

Reconciling with a Rogue

Jacob comes face to face with Esau

Text: Gen. 33:1-20

Introduction:

1. This chapter records the encounter between Jacob and Esau after the build up of the previous chapter. The lead up to Jacob's encounter with Esau had been used mightily in the purposes of God to deepen the work of sanctification in Jacob's life. Now the time had come to face Esau in the flesh and see God work to bring about peace between the two estranged brothers.
2. The word 'reconcile' comes from an old Latin word meaning "to make good again, repair". In this chapter we see some repair work taking place in Jacob and Esau's troubled relationship. At the same time, we will note the ongoing limitations of their relationship due to the fact they were walking different paths.
3. We will divide the chapter into **three sections** for our study as we seek to learn the lessons God has for us from this important epoch in the life of Jacob.

I. **THE OCCASION OF THEIR RECONCILIATION (VS. 1-7)**

"The timing of this encounter came the day following Jacob's high spiritual experience of wrestling all night with the angel of God. In that experience Jacob gained much blessing from God. However, trial often follows closely on the heels of triumph. Blessings are often followed quickly by battle."

(Butler)

A. **The Preparation before Reconciliation (Vs. 1-2)**

1. Jacob sees Esau approaching with the 400 men and again partitions his family in order to give his family the best chance of escape should Esau prove to be hostile (See 32:7-8). He sets the handmaids (Zilpah and Bilhah) and their children out in front, followed by Leah and her children then Rachel and Joseph in the rear. Jacob's actions again demonstrate the sad dynamics of a polygamist marriage where there is partiality.
2. Some are very hard on Jacob for doing this, accusing him of a lack of faith. Try to put yourselves into Jacob's shoes for a moment! At worst it shows that Jacob, like us, was very human and even after all of God's promises and blessings still struggled when faced with the actual problem. On the other hand, perhaps this did not represent a lapse of faith but rather the principle that while our faith is to be totally in God, it is still appropriate at times to take some actions to prepare for what is ahead of us on our end. It could be that for Jacob it went something like this, "Well Lord, I have sought you in prayer and prepared my family as best I can for this confrontation with Esau, now it's in your hands." There are appropriate actions on our side that can accompany faith. There is both the active and the passive side of the walk of faith.

B. **The Process of the Reconciliation (Vs. 3-7)**

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1. Jacob's bowing to Esau (Vs. 3)
 - a. Jacob steps forward towards his brother and the 400 men as they approached. This took courage.
 - b. As Jacob approached Esau, he bowed 7 times. This means he would take a few steps, prostrate himself on the ground, take a few more steps and repeat the process until he had done it 7 times. Ancient records indicate that this was the kind of homage afforded a king.
 - c. Jacob was demonstrating by his actions a change in attitude towards his brother from what he had been like 20 years previous. Matthew Henry wisely commented that "the bullet files over him that stoops".
 - d. Note: For reconciliation to take place between two estranged parties, it takes humility. Jacob had wronged his brother Esau in his handling of the birthright and the blessing and it was appropriate that he demonstrate some contrition.
2. Esau's running to Jacob (Vs. 4)
 - a. The moving moment is now described where Jacob and Esau embrace.
 - b. The text indicates that this was no brief hug between the two estranged brothers – "fell on his neck".
 - c. Both Jacob and Esau weep for some time in each other's arms. Think of all the emotions that must have welled up in their hearts at this moment. It had been twenty long years since they had seen each other and there had been much pain and hurt in their history together. The pain of a home with divided affections from Mum and Dad. The pain of Jacob's deceitful ways. The pain of Esau's years of bitterness and murderous spirit towards Jacob.
 - d. Note: Reconciliation is a precious thing and can take place even after many years. It is a wonderful thing when members of a natural family make right the wrongs of the past and reconcile with each other. It is also precious when members of the family of God get things right with one another after years of holding on to hurt and bitterness.
3. Esau's meeting with Jacob's family (Vs. 5-7)
 - a. Esau looks up and sees the women and children watching the scene. Evidently, they had gathered and watched as their husband and father reunite with Esau.
 - b. Instinctively they sensed the danger was past and so they came forward, each in their respective groups and paid their respects to their uncle and brother-in-law.
 - c. Jacob's reply to Esau's question is instructive – "Who are those with thee? And he said, the children which God hath graciously given thy servant". Jacob viewed his children as gracious gifts from God (Psalm 127). Jacob is very conscious of the grace of God in his life at this time (See Gen. 32:10). Every blessing in our lives should be attributed to the goodness and grace of God.

C. The Power behind the Reconciliation

Our hearts are stirred by the moving scene before us but we would do well at this point to pause and consider what the secret was behind

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this. How was it that the heart of a hardened man like Esau had been melted? What had just taken place was almost impossible humanly speaking. Proverbs 18:19 says, "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle." The events recorded in chapter 33 were made possible through:

1. The promises of God – God had promised to be with Jacob and He had not failed. "And the LORD said unto Jacob, Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and **I will be with thee.**" (Gen. 31:3). The presence of God was protecting and preserving Jacob in his walk of faith. We serve a God who is faithful to do what He promised. We can rely wholeheartedly on His precious promises!
2. The Prayers to God – if there is one thing Genesis 33 should teach us it is that God hears and answers prayer! This was a direct answer to Jacob's prayer recorded in the previous chapter (32:9-12). For Esau to go from wanting to hurt Jacob to embracing Jacob was due to answered prayer!
3. The Power of God – Jacob knew the power of God in a fresh way in his life at this time. It was a power that came through brokenness. If Jacob had approached Esau in self-sufficiency and self-reliance how different the outcome might have been. Jacob had "power with God" and as a consequence "power with men" (Gen. 32:28).
 - a. Jacob had hoped to appease Esau with his gifts but in reality, it was the power of God, not Jacob's planning that had delivered this outcome.
 - b. When we embrace the death to self principle, we come to know something of the resurrection power of the Lord Jesus working in and through us. Then and only then can we really be a force for God in the lives for others.

II. THE NEGOTIATIONS OF THEIR RECONCILIATION (VS. 8-11)

These verses contain the conversation and negotiations that followed concerning Jacob's gift to Esau.

A. The Cultural Concern behind Jacob's Gift (Vs. 8-10)

1. In the culture of the East, the receiving of a gift had great significance. It would assure Jacob that the reconciliation between them was genuine. The test in the East is not so much if someone is willing to give you something but whether they are willing to receive something from you.
2. Whitelaw: "In Eastern countries the acceptance of a gift is equivalent to the striking of a covenant of friendship. If your present be received by your superior you may rely on his friendship; if it be declined you have everything to fear. It was on this ground that Jacob was so urgent in pressing Esau to accept his present."

B. The Condition of the Gift (Vs. 11)

The one condition was that Esau be willing to accept Jacob's generous gift of the 580 livestock.

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1. The Reluctance towards the gift (Vs. 9).
What was behind Esau's reluctance?
 - a. Esau's sense of sufficiency. He felt he had enough. Why should he receive Jacob's gift?
 - b. Esau's pride. To receive this gift would require humility on Esau's part and so he balked at it initially. We sometimes forget that it doesn't just take humility to give. It also takes humility to receive. Our pride can get in the way of us receiving!
 - c. Esau would have to overcome both of these things if he was going to receive Jacob's gift.
2. The Receiving of the Gift (Vs. 11b)
 - a. Jacob urges Esau and eventually he relents and receives the gift.
 - b. Gospel application: We are reminded of the principle that a gift cannot be earned but must be received by the one to whom it is offered. This reminds us of the Gospel.
 - i. Many are reluctant to receive God's free offer of salvation because they think they have enough when in reality salvation is their greatest need.
 - ii. Many are reluctant to receive God's free gift of salvation because of their pride. To admit you are a sinner and that there is nothing you can do to earn God's favour and eternal life in heaven requires humility!
 - iii. As Jacob urged Esau to accept his gift, we urge you to receive God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-9, Rom. 6:23). God's gift of salvation is undeserved; we are guilty sinners (Rom. 3:10, 23; 5:12; 6:23). But God offers it to us because of His great love (John 3:16) if we would be willing to receive it (John 1:12).

III. THE SEPARATION AFTER THEIR RECONCILIATION (VS. 12-20)

A. The Logic of the Separation (Vs. 12-15)

Having made peace with one another, it was important that Jacob and Esau go their separate ways. There were a number of reasons for this.

1. Practical reasons (Vs. 12-14)

Jacob was conscious of:

- a. The limitations of Jacob's family and flock (Vs. 13)
 - i. Jacob demonstrates wisdom and understanding as the leader of his family and flocks. He was conscious of their limitations and that if he drove them too hard, they would suffer. Jacob knew that trying to keep up with a wild hunter like his brother and his band of 400 men would be detrimental to his family and flocks. He was conscious not to 'overdrive' them.
 - ii. Jacob was expressing the wisdom and insight of an experienced shepherd who had spent many years with the flock. He was also a family man who understood the limitations of young children.

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- iii. Pastors (shepherds) of God's sheep would do well to keep Jacob's words of wisdom in mind in relation to their approach to shepherding the flock of God. Some pastor's drive the sheep under their care until they wither and die.¹ While it is vital that a pastor lead the church follow and serve the Great Shepherd passionately, he must also be aware of what the flock can realistically cope with and give time for a pause and rest when needed. The other extreme is to encourage laziness in the flock and that is wrong too! The flock needs to be moving but the shepherd must be conscious of how much distance can be 'endured' (Vs. 14) at a given time.
- b. The leadership of Jacob's family and flock (Vs. 14-15)
 - i. Esau's offer was to head up the clan and lead – "I will go before thee" (Vs. 12). Jacob was not prepared to surrender leadership of his family and flocks to the likes of Esau. That Esau had been willing to make peace with Jacob was commendable but Esau was still Esau the wild hunter and unpredictable by nature.
 - ii. Jacob had a different leadership philosophy to Esau's. He was conscious to lead 'softly' meaning "slowly, gently, easily, step by step" (Gill). This does not mean we need leadership that is soft and weak. Strong leadership in families and churches is a must but in needs to be coupled with gentleness. 2 Timothy 2:24 "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient," Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).
 - iii. Esau offers to leave some of the men with him, probably to act as body guards, but Jacob graciously refuses (Vs. 15). To try and walk together with Esau's men would simply not work.
- 2. Spiritual reasons
 - Beyond the practical reasons, no doubt Jacob was conscious of deeper reasons why he could not walk together with Esau in this way.
 - a. They were men on different paths – Esau was headed in the direction of Seir (Edom) in a dry, barren region south of the Dead Sea. Jacob was going in the direction of Canaan, the land of fruitfulness and blessing.
 - i. We are reminded that while we should seek to live peaceably with the Esau's in our lives, that does not mean we should walk or work closely with them. Jacob did not allow the emotional high of the moment to override wisdom in this area.

¹ This doesn't just happen in fundamental Baptist circles. In fact, some of the business oriented, results driven mega churches are the guilty of burning out dear people in their lust to have a "big church". There are some very burnt out, bitter people out there who got chewed up in the machinery of a mega church.

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- ii. There is a place to make peace, if possible, with someone and then part ways amicably afterwards. Romans 12:18 **“If it be possible², as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.”**
- iii. We are reminded of the truth of Amos 3:3 **“Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”**
- b. They were men with different priorities – Esau was a profane man with worldly priorities and pursuits whereas Jacob was a spiritual man with heavenly priorities and pursuits. Jacob was a man of God, Esau a man of the world. It simply would not be possible to work and walk closely together. Esau’s men could not be allowed to mingle with Jacob’s family.
- c. As God’s people we are to maintain a peaceful disposition to the unsaved world and at the same time, maintain separation from the unsaved world. Both are Christian duties.

B. The Locations after the Separation (Vs. 12-15)

1. Esau returns to Seir which later became known as Edom, the territory of Esau’s descendants (Edomites). It was a dry and barren region south of the Dead Sea. What a picture of the world the profane man inhabits. It may appear attractive from a distance but when you arrive, you find you were fooled by a mirage and all that is there is dry sand and disappointment. “God had called Jacob back to Canaan, not Seir. How the world likes to get us to go with them to some other land than the promised land.” (Butler)
2. Jacob sojourns in two places – Succoth and then Shechem.
 - a. We note that sadly Jacob slipped back into his deceptive ways, giving Esau the impression he would follow him to Seir when he had no such plan at all. It is a sobering reminder that the “Jacob nature” is always with us until we go to heaven and even if we have experienced God’s power at Peniel, we can still yield to the dictates of the self-life again apart from the grace of God. There is no such thing as sinless perfection this side of heaven! Sanctification is an ongoing process in our lives and we have a choice each day between the self-life or the crucified life.
 - b. Succoth is located near the Jordan River a bit north of Jabbok. It is noted that at Succoth, Jacob constructed booths for his cattle. This is why the place was called ‘Succoth’ meaning ‘booths’.
 - c. Shechem was located on the west side of the Jordan between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. It is about thirty miles (48 km) north of Jerusalem.
 - i. Evidently, Jacob dug a well there as many years later Christ would meet the woman of Samaria at that very well (John 4:5-6). Shechem was a prominent city throughout biblical history. It was very close to the future city of Samaria, which became the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel.

² God’s Word recognizes that sometimes peace with certain individuals is not possible in a fallen world but if it is possible, then it should be sought and strived for.

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- ii. Jacob purchases a tract of land from Hamor and his sons for a hundred pieces of silver. Many years later, Jacob's favourite son, Joseph would be buried on this same spot. Joshua 24:32 "And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver: and it became the inheritance of the children of Joseph."
- iii. Jacob builds an altar and calls it "El-elohe-Israel" meaning "the mighty God of Israel. This is the first record we have of Jacob using his new name.
- iv. We do pause at this juncture and wonder why Jacob chose to stop short of going all the way to Bethel at this time. It would seem that God wanted him in Bethel from the instruction that would come a little later (Genesis 35:1). The sojourn at Shechem would be marred with some sad events in Jacob's family. This will be the focus of our next lesson in chapter 34.

Conclusion: What impossible things are you asking God for in prayer? Is there an Esau individual in your life with whom you need to make peace? Who are you walking and working with closely in your life?