



# TRUE RECONCILIATION: THE FACE OF GRACE

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 33:1-17

30th Message

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God's work of reconciliation is the theme of our text from Genesis 33. Nothing more clearly illustrates the supernatural character of the gospel, and no work brings more joy to the Father in heaven, than when former enemies embrace in tears of love and reach out to those who harmed them most. Yet we have to admit that this is so rare, even in the church, that we put it in the category of the miraculous rather than the normative work of grace. In our last study we saw that this task was so important to God that he was at work for twenty years, "wrestling" behind the scenes to prepare Jacob for this moment. At last, in the ultimate wrestling match, Jacob was forced to admit who he was: Jacob, the "heel-grabber."

But what about Esau? What has been going on in the heart of the one who sold his birthright, and vowed to kill his brother for stealing his blessing? Has time changed him? Today we will explore one of the most emotional exchanges in Scripture. This scene is so powerful that the Lord Jesus based much of his parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) on the images from this text; thus this ancient story is a model of true reconciliation.

## I. The Approach to Reconciliation (Gen 33:1-4)

### A. Jacob's approach to reconciliation (33:1-3)

**Then Jacob lifted 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 maids. He put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last.** (Gen 33:1-2, NASB)

Jacob, limping in the light of a new day, arrives back in the Promised Land with his family, and, lifting up his eyes, he sees Esau coming over the horizon. Just as was reported, his brother is not coming alone, but is escorted by four hundred men. Jacob can only assume this must be an army bent on his annihilation. His worst fears realized, he scrambles into survival mode, dividing his children into four camps, and positioning them to encounter Esau, one group at a time. It takes little discernment to see his preference in their placement. The least loved are positioned in front with the maids, while the most loved, Rachel and Joseph, remain in the rear. But at this point it is difficult to clearly discern Jacob's motives. Wenham wonders: "Is he arranging his family in this order that those whom he loves most, Rachel and Joseph, may stand the best chance of escape, with himself last of all in the procession so that he can head the flight? This was clearly his motive in 32:8-22. Or is he arranging his family in order of precedence, so that they may be presented to prince Esau in the correct way? We are left to wonder."<sup>1</sup> We need not speculate for long. After Jacob divides his family, the transformed Israel does a new thing: he passes on ahead of them to face his fear head-on.

**But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.** (Gen 33:3)

Jacob's encounter with God at Peniel has transformed his

paralyzing fear into courage, his deceitful pride into humility. The miracle continues. Once we are able to admit who we are we no longer have to walk in fear of men. Jacob approaches his brother and bows down before him in the homage reserved for a prince. After twenty years of waiting, at last he encounters Esau face to face. The suspense is unimaginable.

### B. Esau's approach: actions of grace (33:4)

**Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.** (Gen 33:4)

By means of three verbs the narrator keeps the suspense building to fever pitch. Upon first glimpsing Jacob, Esau breaks ranks and runs to meet him. We wonder if he is about to kill him. And then we find, he "embraced him." This rare verb (*tabaq*) is used only four times in the Old Testament (Gen 33:4; Prov 4:8; Song of Songs 2:6; 8:3). To Hebrew ears, it sounds almost identical to "wrestle" (*'abaq*) and Jabbok (*yabbog*). So we are kept in suspense as to whether this is a hug or a "wrestling" embrace. While we are still riveted in fear, Esau falls on his brother's neck. To inflict the final blow? We might well imagine that, but instead, he kisses him repeatedly. Esau's lips release twenty years of pent-up anguish for Jacob, and both men collapse in a torrent of tears.

Gestures and symbols are extremely critical to the reconciliation process. These are what pave the way for conciliatory conversation. Jacob's bowing down in homage is symbolic of his attempting to return to Esau the honor he himself received in Isaac's blessing, "may nations bow down to you" (27:29). Esau's embrace is symbolic of the approval Jacob so longed to receive from his father but never did. Now he receives it from his estranged brother. And, even more important, the place where Esau chooses to make intimate contact is Jacob's neck, the very spot where Jacob masqueraded as his brother, wearing goatskins on his neck (27:16). What an ingenious way for Esau to demonstrate forgiveness: kissing the very spot upon which he himself was betrayed. When we recall Isaac's prophesy that one day Esau's descendants would "break his (Jacob's) yoke from your neck" (27:40), we can well imagine that, following his betrayal, Esau would have broken his brother's neck at the first opportunity. But instead, after twenty years, he kisses it. What indescribable love!

So exemplary are Esau's actions of reconciliation that Jesus uses the same three verbs to describe the compassionate heart of the prodigal's father when he saw his son making his way home. While he was yet far off he "ran" (a shameful thing for older men in the ancient world), and "embraced" him and "kissed" him (Luke 15:20). Doesn't it seem a little ironic that the first display of these reconciling actions are found in the heart of the "unbelieving" son, and are given to the "believing Israel"? The pattern continues as Jesus uses the example of an "unclean" Samaritan to demonstrate sacrificial love to one's neighbor. Could this be suggesting that the church can learn significant lessons from the world at times?

Now that these two brothers have released decades of emo-

tions they can begin to speak.

## II. Words of Reconciliation (33:5-11)

### A. Visions of grace (33:5-7)

**He lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said, "Who are these with you?" So he said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." Then the maids came near with their children, and they bowed down. Leah likewise came near with her children, and they bowed down; and afterward Joseph came near with Rachel, and they bowed down.** (Gen 33:5-7)

After many tears, Esau lifts his eyes and sees a small convoy of women and children on the horizon. Esau arrives with an army, Jacob with a family. It is time for the introductions. Notice Jacob's careful wording. These children are gifts of God's "grace" given to Esau's "servant." Jacob never changes his polite, deferential tone to the more informal address of "brother." Then, each of the miniature "companies" approaches their uncle-prince and bows down in "royal" homage.

Following his reception by Jacob's family, Esau questions his brother about the unprecedented retinue of five hundred and fifty animals.

### B. Gifts of grace: *mahaneh*, *minhah*, *hen* (33:8-11)

**And he said, "What do you mean by all this company [lit., "camp"] which I have met?" And he said, "To find favor [lit., "grace"] in the sight of my lord." But Esau said, "I have plenty, my brother; let what you have be your own."** (Gen 33:8-9)

Esau's expression, "What do you mean?" is a Hebrew idiom for "What is the meaning of this?" or "What do you want?"<sup>2</sup> Jacob's answer is that he wants but one thing: "Grace," or "favor in the eyes of my lord," just as he received the grace of God's gifts in children. So the gift (*minhah*), which Esau describes as a camp (*mahaneh*), is for the purpose of finding grace (*hen*).

Wenham notes how different is the spirit between these two in the exchange: "Esau is in jovial mood, whereas Jacob is earnestly deferential. Esau jocularly puns, 'What is all this camp (*mahaneh*) that I have encountered?' Doubtless he realized Jacob was sending him a present (*minhah*), for Jacob had told his servants to explain that they were a gift (32:19). But the pun touched Jacob, for originally he had divided his possessions into 'camps' so that they could escape, should Esau attack (32:8,9,11)."<sup>3</sup>

Esau's generous answer is, "I have plenty, my brother." It appears as if God has blessed Esau too in the intervening twenty years. One who can muster a garrison of four hundred men on short notice must be an individual of considerable prominence. Perhaps his accumulation of wealth and rise to prominence have taken the sting out of Jacob's wounds, paving the way for the possibility of forgiveness.

This extraordinary expression of grace foreshadows what should be a common occurrence in the church. When Peter questioned Jesus as to how often he should forgive his brother, and then tested the waters with a "perfect" seven,<sup>4</sup> Jesus responded with the unqualified "seventy times seven" (Matt 18:22). How is this possible? we ask. There are two reasons. The obvious one is that God has already forgiven us much, much more (Matt 18:32-33). The less obvious reason, and the one suggested by our text, is that no one can rob us of even an ounce of our inheritance in Christ (Eph 1:3,11; 1 Pet 1:4-5), or the quality of our life in the Spirit (1 Cor 2:12-13). In fact, the

more we are wronged for righteousness' sake, the more we are counted as blessed (1 Pet 4:14). This will be the main theme in the Joseph story. It is from this secure position, when we truly understand that no one can take our life from us, that the doorway to forgiveness and reconciliation is easily opened.

In this case certainly, time has healed. Esau conveys to Jacob that his relationship with him as a brother is now more important to him than the restoration of his "things." But Jacob will not take no for an answer.

**Jacob said, "No, please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please take my gift [lit., "blessing"] which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have plenty."** (Gen 33:10-11)

Jacob presses harder, insisting that Esau take the gift not as a means of buying his favor, but as a symbolic "seal" that he has already experienced forgiveness from his brother as a free gift. Then Jacob draws together his twenty years of "wrestlings" and sums it all up in nine (Hebrew) words: "for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably." This is Jacob's climactic moment of spiritual insight. When he had finished his wrestling with the mysterious "man," he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved" (32:30). Now he says the same thing to his brother, substituting the term "favorably" for Esau's acceptance. As Wenham notes: "The verb 'accept' (*ratzah*) is an important sacrificial term used to describe God's receiving of sacrifice (Lev 1:4; 7:18; 19:7). Jacob's argument is that since you have received me with forgiveness as God has, so you must accept my 'present,' a term also used for sacrifice, as God would."<sup>5</sup>

As Jacob makes his final attempt to urge Esau to accept the gift, he plays his last card, substituting the word "blessing" for gift (a significant point missed in most translations). In effect, he says, "I want to restore what I stole from you, brother, and let me do it as a gift of God's grace to you, since I, like you, have been blessed with much." Esau has little choice but to take the gift. With persistent urging from Jacob, he gives in.

But before leaving, Esau makes an offer to his brother.

## III. Freedom to Disengagement (Gen 33:12-17)

### A. Jacob refuses Esau's first offer: different callings (33:12-14)

**Then Esau said, "Let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you [lit., "opposite you"]."** (Gen 33:12)

Now that the brothers are reconciled, Esau is eager that the two "camps" travel together as one. He invites Jacob's family to join his men and make their way back to his home in tandem, but Jacob politely refuses.

**But he said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. Please let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir."** (Gen 33:13-14)

Jacob has no desire to be "equally yoked" with his brother (2 Cor 6:14). The pace at which a family travels is very different from that of a military force. He points out to Esau his pastoral concerns for the frailty of the children, and adds that

the nursing flocks and herds must travel at a leisurely pace. If they are driven hard for even a day, all the flocks will die. He encourages Esau to go on without him so that he can travel at his leisure, with the weakest determining the pace. There may be other motives behind Jacob's words, but this one is certainly striking. Jacob had a different calling from Esau, and twenty years of wrestling has transformed him from a hard driving entrepreneur into a limping shepherd. Shepherds should never be in a hurry, since their concern is for the welfare of the flock, not their own agendas. This is a reminder of Isaiah's vision of the Messiah:

Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,  
In His arm He will gather the lambs  
And carry them in His bosom;  
He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isa 40:11)

And thus we find in the ministry of Jesus that he was never in a hurry. He was able to give nursing lambs and lame sheep his full attention. At times he even slowed his pace when summoned to emergency, life-threatening situations, amazing all who were around him (Mark 5:30; John 11:6).

Jacob's separating himself from Esau suggests that, apart from marriage, reconciliation does not necessarily imply forced proximity or similar callings. One can reconcile a relationship and still have freedom to separate to pursue a different calling. This is especially true with non-believers (2 Cor 6:14), but even in the church we find the apostle Paul and Barnabas separating because their different gifts gave them different passions and callings (Acts 15:39-40).

Jacob doesn't explain to Esau that his destiny is different, too, for his future is in the land of promise, not Seir. But, rather than flatly refusing to go, he leaves open the date of his return. While one might question his genuineness here, Jacob has grown in his ability to speak with tact, and is eager to disengage from his brother without causing him pain.

Still keen to give oversight to Jacob's venture, Esau makes him a second offer.

#### **B. Jacob refuses Esau's second offer: different destinies (33:15-17)**

**Esau said, "Please let me leave [lit., "set" or "place"] 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." (Gen 33:15)**

If Jacob won't travel with him, Esau at least wants to provide safe passage for his family by offering a military escort. The verb "to leave" (*yatzag* – "set," or "appoint") usually has strong overtones of deliberate appointments that exercise official functions (Gen 43:9; 47:2; Judg 8:27; 1 Sam 5:2). We can well imagine Jacob wanting nothing to do with Esau's men acting in any official capacity over his family. But he puts forward another motive, reminding Esau that his gift of forgiveness means more to him than anything, and whatever else Esau might give would only taint the gift. So his departing thought to Esau is that the gift of his grace is all he needs; and his final word to him is "lord." Waltke aptly comments: "The brash-speaking Jacob has become the wise-speaking Israel. He has learned to think before speaking to win a brother. He expresses his feeling with candor and yet with tact. The humbled wise man has learned the art of speaking the truth with grace."<sup>6</sup>

**So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named Succoth. (Gen 33:16-17)**

The scene ends with the two brothers traveling at different

paces, in two different directions, to two different destinies. What can we learn from this dramatic incident of healing, and what does the New Testament add to the story of reconciliation?

## **IV. True Reconciliation: The Face of Grace**

### **A. Reconciliation is the work of heaven: ("camp" - *mahaneh*)**

Long before Jacob and Esau met, God had been working behind the scenes. This is seen in the visits of angels, and God himself, with Jacob, and by the recurring theme word "camp" (*mahaneh*, or "two camps" - *Mahanaim*). This suggests that the work of reconciliation can be so painful and difficult at times that it cannot be achieved without divine aid. During the twenty-year separation of these two brothers, God had been working in each "camp" to prepare them for this day. He had endowed Esau with princely prominence, taking the sting out of Jacob's betrayal; and through all his wrestlings, Jacob had finally come face to face with his greatest fear and confessed who he was. When he was able to do that he could approach Esau in humility. Humility is the gift that removes our fears. Never forget that the real battles for reconciliation occur long before the actual face to face encounters take place—and they are divinely inspired. This is why we should never approach this work without considerable prayer.

### **B. Reconciliation involves not just forgiveness but restoration ("gift" - *minhah*)**

The second thing we discover is that reconciliation involves more than seeking forgiveness. True repentance requires an eagerness to bring restoration for the loss we have caused. If we borrow someone's car and have an accident, it's not enough to ask for forgiveness; we must pay for the repairs and provide transportation for the owner while the car is being repaired. This is the motive behind Jacob's gift (*minhah*). After twenty years with a guilty conscience, he is eager to fully restore the blessing he stole from Esau. His outrageous generosity speaks to the fact that he wants to go beyond that and make a contribution to his brother's life. In personal relationships we cannot always "restore" the emotional damage we have caused, but we certainly can take time to listen with compassion and be eager to make some kind of contribution (*minhah*) to the one we have wronged.

### **C. Reconciliation offers freedom, not control ("grace" - *hen*)**

Third, in Jacob's polite disengagement from Esau we learn that reconciliation does not necessarily require future proximity (except when a marriage is reconciled), as if the two parties needed to work together. Grace is what is given to the guilty party in reconciliation—but it does not come with strings attached. Jacob realizes he has a vastly different calling and destiny than Esau, and wants a future free from his brother's control. So he resists any further connections with him that could jeopardize his freedom to be what God called him to be. When we offer forgiveness to someone who has wronged us, we must never insist on using the grace we extend as leverage on the relationship in the future.

### **D. The New Testament and reconciliation**

In the New Testament we discover that this theme of reconciliation is so central that the entire gospel is built around it. The good news of the N.T. is that God has finished the divine task of reconciling a hostile world to himself. But, unlike the Jacob story, God did not wait for the guilty party to become convinced of their guilt and send a generous *minhah* to him to pave the way for reconciliation. No, the good news is that God himself provided the *minhah*, and not only paid for our guilt, but for the emotional damage we caused in the rela-

tionship. It is impossible to describe the magnitude of what God has accomplished in the gift of his Son. As Paul writes, "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (Col 1:19-22).

Our message to the world therefore is not to condemn it because of its sin, but to be agents of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19). Our message is to announce that the Father is coming with five hundred and fifty gifts, and when he sees you, he will run to you and fall on your neck and weep. "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating thorough us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20).

As a benediction to Jacob's journey from Bethel to Peniel, I want to close with a poem by my close friend Carl Temme, who has captured Jacob's journey as his own.

### *Jacob*

I see you there, you who have prevailed,  
through struggling all the way;  
with lips pursed tight in silent pain  
you dig your father's grave.

Each shovel full of rocky soil  
weighs on your hip now lame,  
and to the weight are added years  
of treacherous toil, fear and shame.

For when the Lord had chosen you  
you could not find your rest,  
at every turn you did resolve  
to ensure that you were blessed.

Each day you spun your well thought plan,  
but so much sleep you lost—  
consumed in day by searing heat,  
at night cut deep by frost.

Look, all the things for which you strove  
now covered deep in earth.  
You realize now how death comes fast  
and grabs the heels of birth.

You had gold rings and hard won wealth,  
you labored for all you could see,  
the treasure that you captured  
now lies dead beneath a tree.

With shallow words and two-faced kiss  
a father's blessing stolen,  
now hollow rings his final breath,  
empty of emotion.

Your mother sped you off in fear,  
she's gone without a sound,  
the only link you had to her  
is laid now in the ground.

Your wife, your prize, has died as well,  
seeking one last blessing.  
Your grief's too deep for word or tear—  
you pronounced her ending.

This lonely hour you search for God,  
can you call Him your friend?  
With stinging hip and head on rock  
you wrestled to the end.

Could you name God—no He named you,  
you thought you had prevailed.  
You realize now we know him  
when we're broken and unveiled.

Man of action with too few words,  
has striving left you whole?  
Eternal were missed moments  
you should have bared your soul.

For I am you and you are me,  
we struggle to secure,  
the peace that God could grant us—  
and with Him it would be pure.

Can I let God provide for me,  
or must I blessing steal?  
Will I again my brother cheat  
and leave deep wounds unhealed?

Can I be faced with enemy  
and look him in the eye,  
let him gaze deep into my soul,  
with nothing there to hide.

Will words of life fill my home,  
are grace and truth my prize?  
Or will I stand by silently  
for stealing, rape, and lies?

Without a friend at graveside stand  
and see the hole so deep,  
turn next to you – your brother stands,  
fall on his neck and weep.

—Carl Temme

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1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 298.
2. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 185.
3. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 299.
4. Seven was considered the number of perfection in the ancient world.
5. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 299.
6. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 457.