



# THE MANY FACES OF RECONCILIATION

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 32:1-32

29th Message

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In Genesis 32 we come to the climactic moment in the life of Jacob, the crisis that all of us have to face at least once, when we are forced to confront our greatest fear. It is time for Jacob to right the wrong he did to his brother Esau by stealing his "blessing." After twenty years of running from his past, Jacob still cannot escape the raging guilt he feels over what he has done. As he is about to return to the Promised Land, the childhood fears that have haunted him for so many years come racing back.

The question we must answer is: How is God "at work" to reconcile these two brothers? Our text is a study of the face of reconciliation, which is our theme for both today and next Sunday. If Jacob were among us this morning, this text would be his testimony of his spiritual re-birth.

## I. Preparations for War (Gen 31:55-32:12)

Introduction/setting: The "border crossing" with angels (31:55-32:2)

**Early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place.**

**Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels [lit., "messengers"] of God met him. Jacob said when he saw them, "This is God's camp [*mahanah*]." So he named that place Mahanaim [lit., "two camps"].** (Gen 31:55-32:2, NASB)

After an emotional signing of a non-aggression pact between two enemies, Laban rises early in the morning and does what any father would do: he kisses his grandchildren and daughters, and blesses them upon their departure. This display of affection, however, is but an empty show, one that is simply endured by the silent Rachel and Leah, who harbor no affection for their father. Laban then returns from whence he came. Finally, after twenty years, Jacob's unending battle with Laban, the quintessential control freak, is over. Following his almost war-like evacuation efforts, he has finally extricated himself from his father-in-law. It's a new day of freedom for the patriarch and his family.

As he departs for home, however, old ghosts reawaken old fears. He has left Laban, yes, but now he must face Esau. Escaping from the one who has "used" him only serves to place him in the hands of the one who has vowed to kill him. But God in his grace meets Jacob at his weakest. Just as God, and a host of angels, appeared to him at Bethel, upon his departure from the Promised Land, so now as he approaches his second "border crossing," angels again meet him. ("Meet," or better, "encounter," is often used of surprising and unexpected encounters, and in some cases when an avenger of blood "meets" a murderer and kills him, Num 35:21). Jacob says, "This is God's camp (*mahanah*)," and names the place Mahanaim (lit., "two camps"). "Camp" becomes the theme word of the story. At times the word has a military significance (1 Sam 17:1; 28:1; 29:1); at other times it is used in a nomadic sense, when it speaks of an intermediate stage on the way to settling in the land (Gen 26:17; Judg 18:11-13).

The exact significance of the term "two camps" is somewhat ambiguous. Waltke asks: "Does it refer to God's camp and Jacob's camp? Does it foreshadow the meeting of Jacob's camp with Esau's? Does it refer to the two angelic camps, here and at Bethel? Or do the two angelic camps prompt him to divide his

household into two groups...? Perhaps the narrator, who loves puns, means to evoke one or more of these connotations. In any case, the narrator employs the number two throughout the scene: two camps, two families, two meetings—one with God and Esau—and two brothers."<sup>1</sup> The image of these "two camps" reminds us that the work of reconciliation involves massive resources and an intermingling of human and divine cooperation.

The literary outline<sup>2</sup> of the text also has two scenes, each of which has three movements.

### Introduction/Setting: Angels of God meet Jacob at Mahanaim

#### A Jacob sends messengers to Esau

#### B Jacob divides his family

#### C Jacob prays based on God's covenant promises

#### A' Jacob sends gifts to Esau

#### B' Jacob sends his family across Jabbok

#### C' Jacob prays as he wrestles the man-God

### A. Jacob sends messengers to Esau (32:3-6)

**Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed [lit., "been detained"] until now; I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight."'"** (Gen 32:3-5)

Anticipating the dreaded reunion with Esau, Jacob sends "messengers" of his own ahead to try and discern his brother's attitude. Did God's action in sending "messengers" to Jacob inspire the patriarch to send some of his own ahead before proceeding into enemy territory? Jacob's stress level is evident in the choice of words he instructs his servants to speak to his brother: Esau is to be addressed as "lord"; Jacob, his "willing servant." His delay in Haran was beyond his control, for Laban "detained" him, and he is returning a very rich man to find "favor" in Esau's sight. Is this Jacob's way of offering Esau a blank check to discover the cost of reconciliation?

The news that the messengers return with could hardly be worse, however.

**The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."** (Gen 32:6)

It appears they did their job, but instead of a verbal reply they report a small army marching to meet Jacob. The news made him dread the loss of his own life and the lives of his wives and children.

### B. Jacob divides his family (32:7-8)

**Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies ["camps"]; for he said, "If Esau comes to the one company ["camp"] and attacks it, then the company ["camp"] which is left will escape."** (Gen 32:7-8)

Jacob's initial response is to minimize his losses by dividing his family and possessions into two "camps." He reasons that if half his family is killed, at least the other half will survive. Now, for the first time in the Jacob story, he offers a prayer of petition to God for his salvation. The manipulator is out of options; his only recourse is to prayer.

### C. Jacob prays, based on God's covenant promises (32:9-12)

**Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies ["camps"]. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. For You said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.'" (Gen 32:9-12)**

Surprisingly, Jacob's first recorded prayer is the longest prayer in Genesis.<sup>3</sup> This might suggest that when death is imminent, and all options have been exercised, even manipulators can demonstrate extraordinary faith. It is amazing that what Jacob says here is a model prayer, both in form (it resembles David's penitential psalms) and theology. What an encouragement this is of God's grace to change us!

Jacob bases any hope and confidence for his future not on his clever schemes, but solely on God's elective grace. This, the first real confession from Jacob is coupled with appreciation that all the good he has (note his expression "two camps") is due solely to the goodness of God. And the motive for his deliverance is not his righteousness, but God's mercy (an admission of weakness, "I fear him"), and loyal-love ("You said, 'I will prosper you'"). All self-confidence melts away in this holy moment in Jacob's life. This is typical in the lives of the saints. When people are forced to look death in the eye, there is a purity about their prayers that brings heaven to earth, and permanent change to their souls.

## II. Jacob's Dark Night of the Soul (Gen 32:13-32)

### A. Jacob sends gifts to Esau (32:13-21)

**So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present [*minhah*] for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on before me, put a space between droves." He commanded the one in front, saying, "When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?' then you shall say, 'These belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present [*minhah*] sent to my lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.'" Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, "After this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; and you shall say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.'" (Gen 32:13-20a)**

Following his evening prayer, Jacob decides to spend the night at Mahanaim. But before retiring he makes one last effort to appease his brother in anticipation of meeting him face to face. He goes through all the possessions he has acquired over the last six years in order to make a generous offer to his brother. For the first time in his life Jacob is giving instead of grasping. And what a gift he offers! One can only imagine the psychological impact on Esau of these multiple convoys of animals. After each wave arrives there is hardly breathing space for him to take it all in. Then, before he can recover emotionally, another wave of ani-

mals comes over the horizon, more numerous and valuable than the preceding one. The staggering numbers in this convoy would be enough to overwhelm a king, to say nothing of a brother. Waltke explains: "A total of 550 animals is a very large gift. In an attempt to appease Esau's anger, Jacob encircles Esau with gifts so he has no place, psychologically speaking, to move."<sup>4</sup> Is this Jacob's way of compensating Esau for his loss, by restoring the "blessing" he stole twenty years earlier? His language to Esau later supports this, for when he presents these gifts to his brother, he does not call them a "present" (*minhah*), but a "blessing" (*berakah*, 33:11).

And notice the position of the shepherds. They are to come last in the procession, after the animals. Fokkelman suggests: "By determining the position of his shepherds, Jacobs determines his own position, 'behind you.' Therewith, however, Jacob has betrayed his moral and psychological position in a revealing way. Now that the place has become too hot for him, the man of 'I first!' is eager to come last, to shelter behind the work of other people (who are bringing reconciliation in the shape of a present, who are innocent)."<sup>5</sup>

At the end of his speech (32:20b-21), the narrator spells out Jacob's hopes in black and white.

**For he said, "I will appease him [lit., "make atonement before his face"] with the present that goes before me ["before his face"]. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me [lit., "lift up my face"]." So the present [*minhah*] passed on before him ["before his face"], while he himself spent that night in the camp. (Gen 32:20b-21)**

Five times the narrator uses the word face (*panah*) in a play on words to describe Jacob's goal of reconciliation. Jacob sent all these gifts "before his face" so that when he finally sees his brother's "face," he thinks in his heart, "perhaps he will lift up my face." (Thus the title of this message, "The Many Faces of Reconciliation.") With profound simplicity the narrator has painted the complex work of reconciliation with just three related words.<sup>6</sup> *Mahaneh* (camp), meaning the task, takes divine help; *minhah* (gift) implying the need for generous restitution; and finally, *hen* (favor or grace), which the guilty party hopes to receive.

Once the convoy is dispatched, Jacob goes to bed. His unsettled conscience probably allows him very little sleep.

### B. Jacob sends his family across Jabbok (32:22-23)

**Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. (Gen 32:22-23)**

Plagued by fear, Jacob tosses and turns in bed. At last he gets up in the middle of the night and escorts his family across the ford of the Jabbok ("wrestling") with whatever personal possessions he has. The scenery in this area is magnificent. The Jabbok "flows through deeply cut canyons for about 50 miles westward from its source, moving from 1900 feet above sea level to 115 feet below sea level. It flows into the Jordan about 20 miles north of the Dead Sea."<sup>7</sup> Ironically, as Jacob is about ready to make the border crossing back into the Promised Land, he returns naked, the same way he left. But this time his nakedness is not due to his father's neglect; it is a statement of his trust in God. He will spend the night alone in the presence of God, with no human props.

What follows is one of the most mysterious scenes in the Bible.

### C. Jacob prays as he wrestles the man-God (32:24-32)

**Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled [lit., "rolling in the dust"] with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you**

**bless me.”** (Gen 32:24-26)

For the first time since Bethel, Jacob goes to sleep alone—but not for long. Soon he is engaged in a fierce “wrestling” (lit., “rolling in the dust”) match with an anonymous man. Jacob has been a wrestler his whole life. He wrestled the blessing from a reluctant father and a sensual brother. He wrestled with stones and with barrenness with Rachel. He wrestled with his manipulative father-in-law for property, and with his wives, who wrestled for his love, in the process of childbirth. Wrestling has shaped his journey through life. Now, as Alter explains, “In this culminating moment of his life story, the characterizing image of wrestling is made explicit and literal.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, as Wenham observes, “The verb ‘he struggled’ (*bq*) occurs only here and in v 26, and is clearly a play on the name Yabbok (*yqb*), and probably Jacob too (*y’qb*). So we could paraphrase it ‘he Yabboked him’ or ‘he Jacobed him!’”<sup>9</sup>

As to the identity of this mysterious man, the narrator metes out his clues sparingly, and over much time. From Jacob’s viewpoint, it was a very gradual revelation. First, we learn that the “man” initiated the struggle. Given its intensity (the cloud of dust), and its length (“until daybreak”), we sense that Jacob has met his match. Is this an angry Laban who has returned, not content with their settlement? Is it a vengeful Esau who seizes the opportunity to make a first strike under the cover of night? Or is this a dream in which Jacob is wrestling with an unsettled conscience?

Adding to the mystery, strange things occur throughout the night. Unable to gain the upper hand, the man “touches” Jacob’s hip socket, and with a mere “touch” (Alter translates it: “barely touched”) dislocates his hip. What magic is this? Undaunted, Jacob will not let go. As dawn begins to break, the man asks Jacob to end the struggle and “to send” him away, leading some Jewish scholars to think this strange man is a “night spirit” who loses his power in the morning, or even Esau’s “tutelary spirit” (Sarna). But Jacob doesn’t view the man in that light; rather, he asks him to bless him. At this point one might regard the whole episode as a dream, and that in his subconscious, Jacob is wrestling a father who never blessed him “face to face.” The absence of a father’s blessing can create subconscious longings that surface at times with surprising force. But, lest we think we have solved the man’s secret identity, more mystery awaits.

**So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.”** (Gen 32:27-28)

Now this man locked in Jacob’s strong grasp does an amazing thing: He asks Jacob, “What is your name?” It might seem absurd to engage in a fierce battle with someone for several hours and not even know his name, but Jacob is not surprised, and for the first time in the story, he says his name.<sup>10</sup> When he met Rachel by the well, he told her whom his mother and father were, but never mentioned his “name” (29:12). Why? Because saying his own name would be an admission of who he was, “the heel grabber.” But now, after a lifetime of struggle, at last he can embrace his own name. This is the climactic moment in Jacob’s life, for when he admits who he is, he discovers with whom he has been wrestling all along. Behind the stones, the barrenness, Laban, and competing wives, lay the hand of God attempting to face Jacob with who he was.

Then the man changes the “heel grabber’s” name—a privilege granted only to superiors in the ancient world. From this point on Jacob will become Israel (lit., “God fights,” or an abbreviated form of “striven with God”), for “you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” Jacob’s entire life has been drastically reoriented. All along he had prevailed through his deceptions and manipulations, but now he prevails by clinging to God. It is important to note the ambiguity and mysterious tension in the name Israel. God is not against passionate “striving”; it is

how we strive and what we strive for that concerns him. Jacob, in contrast to his brother Esau, always strove for the right thing—the “blessing.” But his method of manipulation and deceit wrought havoc in human relationships at every turn. Finally, after twenty years, with Esau coming over the horizon leading a large army, having no human resources left, Jacob prays in total dependence upon God. In this way of “clinging” rather than “wrestling” in his “striving with God and man” he will now prevail. This is the birth of Israel. It is typical of our own spiritual rebirth, which for some, like Jacob, occurs when we face the fear of losing everything.

**Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.”** (Gen 32:29-30)

Now that Jacob has confessed who he is, he returns the favor, asking the man his name (see also Judg 13:17-18; Exod 20:7). But the man will not tell Jacob his name; instead he gives him “the blessing.” This is the ultimate moment of revelation in Jacob’s life. Now he knows that behind the face of the man was the face of God. Awestruck, he sanctifies the place by naming it Peniel (“the face of God”).

**Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel, and he was limping on his thigh. Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew of the hip.** (Gen 32:31-32)

In the opening words describing this moment, “the sun rose upon him,” we sense that this is not just a new day but a new era for the patriarch. The “face to face” confrontation has left its mark on him. Jacob makes his way forward, battle-bruised and limping. At last, this impassioned man of constant action has to slow his pace. It is the picture of calm ecstasy. Was this God’s way of taking Jacob’s temporary weakness (his fear of death that led to dependent prayer), and permanently etching it into the fabric of his being, through dislocating his hip? God not only answered his prayer on that occasion but, by means of a “severe mercy,” so deeply wounded the patriarch, with a perpetual state of weakness, that dependent prayer will be his mainstay for the rest of his life. Fokkelman beautifully captures the magnitude of this “new creation”: “The old Adam has been shaken off. ‘Jakob’ stays behind on one bank of the river. A new man, steeled and marked, Israel, has developed, and he continues the journey on the other bank. The completely renewed, purified relationship with God makes a renewed, authentic relationship with his ‘brother’ possible.”<sup>11</sup>

So profound was this event it was memorialized not only in the place name, but also in Israel’s dietary laws, in the restriction on eating the sciatic nerve. At each meal every Jew would be reminded that, “when Jacob became weak in his struggle with God, Israel the victor emerged.”<sup>12</sup>

What can we learn from Jacob’s story about the many “faces” of reconciliation?

### III. The Many “Faces” of Reconciliation

#### A. The goal of the journey—Reconciliation: To see a brother’s “face”

The long journey from Bethel to Peniel took twenty years. Jacob left a fugitive, fleeing his brother’s murderous rage. He tried to outrun his guilt, but found it inescapable. Guilt is a tenacious foe that cannot be eluded either through time or distance. Jacob left the Promised Land because he had wronged his brother; he cannot return without facing him. The thought of that encounter so plagued him with fear that it practically undid him. But in these generous gifts to his brother, he makes his first attempt at reconciliation by compensating for the wrong he caused, and

goes well beyond that by contributing to the Esau's welfare. What if Israel took this stance toward the Palestinians today? Instead of defending themselves with guns and bombs from those who "hate" them, what if they dispatched convoys of material aid and wealth to build Palestinian schools, hospitals and parks, perhaps even, like their forefather, giving enough wealth to build a "small city"? Certainly this would be the beginning of reconciliation. But there is more to be done than giving gifts to "lift a brother's face."

**B. The necessary "border crossing"—Confession:  
To look at our own "face"**

The second thing we learn is that before Jacob can complete his journey of "reconciliation" he has to make a "border crossing." The crossing, which is so dangerous it requires divine aid, comes when things are darkest for Jacob. For the first time in twenty years he is alone with his thoughts (cf. Ps 4:4). Now he is able to assess the value of his life's work and character. From this reflection he makes his first recorded confession. The combination of fear coupled with the darkness, gives him clear insight concerning the value of God being for him, and the futility of everything he has tried to accomplish in his own strength. It really is Jacob's first prayer, and it is a model one.

As the night wears on Jacob is forced to embrace his ultimate fear, which is "facing" who he is, through an intense four-hour wrestling match. His opponent's identity is kept a mystery. His anonymity serves to dramatize everyone whom Jacob has been wrestling his whole life—his father, Laban, Esau, his wives. It is only at the end of the long night, when his opponent forces him to embrace his own name, that the revelation dawns on him. Behind all the "faces" of his opponents was the "face" of God, who had been using every encounter to get him to look in the mirror and see his own "face." Finally, at Peniel, the miracle occurs.

This too is our border crossing. When we no longer hide behind our strengths and admit who we really are, the obstacles to reconciliation are swiftly removed. Without this divine "border crossing" all our efforts at reconciliation usually end in vain. But the text is realistic. It shows what an intense struggle this "crossing" can be, and how much we need divine help.

**C. The life changes along the journey—"Limping:"  
Seeing God's "face"**

As Jacob leaves Jabbok he is renamed Israel. He limps along in awe that he had seen "the face of God" and survived. The encounter left a permanent mark on him. As Bruce Waltke explains: "Jacob's remarkable encounter reminds saints that they too may encounter God in ambiguity, even in apparent hostility, in mystery cloaked in darkness, and in such humility that he restrains himself from dominating their lives. When they stop wrestling with God and start clinging to him, they discover that he has been there for their good, to bless them."<sup>13</sup>

There is tremendous irony in this passage. Once Jacob is alone he is no longer lonely, because God can finally encounter him face to face. The encounter that began with struggle and pain ends in peace and holy awe. And now, to perpetuate that sweet state of dependence, Jacob is wounded in such a way that his weakness is not only made permanent, but public, too. When our weakness is exposed to the public eye we are never lonely, because the face of God is perpetually near. As we come to the end of the text, we would do well to ask ourselves if have we given thanks to God for our deepest wounds.

*But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).*

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1. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 441.
2. The literary outline is taken from Waltke, *Genesis*, 438.
3. Waltke, *Genesis*, 443.
4. Waltke, *Genesis*, 444.
5. Jan Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 205.
6. Special thanks to Jan Fokkelman for sharing this insight with the men of PBCC.
7. Waltke, *Genesis*, 445.
8. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 180.
9. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 295.
10. I am grateful to Paul Stevens for this insight.
11. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 222.
12. Waltke, *Genesis*, 448.
13. Waltke, *Genesis*, 448.