

El Elohe-Israel

Genesis 33:1-20

The older I get, the more I realize that I like closure. I really enjoy the feeling of completion. It can also be exciting to start new things. The problem is that so much of our lives is lived in the middle. Kids, remember how exciting it was to begin 1st Grade? And adults, remember how exciting it was to graduate from High School? Does anyone really get excited about Middle School?

Being in the middle is often the hardest place to be.

Well, for 20 years Jacob has been living “in the middle”. But now he is coming to a point of closure. It is not his final point of closure. He will have more life to live. But he has come to the end of an important chapter in his life.

How are we to define this chapter in Jacob’s life?

How did it begin?

And how do we know that it is now being completed?

This period in Jacob’s life has not been about his accomplishment. He is not graduating from years of schooling. It has not been a period of his achievement.

The closure in this chapter is not so much about some task that Jacob has completed, as it is about a promise that God has kept to Jacob.

Twenty years earlier, when Jacob was running away from Esau, God met Jacob and made a promise to him. At that time, God committed himself to bringing Jacob back to the Promised Land... back to his home.

Let me read that promise again from Genesis 28.

Genesis 28:12-15 ¹² And he (Jacob) dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven.

And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!
¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring." ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

God's promises to Jacob mark the beginning of a journey for Jacob. This was a long journey, lasting 20 years.

God promised to bring Jacob back "to this land."

God promised to not leave Jacob until He had completed what He had promised.

God also promises to make Jacob's offspring numerous, like the dust of the earth.

And God promises that in Jacob, and in his offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

When Jacob wakes up, he is full of excitement, and fear! He understands the significance of this moment!

Genesis 28:16-22 ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." ¹⁸ So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

It was at this moment that Jacob makes a vow to God.

Jacob promises... if God will be with me and provide for me such that I do come again to my father's house in peace, THEN "the LORD shall be my God."

Jacob is not bartering with God. He is not making an attempt to twist God's arm to bend God to his will.

God initiated the promise. Jacob is simply saying that if God is faithful to complete his promise, then Jacob will no longer see God the same.

Not only will God be the God of Creation. Not only will He be the Almighty God and the sustainer of all life. Not only will He be the God that his parents and grandparents served. From this point on, Jacob will consider this God... to be his God.

"... then the LORD shall be my God."

If you consider the relationship between God and Jacob from God's perspective, the LORD has been Jacob's God even before Jacob was born. Yahweh has loved Jacob all along as His own.

But God is never content for the relationship of His children to be a one-way street. God wants us to embrace Him as He has embraced us.

God is bringing all His children to declare, "the LORD is my God."

It is God's promise to bring Jacob back, and Jacob's vow to personally bind himself to God as his own, that marks this period of Jacob's life.

Jacob is on the verge of returning to the Promised Land. Once he crosses over the Jordan River, the promise of God to bring him back will be fulfilled. God will have accomplished that which He promised. Closure will have occurred. And we will see if Jacob will then keep his vow.

If we want to understand chapter 33, we have to understand that God has brought Jacob 98% of the way home, but not quite all the way.

There is a great hymn called "All the Way, My Savior Leads Me."
And in order to make the point to myself and to our kids, I would often say,
"Let's sing, "Most of the Way, My Savior Leads Me."
And they would always respond, "Dad, it isn't Most of the Way. It is all the Way!"

And I would say, "I hope that you will remember that. Because there will be plenty of times where you wonder if God is going to take you all the way to his promised eternal home."

Well, here we are. Jacob is 98% of the way back to the promised land. Will God fail Jacob even at this point? Or will he bring him and his family all the way home?

What are the final obstacles that threaten Jacob from reaching the promised land?

Read Genesis 33:1-4.

And
Jacob lifted up 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 female servants.

2

And

he put the servants with their children in front,
then Leah with her children,
and
Rachel and Joseph last of all.
3 He himself went on before them,
bowing himself to the ground seven times,
until he came near to his brother.

4 But
Esau ran to meet him
and
embraced him
and
fell on his neck
and
kissed him,
and
they wept.

The first of the final obstacles that Jacob meets is Esau. Will Esau prevent Jacob from returning to the land?

Jacob is the one who has initiated this encounter. He could have tried to slip quietly back into the Promised Land without Esau knowing. But eventually Esau would have found out. Jacob knows that he must face Esau. And the time to face him has arrived.

Even though Jacob has wrestled with God and won, the anxiety of the moment still exists.

Jacob divides his family in order of their importance to him.

Rachel and Joseph are given the highest priority.

Then Leah and her children.

Then the maid-servants and their children.

The text seems to be indifferent to this favoritism, BUT in the coming chapters it will result in the conflict between Joseph and his brothers.

To Jacob's credit, he goes in front of them all. While the droves of animals are intended as a gift to Esau, he protects his family.

And he bows down to the ground seven times before Esau.

Bowing down to the ground shows Jacob's humility before Esau. I find this amazing since God has told Jacob that Esau will bow before him.

The fact that Jacob bows seven times is an indication that he is being more than polite. This is a sign of submission to his brother. Is his bowing contrary to God's promise that he will be lord over his brother?

I don't think so. Do we not see something very similar in the attitude of our Lord and Savior?

Did not Jesus become the servant of all knowing full well that He was Lord over all?

He did not consider "equality with God something to be grasped but made Himself a servant."

And are we not to emulate Christ's attitude throughout our lives?

Jacob is not groveling to his brother. He is acting in a way that displays the character of God.

Are you learning to serve?

Are you OK with considering others more important than yourself?

Even with Jacob's humility, we are surprised by Esau's affectionate response.

Nothing less than the working of God's Spirit in the heart of Esau could accomplish this.

That is not to say that Esau has been converted and is embracing the covenant promises for himself.

But we are to see this as a very positive development.

These displays of affection are not only outward displays. This is truly a powerful moment.

But, in this case, what is wonderfully good, becomes the next obstacle to God's bringing Jacob home.

Genesis 33:5-11.

5 And
 when Esau lifted up his eyes
 and
 saw the women and children,
 he said,
 "Who are these with you?"
 Jacob said,
 "The children whom God has graciously given your
 servant."
6 Then the servants drew near,
 they and their children,
 and
 bowed down.
7 Leah likewise and her children drew near
 and
 bowed down.
 And last
 Joseph and Rachel drew near,
 and
 they bowed down.
8 Esau said,
 "What do you mean by all this company that I met?"
 Jacob answered,
 "To find favor in the sight of my lord."
9 But
 Esau said,
 "I have enough, my brother;
 keep what you have for yourself."

10 Jacob said,
 "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.

11 Please
 accept my blessing that is brought to you,
 because God has dealt graciously with me,
 and
 because I have enough."

 Thus
 he urged him,
 and he took it.

In this exchange we begin to see the building of tension between Jacob and Esau.

The joy of reconciliation is immediately replaced with a subtle struggle between the brothers.

This tension occurs on several levels.

The first tension is caused by Jacob's insistence that Esau receive the gift he has offered.

Jacob does not want to offend his recently reconciled brother. But he also desires that there be formal reconciliation between them. Jacob does not want to be indebted to his brother for the wrongs he has committed.

If Esau accepts the gift offered from Jacob it will secure a formal relationship of peace between them.

What was initially a very "informal" yet "emotional" embrace in verse four is replaced with a much more formal agreement between the brothers.

You can imagine how this would create tension.

Esau has informally, yet with great emotion, embraced Jacob.
Now Jacob is telling Esau, can we put your acceptance of me in a contract?

Jacob wants to make formal, even legal, that Esau has no claims against him.
Talk about spoiling the moment.
I can hear Esau saying, “Why do you need this formal acceptance of our reconciliation?”

Esau initially does not want the gift.
But Jacob persists.
“If I have found favor in your sight, let’s formally bind you to your words, by you receiving this gift from me.”

This agreement is very important to Jacob. He compares finding favor with Esau to seeing the face of God. This reminds us of Jacob’s wrestling match with God the night before.

Not only does Jacob want a formal act of forgiveness and acceptance from Esau, but he also wants to position himself as the one who is blessing Esau. Jacob is receiving blessing from God through the covenant promises. And through those same covenant promises, blessing is to flow from Jacob to the nations.

So, there are two subtle issues at stake:
Jacob wants formal acknowledgment that all previous wrongs are forgiven. There is peace between them.
Jacob wants to impress upon Esau that blessing now flows from him.

On a much smaller scale, think about going out to eat with your parents. All your life, the parents pay the bill. But at some point, the adult child feels the need to pay the bill. At times this can be a bit awkward.

Esau is the older brother. But here Jacob is asking Esau to receive his gift. This is a subtle, but important battle of the wills.

And Jacob wins. Esau receives the gift and acknowledges that Jacob is “blessing” him.

This sets the stage for a final struggle between the brothers.

Genesis 33:12-17.

12 Then
 Esau said,
 "Let us journey on our way,
 and
 I will go ahead of you."
13 But
 Jacob said to him,
 "My lord knows
 that the children are frail,
 and
 that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me.
 If they are driven hard for one day,
 all the flocks will die.
14 Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant,
 and
 I will lead on slowly,
 at the pace of the livestock
 that are ahead of me
 and
 at the pace of the children,
 until I come to my lord in Seir."
15 So
 Esau said,
 "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 But
Jacob journeyed to Succoth,
and
built himself a house
and
made booths for his livestock.
Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

Everything is going better than expected.
Jacob is reconciled to his brother.
He has secured a formal agreement of forgiveness and peace.
He has positioned himself as the giver of blessing.

But all of these great accomplishments set the stage for one last obstacle to Jacob's return to the Promised Land.

Things have gone so good with Esau that Esau invites Jacob to live with him, or at least stay with him for a while.

We should not forget that the last time that Jacob stayed with someone it turned into 20 years.
Jacob does not want this to happen again.

But how can he graciously decline Esau's offer without jeopardizing all the good things that have just occurred?

At this point, Jacob seems to flounder.
You know what it is like to feel the need to decline a gracious invitation without insulting the one giving the invite.

Jacob blames his flocks and his family. They cannot travel quickly.
Jacob did not have trouble traveling quickly when he was on the run from Laban.
And if there is anyone who is slow, it is him. He is the one with an injured hip and a limp.

Esau does what any good host would do. He provides a way in which Jacob might travel at his own pace.

I will leave some of my “army” to escort you at your pace.

If Jacob accepts this escort, he will be obligated to go and stay with Esau for some time.

But Jacob is intent on getting back to his home.

When Jacob refuses Esau’s escort, Esau seems to understand that Jacob is not coming.

Jacob does not actually say this. In fact, it sounds like Jacob will come on his own.

But the abrupt ending of the story seems to indicate that both parties understand that Jacob is not coming any time soon.

They part on good terms.

Esau returns home to Seir.

And Jacob travels to Succoth.

Succoth is on the Eastern side of the Jordan River.

Jacob is now 99% of the way home.

He builds a house. And he makes booths for his livestock.

Again we have just a hint of fear that Jacob will not make the final step to enter the Promised Land.

But our fear is short-lived.

18 And
 Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem,
 which is in the land of Canaan,
 on his way from Paddan-aram,
 and
 he camped before the city.

19 And
 from the sons of Hamor,

20

Shechem's father,
he bought for a hundred pieces of money
the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent.
There he erected an altar
and
called it El-Elohe-Israel.

We do not know how much time Jacob spends at Succoth.
In the text it is only one verse.

Jacob arrives at a place called Shechem.
It is easy to miss in the brief text the climax of this moment.

We are told that Shechem is “in the land of Canaan”.
And we are reminded that this is the end of Jacob’s journey from his home
with Laban in Padan-aram.

Not until Jacob arrives in the land are we to have a sense that God has been
faithful to his promises to him. Closure has occurred.

Jacob is again living in a tent.
In Succoth, he could build a house without any problem.
But Shechem is a place that is already settled.
The fact that Jacob must buy a small piece of land from the sons of Hamor is
not a problem.

Jacob sees this moment as a defining moment in his life.

He pitches his tent there.
He builds an altar.
He calls it El Elohe-Israel.
God, the God of Israel.

And now we have come to the pinnacle of Jacob’s journey up to this point.
It is at this moment that Jacob finally declares that God is his God.

God is more than the God of his father. God is more than the God of Abraham.

God is more than the One true God of the Universe.

God has given Jacob a new name: Israel.

But now, Jacob worships God as the God of Israel, El Elohe-Israel.

We can apply this moment in Jacob's life both personally and corporately.

We apply it personally as we come to the place where we believe that God has individually loved us in Christ. And we respond to that love in our own repentance and faith. God is not just a god, or the God, but he is my God.

We apply it corporately by understanding that God has attached himself to Israel. Any who can rightly be included under the banner of Israel, has a right to call upon God as their God.

Today, we rightly understand that God's people to include people from every nation and people. But even though we do not belong to the physical people of Israel, we are members of Israel.

Galatians 6:15-16 ¹⁵ For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

John 1:12-13 ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

As Christians, we are not an entirely new people. We belong to the One true people of God. We belong to Israel.

2 Samuel 7:23-24 ²³ And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whom God went to redeem to be his people, making himself a name and doing for them great and awesome things by driving out before your people, whom you redeemed for yourself from

Egypt, a nation and its gods? ²⁴ And you established for yourself your people Israel to be your people forever. And you, O LORD, became their God.

1 Peter 2:9-10 ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Why is this important?

Because, we are to understand that in God being faithful to Jacob, He has been faithful to us.

The greatest and most profound act of God's faithfulness is found in Jesus Christ.

In Genesis 3:15, God promised to send a Redeemer who would crush the head of Satan. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we find closure to that promise.

God has been faithful. But it is not simply a general faithfulness. He has been faithful to His people throughout the ages. And you are now a member of that same people through your faith in Jesus Christ.

It is good to see the many ways in which God has been personally faithful to us. We should recognize His good hand of love in our lives. But in times where the clouds of trial make it difficult to see God's good hand to us personally, we need to remember His faithfulness to His people that is demonstrated to us on every page of the Bible.

And we must remember to place our own devotion to God as the response to His goodness and faithfulness to us.

We do not obey God to earn His favor. We bow ourselves to God as our God because of His favor.

God's love and faithfulness to His people is the fountain from which we seek to worship and obey Him in all things.

When God gives the 10 Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, He is calling for Israel to embrace Him as THEIR God, and to worship and obey Him alone.

But notice the language that God uses in His preface to the Law.

^{ESV} **Exodus 20:2** "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Used 5 times in Exodus 20)

"I am the LORD your God."

And it is as your God, that I was faithful to my promise to Abraham to bring you up out of Egypt.

Now, because of my faithfulness to you, love and obey me.

The same foundation is seen in the book of Leviticus.

Leviticus 20:7 ⁷ Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God.

You do not make yourself holy so God will take you to Himself and be your God. It is in the context of being in Covenant Relationship with God that we are to grow in holiness throughout our lives.

Do you place your own struggle to believe and to obey and to be holy in the context of living in union with Christ who is your God?

As a Christian, do you see God as impersonal?

Do you think He keeps you at arms distance?

Or do you believe He is not ashamed to be joined to you?

And do you believe that He is working in you and for you?

Of course, there is a tension with which we must live.

Even those who have a right to believe God is their God must strive to remain in God's love.

John 15:9-10 ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

God has cut off many in Israel who persisted in evil. God knows how to distinguish those who are truly his and those who are his in name only. We should all take seriously his warning.

But I find in many people an attitude of struggling to believe that the God of the Universe is their God. It feels presumptuous. We think, "If God really knew me, he would be ashamed to join himself to me."

And we think that we must somehow do something great to earn the right to have him as our God.

Let Jacob be a reminder to us. It was not what Jacob did that earned him the right to say "El Elohe-Israel." It was God's faithfulness to Jacob. It was God's steadfast love. And Jacob simply came to recognize God's tremendous love for him.

Jacob's life is not over. The final chapter is still yet to come. Jacob is awaiting the Resurrection. This is the day for which we are all waiting. This is the final moment of closure. This will be the moment when all God's people will declare with one voice that God has fulfilled all His promises to us.

And we will all perfectly love and obey Him as El, Elohe, Israel.