

“THE GRACE OF RECONCILIATION”

Jacob left Laban behind in Paddan-aram. He was on his way back to his family and to his home in the land of Canaan. Twenty years had passed since he left his father’s house, and the reason for his departure was yet to be resolved. As far as Jacob knew, Esau was still murderously angry at him for stealing his birthright. But Jacob himself was not the same man that he was when he left. We saw this in the passage we studied last week. Jacob took the initiative in sending messengers to find Esau, hoping to reconcile with him. But he was greatly troubled at the report that those messengers brought back to him. Esau was coming to meet him alright, along with four hundred of his men. This drove Jacob to his knees in prayer. And then, after he had done all that he could to try to soften Esau up, he wrestled with the Lord beside the Jabbok river. God used this crisis in Jacob’s life to cause him to place all of his trust in him. Jacob was made to see that his cunning was not going to be enough to save him. He finally realized that his own skills and abilities were inadequate for the challenges with which he was faced. The Lord made him aware of how helpless he really was. And Jacob responded to this with faith. He pinned all of his hope on God, refusing to let go of him until he blessed him. And when God asked him his name, he admitted that he was ‘Jacob,’ which meant admitting that he was a cheat. But in his grace God gave him a new name, which signified a new character. God told him that from now on his name would be called ‘Israel,’ because he had overcome the trials that had been set before him by clinging to the Lord in faith. It is difficult for us to discern exactly what happened to Jacob in his

encounter with the Lord alongside the Jabbok river that night. Was this the moment of Jacob's conversion? Or was it a time of renewal? We do not know because the Bible does not tell us. What we do know is that a change came over Jacob. He is a new man. The old man is still there, and we will see that old man appear on a number of occasions in the remainder of the Genesis narrative. But Jacob has come face-to-face with God, and when that happens to a person, they are never the same again. Such encounters had lasting effects in the lives of Moses, the prophet Isaiah, and the apostle Paul. And the same principle holds true for everyone who is brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. True conversion produces a real change in the life of a believer. It does not make us immediately perfect, but it does make us into new creatures in Christ. Jacob was a new creature, a man with a new name and a new character. And in the chapter that we are studying tonight, we can see his new character on display. Because of God's grace, Jacob is returning home as a changed man. And this leads him to do all that he can to undo the wrongs that he has committed in the past.

Our passage begins with Jacob facing the same situation that he faced in the preceding chapter. Esau is still coming, with his four hundred men. And Jacob is still uncertain of how Esau is going to receive him. But Jacob does not run away. He keeps going forward to meet Esau. He is trusting God's promises, and his faith has given him courage to do what he knows to be right.

But what was right in this situation? For all Jacob knew, his determination to meet up with Esau could very well result in his death, as well as the death of everyone he held

dear. So why did he send those messengers in the first place? Why didn't he try to avoid Esau instead of announcing his return to him? Because he knew that he sinned against his brother when he swindled him out of his birthright. He knew that it was wrong for him to trick their father into giving him the blessing. It is true that Jacob was entitled to the birthright and the blessing. The Lord announced this when Jacob and Esau were born. But this did not excuse Jacob for his sin. Jacob now knows this, and he is determined to set things right.

There is a very important lesson for us in this. It is a very basic lesson, but it is a lesson that we all need to be continually reminded of. It is the simple lesson that two wrongs do not make a right. It was wrong for Isaac to try to bless Esau instead of Jacob, but that did not excuse Jacob for deceiving his father. It would have been very easy for Jacob to rationalize what he had done. It is not very difficult for us to imagine the thoughts that might have gone through his mind during those twenty years in Paddan-aram. And the reason why it is not difficult is because we do the same thing. How many times have you and I said, or thought, things like this: 'I know I shouldn't have handled things that way, but what do you expect when he treated me the way that he did?'

Jacob could have reasoned that way, and he had probably done so at many times over those twenty years. But now he was going to face up to what he had done. The Lord had worked his grace in Jacob's life, and Jacob knew that he was a sinner. He was not going to try to excuse himself. He was going to go to his brother and make things right. And notice how far he was willing to go in order to do so. He was willing to give up what was

rightfully his in order to reconcile with Esau. What an example we have here for how God's mercy to us should humble us and motivate us to seek reconciliation with those we have wronged.

Notice how Jacob pursues reconciliation with his brother. His actions convey that he is giving back the blessing that he had stolen from Esau. Remember what Isaac said when he blessed Jacob (thinking, of course, that he was Esau). Isaac said,

“May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you.”

That was Isaac's blessing, the blessing that Jacob stole from Esau. Now look at what Jacob does as he approaches Esau. He bows down to Esau. He calls himself Esau's servant, and he calls Esau his lord. His wives and children bow down before Esau. And he gives Esau a large portion of all of the abundance that God bestowed upon him. In doing these things, Jacob is saying that he is giving back the blessing that he had stolen. He has renounced his scheming ways, and now he is trusting the Lord to bring about what he has promised him.

As Esau approaches, Jacob sets his wives and children behind him, placing his favorites in the very rear. And then he goes forward to meet Esau, bowing down seven times, the same way a vassal would have greeted his king in those days. But then Esau

does something that takes us by surprise. He receives Jacob in a manner that bears a striking resemblance to the reception that the father extended to the prodigal son in Jesus' famous parable. Esau runs to meet Jacob. He embraces him. He kisses him. He weeps with him. It is the same old spontaneous Esau, but with one major difference: instead of comforting himself with thoughts of killing Jacob, he finds joy in receiving him back again.

Now, what was it that produced this change in Esau's heart? It was the Lord. Esau was still an unbeliever. He was still outside of the covenant. But God holds the hearts of all people in his hands. As it says in Proverbs, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." [Prov. 21:1] The Lord changed Esau's heart, the heart of an unbeliever, in order to fulfill what he had promised to Jacob.

And Jacob makes full acknowledgment of the Lord's hand in all of this. When Esau asks him about his family, Jacob answers that they are "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." He gives the credit to God for blessing him with all of these children. They are a gift from God. And then, when Esau is reluctant to accept the gift that Jacob is offering him, Jacob says,

"No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me."

Do you see what Jacob is saying? He is humbled by how the Lord has made Esau so favorable towards him. Jacob did all that he could to try to soften Esau up. He even tells Esau that that is why he sent all of those presents ahead of him. But when Esau refuses the present, when he says, ‘you keep it for yourself, I have all that I need,’ then Jacob is truly humbled. At that moment, he gains deeper insight into what transpired on the banks of the Jabbok the night before. This is why he likens Esau’s reception of him to his encounter with the Lord in the previous chapter. Recall what he said after that encounter: “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” And now he says that seeing Esau’s face is like seeing God’s face, that Esau’s acceptance of him is like God’s acceptance of him. In the words of commentator Derek Kidner, “[Jacob’s] language shows that he saw the two encounters, with his Lord and his brother, as two levels of a single event.” [p. 171] Through the gracious acceptance of his brother, Jacob was reminded of the way in which the Lord had graciously accepted him. Here we have a wonderful example of the connection that exists between our relationship with God and our relationships with others. We must never drive a wedge between them. God’s dealings with us should guide us in how we deal with others, and our dealings with others should remind us of God’s dealings with us.

Jacob is indeed a changed man in this passage, but he is not a perfected man. And we can see this by what transpires in verses 12-20. Esau wants Jacob to travel back to Seir with him, but Jacob does not want to do that. This was the right decision for Jacob to make. The Lord had told him to go back to the land of Canaan. Seir was not in Canaan.

That much is clear. What is less clear is what we should think about Jacob's parting words to Esau. It is difficult to tell whether there was some deception in his words when he told Esau that he would come to him in Seir. Did Jacob mean that he would follow right behind Esau? Or did he mean that he would come to visit him some day? It is hard to say. But it certainly seems a bit deceptive, at least on the surface.

Regardless of how we view Jacob's parting with Esau, the real problem comes at the very end of the chapter, where we are told where Jacob settled. First, he went to Succoth, in Canaan. And he stayed there long enough to build a house for himself and shelters for his livestock. Then he traveled further south in Canaan to the city of Shechem and bought some land there. Now, what was so wrong about this, you might ask? It was wrong because God told him to return to Bethel, to the place where Jacob was given the vision of the ladder set up between heaven and earth. Shechem was close to Bethel, about a day's journey, but it was not where God told Jacob to go. Jacob had come a long way, but he was not yet where God wanted him to be. And this was true both geographically and spiritually.

This reminds me of what is said about the boy Eustace, in C.S. Lewis' story *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, after Eustace has a life-changing encounter with Aslan. Lewis writes,

“It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that ‘from that time forth Eustace was a different boy.’ To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He

had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun.” [112]

And so it is with every follower of Christ. The cure has begun. And so it was with Jacob. Jacob underwent a transformation. He obeyed God’s command to leave Paddan-aram and to return to Canaan. He took the initiative to seek out his brother and to reconcile with him. He stopped trusting in his own abilities and entrusted himself into God’s hands. But he stopped short of complete obedience. He stopped in Shechem, when he should have gone on to Bethel. And, as we will see in the next chapter, he and his family would pay a terrible price for this disobedience. God had accomplished a great deal in Jacob’s life, but he was not finished yet. He was still sanctifying him, just as he continues to sanctify all of his children, right up to that day when he brings us into our full inheritance.