God had given him. If I steal your car and crash it, and ask for forgiveness, that is not enough. I need to offer a gift to the best of my ability that matches the value and worth of the thing I stole from you, and perhaps more; the Jewish Law required a person to repay between 2 to 5 times as much as what he stole (Ex.22:1 – 14). That is what makes reconciliation and restoration the hard prelude to full forgiveness.
 - c. Reconciliation offers freedom in favor (*hen*): Esau and Jacob part amicably. Part of it is that they must travel at different speeds. The other is that Esau lives in Seir and yet Jacob will not.
 - d. Illus: This from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 'The rules were simple: If a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hard-liners grumbled about the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free, but Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu insisted that the country needed healing even more than it needed that particular brand of justice. At one hearing, a policeman named van de Broek recounted an incident when he and other officers shot an 18-year old boy and burned the body, turning it on a fire like a piece of barbeque meat, to destroy the evidence. Eight years later van de Broek returned to the same house and seized the boy's father. The wife was forced to watch as policemen bound her husband on a woodpile, poured gasoline over his body, and ignited it. The courtroom grew hushed as the elderly woman who had lost first her son and then her husband was given a chance to respond. 'What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?' the judge asked. She said she wanted van de Broek to go to the place where they burned her husband's body and gather up the dust so she could give him a decent burial. With his head down, the policeman nodded agreement. Then she, a follower of Jesus, added a further request: 'Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.' Spontaneously, some in the courtroom began singing Amazing Grace as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand, but van de Broek did not hear the hymn. He had fainted, overwhelmed.' (Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World*, 2003, Zondervan)
10. A man named Carl Temme has captured Jacob's journey with this poem. Carl is a good friend of Brian Morgan, a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, who shared this poem in his sermon on this passage. I am deeply indebted to Brian for his prayerful research on Genesis.

Jacob

I see you there, you who have prevailed,
through struggling all the way;
with lips pursed tight in silent pain
you dig your father's grave.

Each shovel full of rocky soil
weighs on your hip now lame,
and to the weight are added years
of treacherous toil, fear and shame.

For when the Lord had chosen you
you could not find your rest,
at every turn you did resolve
to ensure that you were blessed.

Each day you spun your well thought plan,
but so much sleep you lost--

This lonely hour you search for God,
can you call Him your friend?
With stinging hip and head on rock
you wrestled to the end.

Could you name God--no He named you,
you thought you had prevailed.
You realize now we know him
when we're broken and unveiled.

Man of action with too few words,
has striving left you whole?
Eternal were missed moments
you should have bared your soul.

For I am you and you are me,
we struggle to secure,

consumed in day by searing heat,
at night cut deep by frost.

Look, all the things for which you strove
now covered deep in earth.
You realize now how death comes fast
and grabs the heels of birth.

You had gold rings and hard won wealth,
you labored for all you could see,
the treasure that you captured
now lies dead beneath a tree.

With shallow words and two-faced kiss
a father's blessing stolen,
now hollow rings his final breath,
empty of emotion.

Your mother sped you off in fear,
she's gone without a sound,
the only link you had to her
is laid now in the ground.

Your wife, your prize, has died as well,
seeking one last blessing.
Your grief's too deep for word or tear--
you pronounced her ending.

the peace that God could grant us--
and with Him it would be pure.

Can I let God provide for me,
or must I blessing steal?
Will I again my brother cheat
and leave deep wounds unhealed?

Can I be faced with enemy
and look him in the eye,
let him gaze deep into my soul,
with nothing there to hide.

Will words of life fill my home,
are grace and truth my prize?
Or will I stand by silently
for stealing, rape, and lies?

Without a friend at graveside stand
and see the hole so deep,
turn next to you - your brother stands,
fall on his neck and weep.