

## Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church

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DHW

LESSON 25

### THE BOOK OF GENESIS

#### Chapter 32 & 33

##### INTRODUCTION

Jacob must have felt greatly relieved when Laban *kissed his sons and his daughters* and returned to Padan-aram (31:55). Never again would he work for Laban. One problem had been lifted from him. But now he faced another problem – Esau, his brother from whom he ran away because he wanted to kill him for stealing his brother’s blessing (27:41). Twenty years had passed, Esau might not forget what Jacob had done to him, and now his return would be the opportunity to settle an old score. In life when we do something wrong, we harbour feelings of fear and guilt. And sometimes the moment comes when we have to face up to our wrong doings. This present study shall lead us to understand how restoration, reconciliation, and restitution can happen when things, which we are required to do are done so that old score can be amicably resolved.

Chapters 32 and 33 also present some valuable insights into the manner that God deals with us, the changes that should take place in us, and the way in which we should conduct ourselves. The following is a suggested outline of the two chapters:

- 1) The angels of God met Jacob (32:1-2);
- 2) Jacob sent messengers to meet Esau, his brother (32:3-8);
- 3) Jacob prayed to God for deliverance from Esau, his brother (32:9-12);
- 4) Jacob made preparations to meet Esau (32:13-23);
- 5) Jacob wrestled with an unknown man (32:24-32);
- 6) Jacob met Esau (33:1-15);
- 7) Jacob and Esau parted company (32:16-20).

##### STUDY THE WORD

#### The Angels of God Meet Jacob

On his return journey from Padan-aram to Canaan, *the angels of God* met Jacob (32:1). No other details are given about this meeting. It must have reminded Jacob of the dream which he had when he fled to

Padan-aram. In his dream, he saw *the angels of God ascending and descending* on a ladder stretching between heaven and earth. He named the place Bethel. Then he was uncertain of what lay ahead. And now he faced another problem – Esau, who had vowed to kill him for stealing his blessings from Isaac, their father. It was because of this reason that Rebekah sent him away to Laban as a pretext to get a wife. He feared that Esau might still hate him and would kill him. He had not heard from Esau in these past twenty years. His fear was natural and obvious because he had sinned against Esau. Jacob might have wondered whether God would sustain him as He had originally promised at Bethel. Therefore this meeting with the angels of God served to comfort and encourage him. He named the place *Mahanaim*, which means two camps – one camp of the angels of God and alongside it his own camp.

### **Jacob Sends Messengers to Meet Esau**

Burdened with a nagging fear of Esau, Jacob sent messengers ahead of his entourage to meet his brother Esau in the land of Seir or another

name, Edom, where Esau settled. It was a desire to make peace with his brother. Jacob specifically instructed his messengers to address Esau as *lord* or “master” (Hebrew, *adonai*), and to describe him as *thy servant Jacob* (32:4). These self-effacing terms were an attempt to tone down the blessing, which Jacob had received from Isaac their father, who had made him lord over his brother (27:29). It was also a confession of repentance for stealing Esau’s first-born birthright. His mention of the animals which he had and his servants was a hint that he was willing to make generous reparations. Observe at this time that he omitted mentioning camels, which were valuable and expensive then. Jacob hoped that Esau would be gracious and forgiving towards him (32:5). This was a different Jacob throwing himself at the mercy and grace of Esau.

The messengers returned and reported that Esau was already on his way to meet him with four hundred men (32:6). News must have spread like wild fire. Esau must have heard that his brother Jacob was returning to the land. When Jacob’s messengers met him, he did not give the messengers any message for

Jacob. Jacob was terrified and worried. His immediate thought must have been that Esau was coming to kill him. He quickly divided his entourage into two groups. This was an attempt to reduce the loss. If Esau smote the first group, the second group would have time to make an escape. Although his action might be described as “justifiable prudence,” it was on a lower level. God had promised that He would be with him. God had promised to multiply his seed. God had clearly directed him to return to the land of his fathers and kindred. God had encouraged him through the meeting with His angels. But Jacob, true to his character, prepared to face the threat using his own plans.

### **Jacob Prays to God for Deliverance from Esau**

However, Jacob did right by turning to God. His prayer can serve as a teaching model for us. His call to God as the God of Abraham and of Isaac was not mere formality. It denoted the true God who had in the past blessed and protected Abraham and Isaac, who had both prospered and lived to a ripe old age. Although the situation was urgent, he took time

to address God appropriately and not flippantly.

He then addressed God as the LORD, the personal name of God, the One, who keeps His Covenant Promises. He recalled that the LORD had commanded him to return to his country and to his kindred, and promised *I will deal well with thee* (32:9). He had obediently done what the LORD had commanded him to do. Jacob now rested on God’s promise to protect and prosper him just as God had protected him from Laban.

Jacob then humbled himself before God. He confessed his unworthiness for all the mercies the LORD had bestowed on him and the truth that He had shown to him. He acknowledged that when he passed Jordan he had only a staff, but now he had become two camps. In other words, all his wealth and family were from God, who had showed His covenanted love and faithfulness to him (32:10).

He then petitioned the LORD to deliver him *from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau* (32:11a). The repetition of the phrase indicates his earnest plea. Jacob openly admitted that he was afraid of Esau, who might smite him and his

wife and children (32:11b). In 32:12, Jacob again claimed God's promise that *I will surely do thee good and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude*. Although gripped by fear and guilt at this point, Jacob totally exercised his faith in God to save him. His prayer was short and straight to the point, but it was Jacob's first longest prayer in the book of Genesis. If there was anything missing in his prayer, it is the failure to ask God what he must do. The following account relates what he had planned.

### **Jacob Makes Preparations to Meet Esau**

Jacob prepared to present Esau with a generous gift. He took 200 female goats and 20 male goats, 200 female lambs and 20 rams, 30 female camels with their young, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys, and 10 male donkeys. The animals numbered all together 550. The gift was fit for a king. Jacob instructed his servants to arrange them by groups. He told the foremost servants what to say to Esau, when they met him, *They be thy servant Jacob's; it is a present sent unto my lord Esau: and, behold, also he is*

*behind us* (32:17, 18). He also instructed the other servants who led the subsequent groups to say the same thing.

Jacob's stratagem was criticised by some as evidence of his lack of faith. Having prayed to God for protection and deliverance, he then resorted to his own plan. Some went to the extent of saying that while he was praying his mind was "undoubtedly continuing to work on plans that might divert his brother's antagonism."<sup>1</sup> Others, who are more kind, approve of the gifts made to Esau and the fact that Jacob exercised human responsibility of being prudent. Prayer does not negate necessary action.<sup>2</sup> Jacob was trying to make amends to his past wrongdoing to Esau. He was making some kind of restitution. He was wise as in Proverbs 25:21-22: *If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the LORD shall reward thee.*

He sent all of them across the river Jabbok *And Jacob was left alone* (32:24). Then suddenly an

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<sup>1</sup> James M. Boice, *Genesis*, volume 2:328.

<sup>2</sup> H.C. Leupold, *Genesis*, volume II:869.

unknown man appeared and wrestled with him.

### Jacob Wrestles with An Unknown Man

Jacob had sent his family ahead of him across the river Jabbok, which flows into the Jordan about 20 miles north of the Dead Sea (32:22-23). He wanted to be alone probably to think through the whole thing. He had, in a way, stripped himself of all his possessions and prestige so as to focus on the problem at hand. But he was not alone. An unknown “Man” wrestled with him until the morning (32:24). When the “Man” saw that he could not prevail over Jacob, he wrenched the joint of his thigh. That made Jacob weak. The “Man” told him to let him go because daybreak was coming. But Jacob would not until he blessed him, realising that the “Man” was stronger than he. Jacob tenaciously held on to the “Man.” The “Man” asked Jacob what his name was, and he answered *Jacob*.

The “Man” changed Jacob’s name to *Israel* and declared that Jacob as a prince had *power with God and with men and prevailed* (32:28). When Jacob asked him for his name, the “Man” did not tell him.

Jacob then named the place *Peniel*, which means the “face of God” (32:30). Many years later, when Jacob recalled this incident, he called the “Man” *The Angel* (Genesis 48:16). The prophet Hosea, referring to this incident, called him God, and also “the angel.”<sup>3</sup> The “Man” is none other than the pre-incarnate Second Person of the Godhead, the LORD Jesus Christ, the God-Man. This pre-incarnate appearance of Christ in human form before his birth in Bethlehem is theologically referred to as “Christophany”.

In order to win over Jacob, the “Man” dislocated Jacob’s thigh. But Jacob held on and would not let go until the “Man” blessed him. The “Man” then changed his name to “Israel,” which means “striving with God.” Jacob commemorated his night of struggling with God by naming that place Peniel as Jacob put it, *for I have seen God face to face* (32:30). He left the place the next morning. From then on, the children of Israel do not eat the sinew (a tendon). This custom is still practised today. Jews today avoid

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<sup>3</sup> Hosea 12:3 *He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and by his strength he had power with God: 4 Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him in Bethel, and there he spake with us;*

eating the interior cord and nerve of the hind quarter of animals.<sup>4</sup>

The blessing that Jacob received from the “Man” was the change of his name. What is in a name? A name change means a change of life and status.<sup>5</sup> For Jacob, the name was a tremendous blessing. He had prayed for deliverance from Esau. His prayer was answered. God had come to him as close as it was possible and in that sense he had seen God face to face. Jacob was a changed man from this point onwards. Now crippled in his natural strength, Jacob became bold in faith. The spiritual lesson is that we must not do anything in our own strength and wisdom. The just shall live by faith. If we have faith even as little as a mustard seed, we can move mountains. Without faith we cannot please or approach God. How then can God be on our side?

### Jacob Meets Esau

The moment of truth had come. Jacob looked up and saw Esau

coming with four hundred men (33:1). Jacob had divided his family. He placed the handmaids and their children first, then Leah and her children, and lastly Rachel and Joseph (33:2). He placed the ones he loved most last. Then Jacob went on ahead of them. He was no coward and assumed his position as head of the house. He bowed himself seven times as he approached Esau. On seeing him, Esau ran to meet him and embrace him. He fell on Jacob’s neck, kissed him, and both of them wept! Esau asked two questions: *Who are those with thee?* (33:5), and *What meanest thou by all this drove which I met?* (33:8). When Jacob explained that the animals were gifts, Esau replied that he had enough of his own (33:9). However, Jacob successfully persuaded Esau to accept them because God had been kind to him and blessed him and that he too had enough for his family. He told Esau that in meeting him, as though he had seen the face of God for the latter had been pleased with him (33:10, 11).

Esau then suggested that they carried on the journey together. But Jacob parried the suggestion by giving the excuse that his children and the young of the flocks could not

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<sup>4</sup> John J. Davis, p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Kings 23:34 *And Pharaohnechoh made Eliakim the son of Josiah king in the room of Josiah his father, and turned his name to Jehoiakim, and took Jehoahaz away: and he came to Egypt, and died there.*

2 Kings 24:17 *And the king of Babylon made Mattaniah his father's brother king in his stead, and changed his name to Zedekiah.*

catch up with the pace. Jacob further added that he would carry on slowly with his family and all his cattle until he reached Esau in Seir (33:13, 14). Esau offered to leave some of his men with Jacob but Jacob replied that there was no need for that.

### Jacob and Esau Part Company

Esau then went on ahead and returned to Seir. Jacob instead journeyed to Succoth, where he stayed for a while. Then he crossed the Jordan River and proceeded to Shechem. In Shechem he bought a piece of land from Hamor and pitched his tents. He also built an altar and called it “God-the God of Israel” (33:20). Jacob’s settling in Shechem was not right because he should continue to Bethel where he first met the LORD God, and where he promised to return to. Bethel was farther south of Shechem. This partial obedience would turn out to be very costly for him as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

#### *PRACTICAL VALUE*

The central theme of this episode is the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. Jacob’s conduct gets two different interpretations. One view is that Jacob acted wisely in

sending the gifts to Esau. Jacob was seen as the one seeking forgiveness and confessing his guilt, although this is not shown in the text. The other view is that Jacob was still using his own strength to protect himself and his family as seen by the division of his family, the bowing, and the giving of gifts.

Let us weigh the two views. Jacob arranged his family in “climactic order”—the most beautiful and the best loved were placed last. As for himself he went before them and met Esau, putting himself in grave danger, which showed his courage. His bowing to the ground seven times (such bowing was accorded only to kings) indicated his deep respect for his brother. It was not an indication that Esau was to rule over him. So there is no reason to doubt his sincerity and courage.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the promises of God do not negate the responsibility of man to help himself. God’s sovereignty does not dispense with human responsibility.

The second interpretation views that Jacob’s division and arrangement of his family showed his continued attitude of favouritism. He

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<sup>6</sup> Leupold, 886.

was willing to sacrifice the less loved ones.

Bowing seven times sought to remove from Esau's thinking that he had come back to be lord over him. It was God's purpose and plan that he was chosen and not Esau. Jacob knew that. So he was not acting in accordance with the revealed will of God. He could assume his God-given lordship over his people, and yet be humble and showed a deep respect for his brother. But bowing seven times to the ground, like a servant, is not the way one meets a brother after a long separation. He was still gripped by fear and guilt. This act of his was not God honouring. In contrast Esau's greeting of his long lost brother was most natural, warm, and sincere.

Next Jacob was not sincere when he told Esau that he would follow his brother to Seir, but at his own pace (33:13). Instead of going to Seir, which was south of where they met, Jacob proceeded west to Succoth. Then he crossed the river Jordan and went to Shechem. Jacob still could not speak openly and honestly.

There are merits in both interpretations. This writer believes that Jacob had changed after his experience with God at Peniel. And

as with every person, who has a personal saving encounter with Christ, he becomes a "new creature." But change does not come instantly. Change comes gradually. Our sinful habits and ways take time to change. It is a process, but change will take effect, if one truly believes. Jacob truly believed and as we see later, he did change. One should not be too harsh but be more objective in assessing Jacob's character and conduct.

A bad conscience has a way of misinterpreting another person's good or evil intentions. Jacob had a bad conscience and he misinterpreted Esau's intention in coming to meet him with four hundred of his soldiers. The way to overcome this bad conscience is to confess sin and renounce our wrongful behaviour.

We should not cover our sins but to confess them. *He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy* (Proverbs 28:13). And in everything let us do it to glorify God. AMEN