

Brothers Reconciled
Genesis 32-33

We're going through the Genesis family stories, which are also the Abraham's blessing stories. In Genesis 12, God called Abraham, told him to go to a new place, and promised to bless Abraham and his descendants. And God told Abraham that this family blessing would eventually spread to all the peoples on earth.

Every single story in Genesis after that is about that family, Abraham's family, and that blessing, which through Christ went to all the nations, and has become our blessing. We who meet in this little church, and every believer, has through Christ inherited that blessing.

Jacob Flees and Returns

Twenty years before our story, Jacob stole from his brother Esau the blessing of their father Isaac. Isaac was Abraham's son, Esau and Jacob were Abraham's grandsons. Esau was so angry at what Jacob had done that he was ready to kill Jacob. So Jacob ran. Now, twenty years later, Jacob has many flocks and herds, and a family, and he's going back home.

Jacob sent messengers ahead to talk to Esau: "This is what you are to say to my lord Esau. Your servant Jacob says, I have been with Laban, now I'm coming home. I am sending this message to my lord, that I might find favour in your eyes." That I might find favour in your eyes. Jacob is asking for forgiveness.

The messengers came back and said, "we passed on your message, and Esau is coming to meet you, and he has four hundred men with him." That does not sound like forgiveness, does it. The Bible says Jacob had great fear and distress. The Bible rarely says things like that. It just tells us what people say and do, and we can figure out how they feel. But here it tells us.

Jacob's Prayer

Jacob prayed, and this is one of the longer prayers in Genesis. "God, you led me here, you told me to come home, and you'd take care of me. You've been very faithful to me since I left home. But now, I am afraid, please save me from Esau. Remember that you promised to bless me and give me many descendants."

We could pray this way when we're afraid. "One, God, you led me here. Two, you've been faithful to me until now. Three, right now I am very afraid. Four, remember that you promised to be with me and take care of me. Amen."

Jacob's Gifts and Message

Jacob sent gifts ahead of him to Esau: goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys. 550 animals in all. Big gifts. He was giving Esau these animals, and also the servants that took care of them.

And Jacob told them carefully what to say. Each herd was separate, with its own servants, and they were all to give Esau the same message: "These animals belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us." All servants gave the same message.

Jacob Wrestles with God

In the middle of the Esau story, Jacob wrestled with the man at night, who turned out to be God. By putting this story in the middle of the Esau story, Genesis is telling us that these stories belong together. Jacob fights for his life all night, and the next day his life is at risk from Esau. There is some kind of parallel between the man at night, who is God, and Esau the next day.

Meeting Esau, Meeting God

The next morning Jacob looked up, and there was Esau coming toward him, and sure enough, there were four hundred men with him. All his gifts and messages had gone ahead. So Jacob arranged his four wives, one behind the other, each with their own children.

Then Jacob went ahead of them to meet Esau, and as he went to Esau, he bowed to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. What's going on here? What's all this "my lord Esau" and "your servant Jacob," and bowing to the ground seven times. This is his twin brother!

Jacob is doing his best to give back what he stole. His father Isaac blessed him this way, in Genesis 27: "be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you." This should have belonged to Esau, but Jacob stole it. Esau knows all this. Jacob is giving it back, as much as he is able. He is treating Esau as if Esau had actually gotten this blessing.

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Remarkable and wonderful! Is that not one of the happiest lines in the Bible?

How did that happen? Did Esau set out from home angry, and then change his mind along the way? Or did Esau have forgiveness in his heart all along? Then why come with four hundred men? We don't know, I guess that part does not matter. But we know how it ended.

When Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son's father meeting the returning son, Jesus uses this line. This is how the father greets his disgraceful son. This sentence does not occur anywhere else in the Bible. And after all the trouble in Genesis between brothers, and between sisters, this reconciliation is a little bit of God showing through. It is a part of his blessing.

After they embraced and wept, Esau said, “All these flocks and herds you sent me, what do they mean?” Jacob said, “To find favour in your eyes, my lord.” Esau said, “I have all I need, my brother, you keep these.”

Jacob said, “No, accept this gift. Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me favourably.” At the end of the previous night of struggling with the man, Jacob called the place “Peniel,” the face of God, because he said, “I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared.”

To Jacob the next day, that all night meeting with God was like his meeting with Esau. In both cases, he could easily have been killed, wrestling with God face to face, and meeting Esau. But the night of wrestling ended wonderfully, with a new name for Jacob, not “deceiver” any more, but “Israel,” “one who struggles with God and overcomes.” And it ended with God’s blessing.

And the danger the next day, from Esau, also ended wonderfully with this reconciliation. What happened the night before with God, and what happened the next day with Esau, are to Jacob the same. So Jacob says to Esau, “Esau, seeing your face today is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me favourably. These gifts are my gratitude to you and to God.” Jacob could see that Esau’s warm forgiveness was God’s grace to him.

There’s more conversation with Esau after this, and Jacob continues to say “my lord Esau” and “your servant Jacob.” Jacob did not just talk this way to pacify Esau. Esau was pacified by now, they were reconciled. But Jacob keeps talking like this because he really is doing what he can to give back to Esau what he stole.

“Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.” Jacob has God’s blessing now, he can give back what he stole. He cannot really give it back, of course. But as much as he can, he does.

Observations

The forgiveness of Esau cannot really be explained. He never in his life shows any interest in God. Even in this meeting, Jacob speaks of God repeatedly, but Esau never mentions God.

We should take Jacob’s comment at full value, “seeing your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me favourably.” God made this happen, and he can make this happen with anyone he wants, even someone not interested in him.

Jacob worked hard to make the reconciliation happen. He prayed, and he planned, and he put plans into action. He did all he could to win Esau back. He did not just say “sorry about that.” He had motivation, he was terrified, that helps. But still, he prayed earnestly, and he did all he could to reconcile with Esau.

Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embraced him. He threw his arms around Jacob's neck and kissed him. And they wept. "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God."

Can you imagine your reconciliation with God being like that? Can you imagine God running to meet you, and embracing you, throwing his arms around your neck and kissing you? When the Bible says we are reconciled to God, could you see this being the picture behind that?

Jesus used this picture to teach us about God. When Jesus told the story of the prodigal coming home, Jesus used this very sentence from Genesis to describe the prodigal's father running to meet that unpleasant and much loved son. Jesus telling us about his Father in heaven. And this is the blessing we've all inherited. Try that on, my brothers and sisters. Amen.

PRAYER: God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, thank you for this story. There are so many things in here. Help us be reconcilers. Help us where there are family troubles like this. And anoint our imaginations with your Holy Spirit, so we can rightly picture how you receive us. May your Spirit bear witness with our spirits that these things are so. And whether we can picture it or not, we praise you for how you receive us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord bless you and protect you.
May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord show you his favour and give you his peace. Amen.
Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.