

YOU TAKE THE SOUTH ROAD, I'LL TAKE THE NORTH ROAD AND YOU'LL BE IN SEIR-LAND AFORE ME!

GENESIS 33:1-20 SEPTEMBER 14, 2022

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy had a momentous meeting with Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie. He arrived wearing "a field marshal's uniform...and [carrying] a long swagger stick." He and JFK had a series of gatherings over the next few days. The President, who suffered from severe back pain, graciously stood at attention while Selassie spoke.

He said he came to "explore ways and means of strengthening...cooperation" between the US and Ethiopia. He came hoping to receive JFK's full support in Ethiopia's dispute with neighboring Somalia. He also invited the President to come and visit Ethiopia personally.

"In [their] meetings, the President spoke simply and directly...even when he knew it might disturb or displease the Emperor...and he promised to give careful consideration to Ethiopia's request."

"The undisclosed U.S. strategy was to *partially* satisfy the Emperor's request as inexpensively as possible while assuring a...friendly government in Ethiopia." As to the invitation to visit, JFK "expressed his desire to arrange such a [trip] as soon as his schedule permitted."¹ Whether that was true or not didn't matter. The President was killed seven weeks later in Dallas.

In our text tonight, Jacob and Esau have a meeting with many similarities to JFK's and Selassie's. Esau, a military leader, stands before his counterpart, Jacob, who is crippled and in pain. Esau hopes this will lead to new cooperation between their peoples and that Jacob would come and visit his homeland. Jacob has no intention of doing so but speaks tactfully so as not to offend his brother. Though he says he'd love to come down to Seir, he never takes Esau up on the invitation.

There's one more interesting similarity. Haile Selassie's fuller title was "Emperor of Ethiopia, Elect of God, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and King of Kings." Of course, Selassie *wasn't* God, but during his reign, there were those who really saw him as God.²

In verse 10, Jacob says: "I have seen your face, and it is like seeing God's face." Was Jacob just being polite? Was he buttering Esau up? When we're thinking about Bible characters who serve as types of our Lord, we *never* put Esau on that list. Hebrews describes him as an immoral, irreverent, unrepentant man.³ We don't want to emulate Esau.

And yet, there's something about *this* encounter that reveals God's grace through Esau's actions. Cyril of Alexandria said this scene foreshadowed the reconciliation of Christ with Israel.⁴ But it's not

¹ Theodore Vestal *The Lion of Judah at Camelot: U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Ethiopia as Reflected in the Second State Visit of Emperor Haile Selassie to the United States*

² <https://blog.nationalmuseum.ch/en/2022/01/emperor-haile-selassie-god-of-the-rastafarians/>

³ Hebrews 12:16-17

⁴ *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture: Old Testament II (Genesis 12-50)*

just about God and Israel. We'll find that the words describing Esau are almost *exactly* how Jesus describes the Prodigal Son's father in Luke 15. Gordon Wenham writes, "Though Jacob's comparison of Esau's action with God's sounds too [complimentary] (*Wenham's word is fulsome*), it is not inappropriate, for God's mercy *is like this* according to Scripture."⁵

Through this scene, we can revel in the mercy of God through the example of Esau, and then we'll see the *misstep* of Jacob, who follows the example of Abraham too closely.

Genesis 33:1-2 - Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming toward him with four hundred men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two slave women. ²He put the slaves and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last.

There are several moments where it may have been helpful to have a window into Jacob's thought process, but those windows are left closed. We're left to wonder what he was thinking. We wonder if he was afraid at this moment. Many commentators think he was and that his dividing of the family here was a *defensive* measure, hoping a few might survive an attack from Esau.

In the last passage we were told plainly when Jacob was afraid, but it's not said here. This makeshift parade wouldn't have been much of a strategy. They're all pretty close together and on foot.

Sadly, what *is* clear is that Jacob is arranging his family according to how important they are to him. The text doesn't bother to even name two of the wives or *any* of the children other than Joseph. Jacob's heart *is* being transformed and he *is* finally starting to walk by faith, but he's not perfect. He has allowed favoritism to taint the way he relates to his family. This has already been a huge problem for this family and it will continue to be a huge problem in the coming years.

The New Testament reminds us that God shows no partiality and we are not to show partiality. Not in the home, not in the house of the Lord, not in the halls of justice.⁶ It is a weed that kills fruit.

Genesis 33:3 - ³He himself went on ahead and bowed to the ground seven times until he approached his brother.

The Lord has strengthened Jacob, but he doesn't know exactly what's going to happen. *Unlike* before, he faces his brother without fear. He moves in *front* of his family, bowing as he goes.

There's an ancient tablet that explains how, in that era, bowing seven times was customary when you met a monarch.⁷ It signals Jacob's absolute surrender and humility. He was emboldened,⁸ and the Lord had taken away his fear, but that didn't make him swagger. He walked humbly. John Goldingay writes, "Release from fear does not mean release from deference and submissiveness."⁹

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham *Eerdman's Commentary On The Bible: Genesis*

⁶ Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, 1 Timothy 5:21, James 2:1-9

⁷ Thomas Harrison *The Tell El-Amarna Tablets (Science Vol. 21, No. 537 May 19, 1893)*

⁸ Andrew Steinmann *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*

⁹ John Goldingay *Genesis (Baker Commentary On The Old Testament Pentateuch)*

Genesis 33:4 - ⁴But Esau ran to meet him, hugged him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. Then they wept.

If you were to turn to Luke 15, where Jesus delivers the beloved Parable of the Lost Son, you would read: "...while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him."

*This is God's heart of compassion and care for you! You and I were the prodigals the Father ran to save. He doesn't hold us at arm's length - the Lord rushes to embrace us - to fold us into His active, life-changing love. One commentator notes how "whole-heartedly" Esau acts. This meeting which could've been defined by anger or bitterness or argument, was instead defined by mercy and joy.*¹⁰

Bruce Waltke points out that while Esau runs, Jacob limps.¹¹ No matter who we are or what we've accomplished, on the *spiritual* level, we come to God *limping*. We're helpless and without hope. But then the Savior swoops in and takes us in His arms, covering us with His love, wiping out all our past wrongs, replacing all of that history with grace and tenderness and plans for a glorious future.

Esau had the right to hate Jacob. Jacob had cheated and wronged him. Even Jacob wouldn't have blamed Esau for destroying him right then and there, taking everything away from him. But instead of wrath he found warmth. This is an affection these brothers *never* had for each other. It wasn't that they *used* to be close - they weren't. But despite the wide gulf of guilt between them, all Esau pours out in this scene is love and forgiveness and grace and assistance.

This is how God runs to you! We have a sneaking suspicion that God is fed up with us, don't we? That He was willing to go to Calvary, but He's not going to go *farther* for us. *It isn't true*. Esau took a long trip - a hundred miles at his own expense - to embrace his brother. Our Lord crossed heaven and earth, time and eternity, death and the grave out of His love for you. In Jeremiah 31, He says:

Jeremiah 31:3 - I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued to extend faithful love to you.

If your heart is whispering: "I'm a worthless, limping failure. God *must* be disappointed with me," then go to Psalm 136 where 26 times in 26 verses we read "His faithful love endures forever." That *hesed* we talked about last time. A faithful, repairing, embracing, merciful love that endures *forever*.

**Genesis 33:5-7 - ⁵When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he asked, "Who are these with you?" He answered, "The children God has graciously given your servant."
⁶Then the slaves and their children approached him and bowed down. ⁷Leah and her children also approached and bowed down, and then Joseph and Rachel approached and bowed down.**

¹⁰ August Dillmann *Genesis, Critically And Exegetically Expounded, Volume 2*

¹¹ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

Scholars tell us that Jacob used terms that are the unmistakable language of “submitting oneself... to be a subject.”¹² In fact, we see a foreshadowing here how when the Lord arrives, “every knee will bow.” Jacob, the wives, children, and servants all bend their knees before Esau.

Christ Jesus is our Savior and Friend, but He is also Master and Commander. We owe Him our allegiance, our service, our loyalty, and our strength. He is no taskmaster, but we are to live every day with our knees bowed to the King. Read Ephesians 3 where Paul talks about the power and importance of kneeling before our Lord, Who loves us and enriches us and glorifies us as we kneel.

Genesis 33:8 - ⁸So Esau said, “What do you mean by this whole procession I met?” “To find favor with you, my lord,” he answered.

Esau demonstrates how the Lord interacts with us. He *speaks* to us and invites us to respond to Him. We think of those times Jesus said, “What do you want Me to do for you?” Jacob’s answer here was, “Give me grace!” He calls Esau “Adonai.” That’s a term men would use for a master, but most of you know it’s also a term the Bible uses for our Lord. It’s a word that means “owner, master, father,”¹³ and it is used of the Messiah in passages like Psalm 110.

So we see that Jacob’s heart is spiritually calibrated just as it should be. What do you want? *Grace*. As we speak to the Lord, the greatest thing we can ask for is His grace and the great news is that He does not withhold it from us. It *overflows* in abundance to us.¹⁴

Genesis 33:9-11 - ⁹“I have enough, my brother,” Esau replied. “Keep what you have.” ¹⁰But Jacob said, “No, please! If I have found favor with you, take this gift from me. For indeed, I have seen your face, and it is like seeing God’s face, since you have accepted me. ¹¹Please take my present that was brought to you, because God has been gracious to me and I have everything I need.” So Jacob urged him until he accepted.

Jacob continues to call himself a servant and Esau his lord, while Esau consistently calls Jacob “my brother.” What an amazing thing God has done, not just *sparing* our lives, not just giving us entrance into heaven, not just allowing us to become His servants, but doing so much more in His affection toward us. The Lord says, “I’m going to make you citizens of My Kingdom. *And* I’m calling you *friends*. *And* I’m giving you the right to become *children* of God.”

This is the “acceptance” of God. Jacob said to Esau, “You have accepted me.” The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* tells us this is a term that means “to be favorably received” and “describes God’s pleasure with His servants.” It’s the word God the Father uses in Isaiah 42:1 when He says He *delights* in Christ, the Son. *That* delight is what He feels about you, too!

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 1:14

In Psalm 147 we read:

Psalm 147:11 - ¹¹ The Lord values those who fear him...who put their hope in his faithful love.

“Values” there is the same root word we see here as “accepted.” On the authority of God’s Word we know that when we come to Him in faith and receive His free gift of grace, He accepts us, He values us, and He delights in us. Just like Jacob, we don’t deserve it - quite the opposite. The Lord’s acceptance and forgiveness are unmerited, but He extends it all the same. And now, much more than God just meeting us at the crossroads and saying, “Alright, this squares us,” He gives us more than we could ask or imagine. As people who have received the grace of God, we can say like Jacob, “I have everything I need.” Your version may say “I have enough” like Esau said back in verse 9, but in the Hebrew, Jacob is saying something different. He says, “I have everything I need.”¹⁵ Those words remind us of Psalm 23. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I have what I need.”

We can see God’s *peace* ruling in Jacob’s heart. Where would they live? Where would they go? What about famines or foes? What about his limp? Those are fair questions but in *this* moment, Jacob has the splendid certainty of faith and can *correctly* say, “I have everything I need.”

Genesis 33:12 - ¹² Then Esau said, “Let’s move on, and I’ll go ahead of you.”

Like all Biblical types, we can’t press *too* hard otherwise the analogy crumbles. But here we still see a shadow of our Lord’s goodness. Esau says, “Let’s move out together,” or your translation may say, “Let us take our journey.” At the same time, he says, “I will go before you.” What a great statement of how the Lord leads *and* of His constant presence. He walks with *and* goes before. He is not some far removed Deity Who will answer one question if we can survive the climb up the mountain to reach His temple. In Deuteronomy we read: “*For the Lord your God is the One who will go with you; He will not leave you or abandon you.*” Of course, Jesus said the same in Matthew 28.

While this gives us one last, beautiful reminder of the Lord’s care for us, *this* is the moment when the scene of grace begins to fade, like a dream sequence coming to an end. We find the brothers there on the road and Esau has just made an offer to Jacob. He says, “Why don’t you all come with me, I’ll lead you on down to *my* territory.”

This is a dangerous offer. Esau’s plan would put an *unbeliever* in a position of leadership over the family of faith. He would be leading them *out* of the land of promise and out of the will of God.¹⁶ This is *definitely* not what God had directed Jacob to do, so how would he answer?

Genesis 33:13-14 - ¹³ Jacob replied, “My lord knows that the children are weak, and I have nursing flocks and herds. If they are driven hard for one day, the whole herd will die. ¹⁴ Let my lord go ahead of his servant. I will continue on slowly, at a pace suited to the livestock and the children, until I come to my lord at Seir.”

¹⁵ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

¹⁶ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

Some criticize Jacob, saying he was lying here - that it was *old* Jacob back in action. Others point out that the Bible doesn't call this a lie. Earlier, the Holy Spirit labels Jacob's actions as deception, but not here. In fact, if we had been there, it would've been obvious that he was saying, "I'm not going to go with you. We need to separate." He's just doing so in a very polite way. Esau wouldn't need to travel hard and fast. In fact, now that *he* had nursing flocks given to him by his brother, he too would have to travel slowly. And we see he gets the message, he leaves that very day.

We're not given all the details of their talk or their time together. We'll find in chapter 36 that they figured out they wouldn't be able to live together, just as Lot and Abraham had discovered. The land couldn't support them both. So

Genesis 33:15 - ¹⁵ Esau said, "Let me leave some of my people with you." But he replied, "Why do that? Please indulge me, my lord."

Without Esau's people to guide, how would Jacob find his brother in Seir? It would be *possible*, but obviously Jacob is doing what we all sometimes do: "Yeah we should *totally* get lunch sometime..."

I do see one last echo of the Lord's grace in Esau's final word. Our Lord, Who has gone before us, was faithful to leave some of His people with us. The Church is given not just out of convenience or simple tradition. God gives us each other so that we might encourage, support, protect, and guide one another as we are built up together. We're meant to take the road of faith together.

So, in verses 1 through 15, Jacob enjoys the grace of God through the example of Esau. But this chapter which shined so bright at the start ends with storm clouds gathered on the horizon. Jacob makes a serious mistake. It seems as though, in the aftermath of these incredible events, he sort of sighs a breath of relief and instead of continuing in faithful diligence, he simply imitates the things he heard that Abraham did and calls it good. It starts with a small move.

Genesis 33:16-17 - ¹⁶ That day Esau started on his way back to Seir, ¹⁷ but Jacob went to Succoth. He built a house for himself and shelters for his livestock; that is why the place was called Succoth.

Jacob doesn't go to Hebron to live with Isaac. He moves 4 miles to the north and west of his meeting with Esau and he lives there for a while in a house. We're not sure how long he's there, but after some time, he moves on, not to where God led, but simply copying the footsteps of Abraham.

Genesis 33:18-20 - ¹⁸ After Jacob came from Paddan-aram, he arrived safely at Shechem in the land of Canaan and camped in front of the city. ¹⁹ He purchased a section of the field where he had pitched his tent from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of silver. ²⁰ And he set up an altar there and called it God, the God of Israel.

We know this was not a good decision because of the disaster that comes in the very next chapter. And *after* that tragedy, God is going to speak directly to Jacob and say, "Get up! Go to Bethel and settle there." Now, Bethel was only 20 miles from Shechem. So it seems like Jacob *knew* he should probably get himself back to Bethel, but once in Shechem thought, "Eh...close enough."

How is this possible? The truth is, like the song says, our hearts are prone to wander. Walking by faith requires a daily determination to follow God. You don't *eat* by accident. You make choices and put those choices into motion. King Joash is a powerful warning about our propensity to wander from the Lord. For 40 years he honored God, for 40 years his life was all about repairing the temple. That was his focus and his passion. But then, after those 40 years, the priest Jehoiada died. Jehoiada had been like a father to Joash. And Joash stopped listening to the truth. He abandoned the temple. He abandoned the Lord. And he even had Jehoiada's son killed when he tried to direct Joash back to the Lord. Prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love.

Jacob was wandering from where God wanted him. Of course, it was *only* 20 miles. But what *seemed* safe to Jacob wasn't safe at all. R. Kent Hughes calls this faith mixed with *partial* obedience. Genesis consistently described cities in Canaan as *bad* places for God's people to be. But there's Jacob, camped right outside of Shechem. Why did he do this?

It seems he was trying to mimic what Abraham had done. Abraham came to Shechem, built an altar there, and bought a piece of land as a burial plot. Jacob does the same thing. The land he bought would be used for his burial, according to Joshua 24. But, like Abraham, this time in Shechem was a prelude to disaster. At the same time, we see he *wants* to worship God. He *wants* to follow the Lord. Yet, he stops short of complete obedience in his choices. Instead, he mimics what his grandfather did and probably thought, "That's good enough, right? I did the thing, so I'm good."

Jacob assumed Laban was going to hurt his family. He assumed Esau was going to hurt his family. Ironically, now he assumes the people in Shechem would be *good* for his family. The opposite was true, as we'll see next time.

God's gracious love does not give us a blank check to do whatever we think is best. The Lord is still the Decider. Jacob's walk of faith was not just about *getting away from* Laban or *not* going with Esau. It was about being where the Lord wanted him to be. And, at *this* point, that place was *Bethel*. Not a day's journey from Bethel.

Jacob wasn't perfect - he still had a lot to learn, just like we do. At the same time, his failure here did not *diminish* God's grace for him. No, the Lord was *still* faithful to come alongside His limping son and faithfully complete the work He began, just as He will for us. His faithful love endures *forever!*