

Chapter 11: The Sacrifice of Jacob

Genesis 32:1–21

When Laban heads back to his home (Gen. 31:55), Jacob escapes the frying pan only to head into the fire. Coming back into the land of Canaan, Jacob must now face up to lingering conflicts and festering wounds that have remained unaddressed for the past twenty years. God has sent Jacob back not only to Jacob's country, but also to his *kindred* (Gen. 31:3; 32:9), which will require Jacob to reconcile with his estranged brother, Esau. Now, in many ways Jacob returns to the land of Canaan from a position of strength, since he possesses the birthright and the blessing. By this point, Esau has confirmed Jacob's sole claim to the land of Canaan by moving away and settling in the land of Seir, in the country of Edom (Gen. 32:3). Jacob, then, has three difficult choices before him: (1) to ignore Esau, allowing the rift between the two brothers to grow larger; (2) to make a power play, asserting his own strength and rightful claims to Canaan against Esau; or (3) to humble himself by seeking reconciliation with Esau—even if this attempt finally gives Esau the opportunity to murder Jacob (Gen. 27:41).

Jacob, then, must choose between the strength of his birthright and blessing, and the value of his potential reconciliation with his estranged brother. Is reconciliation valuable enough to make himself vulnerable and weak, risking not only his own life, but the lives of his wives and children (Gen. 32:11–12)? Why, though, does God command Jacob to return *now*, rather than after Esau's death? What is God seeking by sending Jacob into the valley of the shadow of death? How will Jacob process the agonized anxiety over the approach of Esau's army (Gen. 32:6)? In this moment of Jacob's deepest anguish, we see that *God sustains our faltering faith when we are in the shadow of death*.

Sending Us Into the Shadow of Death (Gen. 32:1–8)

After Laban departs from Jacob (Gen. 31:55), Jacob continues on his way back toward the Promised Land:

[1] Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. [2] And when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called the name of that place Mahanaim. (Gen. 32:1–2)

Of course, Laban is not Jacob's only enemy. Laban is not even Jacob's oldest enemy. As much of a blessing as it is for God to deliver Jacob from the hands of Laban, Jacob now faces a much deadlier enemy in his own brother. Jacob, therefore, "proceeds with trepidation, as one who goes to the slaughter." Over this entire passage hangs the shadow of death as Esau approaches, since Jacob has every reason to believe that Esau will try to kill him.

The Angels of God

In the midst of Jacob’s great fear, the text holds out reasons for hope. The very first words in this passage, “Jacob went on his way” (Gen. 32:1), do not sound on the surface like much more than a description of Jacob’s continuing his journey. The words “go/went” and “way,” however, only appear together in the story of Jacob one other time, in Jacob’s prayer to God at Bethel: “If God will be with me and will keep me in this *way* that *I go*...” (Gen. 28:20).² The next phrase, “and the angels of God met [פָּגַע; *pāgaʿ*] him” (Gen. 32:1), also connects back with the scene at Bethel, where Jacob “came [פָּגַע; *pāgaʿ*] to a certain place” (Gen. 28:11) and saw a ladder on which the “angels of God” descended and ascended (Gen. 28:12).³ The text does not explicitly tell us whether these angels are friendly or threatening, but Jacob reacts by declaring, “This is God’s camp!” (Gen. 32:2). In this, he speaks almost identically to the words he declared after his vision at Bethel, “How awesome is this place! *This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven*” (Gen. 28:17).⁴ Then, just as Jacob earlier “called the name of that place Bethel” (Gen. 28:19), now Jacob calls “the name of that place Mahanaim” (Gen. 32:2).⁵ Clearly, the text portrays the visitation of these angels in the same terms as the earlier visitation of angels. Just as God sent angels on Jacob’s way out of Canaan, the Lord now sends an army of his “celestial troops” upon Jacob’s return to Canaan.⁶ At Bethel, God promised to bring Jacob safely back into the land (Gen. 28:15), and now God is demonstrating that he intends to fulfill his promises.

The Camp of God

What, then, is the meaning of “God’s Camp”? The word *Mahanaim* (מַחֲנַיִם; *maḥānayim*) means “a pair of camps.” The Hebrew language has a way of communicating not only whether a noun is singular (“camp”) or plural (“camps”), but also a way of communicating that there are precisely *two* (or, “a pair”) of something, as here. This dual ending (*-ayim*) is common for place names such as Jerusalem (יְרוּשָׁלַיִם; *yeruśalayim*) and Egypt (מִצְרַיִם; *miṣrayim*). In those cases, the duality is figurative and does not necessarily suggest that there are two cities or two nations. With Mahanaim, though, the dual meaning of these *pair of camps* seems to be literal—there are, in some sense, *two* camps. What, then, are those two camps? To answer this question, the parallel scene at Bethel is again helpful. There, despite the fact that Jacob felt alone, God promised that he would be *with* Jacob, and he demonstrated his promise by opening Jacob’s eyes to the angelic host surrounding him (Gen. 28:10–15). Here, Jacob recognizes that his own *camp* is not alone, for another camp surrounds and protects him: the encampment of the angels of God.⁷ By *camp*, we do not mean that God has gone on a *camping* trip. Rather, this is the “base of operations” for God’s angelic armies as they prepare to fight for God’s chosen people.⁸ This is a clear example of Psalm 34:7: “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”⁹

Finding Favor with Esau

With the armies of God’s *angels/messengers* (מַלְאָכִים; *mal’ākīm*) patrolling the area (Gen. 32:1), Jacob gains enough confidence to send his own *messengers* (מַלְאָכִים; *mal’ākīm*) to Esau:¹⁰

[3] And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, [4] instructing them, “Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant

Jacob, ‘I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. [5] I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.’” (Gen. 32:3–5)

The location of Esau is a play on words: “in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.” When Esau was first born, Genesis 25:25 told us that he was *red* (אֶדְמוֹנִי; *’admōnī*) and *hairy* (שֵׁעָר; *šē’ār*). Now, the red, hairy man lives in the land of Seir (שֵׁעִיר; *šē’ir*), the country of Edom (אֶדוֹם; *’ēdôm*).¹¹ Also, the word for “country [שָׂדֵה; *šādeh*] of Edom” reminds us of another initial description of Esau: “Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of *the field* [שָׂדֵה; *šādeh*]” (Gen. 25:27).¹² Additionally, the fact that Esau has moved away from Canaan to Edom confirms that Esau has no claim on the land of Canaan, since Jacob has taken both the birthright and the blessing (cf. Gen. 36:6–8; 37:1).¹³ The last time these terms and themes appeared, Jacob and Esau were headed for all-out war, so now we “wonder in concern if another conflict will be growing between the now fore-warned, rough, hairy Red-beard and the smooth Heel-catcher.”¹⁴

Seeing God’s angels may have given Jacob the confidence to initiate a dialogue with Esau, but he does not approach his brother with the reckless, naive arrogance of his youth after seeing God’s angels at Bethel (cf. Gen. 29:1–30). First, Jacob instructs his messengers to treat Esau as Jacob’s “lord,” giving Esau a message from Esau’s “servant Jacob” (Gen. 32:4). This is a stunning reversal from the blessing that Isaac gave to Jacob.¹⁵ According to Isaac’s blessing, Jacob will be served by peoples and nations, but Isaac also declares that Jacob will be “lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you” (Gen. 27:29). Then, when Esau pleaded for a blessing, Isaac reinforced this message, telling Esau, “you shall serve your brother” (Gen. 27:40). Jacob possesses the blessing of pre-eminence over Esau, and yet he humbles himself as a servant, treating Esau as his lord.

Second, John Walton demonstrates that each of Jacob’s three statements to Esau attempt to de-escalate Esau’s hostility toward him.¹⁶ By claiming to have sojourned with Laban until now (Gen. 32:4), Jacob implies, “I have not been hiding, avoiding you, or sneaking around behind your back.” Then, by mentioning his great wealth of livestock and servants, Jacob implies, “I am not coming to try to take anything from you. I have plenty. I am not going to try to trick you out of anything or lay claim to anything that you have acquired.” Finally, by saying that he hopes to find favor in Esau’s sight, Jacob is asking, “Why don’t we let bygones be bygones; forget the past and start over?” Jacob’s first desire is for reconciliation and peace.

This last request for *favor/grace* (חֵן; *hēn*) is critical to this passage. This word, along with the verb *to show favor/be gracious* (חָנַן; *hānan*), will appear several times in the next chapter during the reunion of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 33:5, 8, 10, 11, 15).¹⁷ Much earlier, we read that Noah *found favor* in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8); however, Noah’s favor was “an accomplished fact. For Jacob it is an objective.”¹⁸ The key issue in this narrative will be *whether* favor/grace is possible for Jacob and *how* Jacob can actually obtain this favor/grace. These messengers represent Jacob’s first attempt to seek peace, but Jacob’s peace with Esau will require much more, as we will see.

The Approach of Esau

The narrative cuts straight to the response of Esau, delivered through the returning messengers:

[6] And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is

coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.” [7] Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, [8] thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.” (Gen. 32:6–8)

Esau responds to Jacob not by sending his own messengers, but by coming personally with four hundred men to meet Jacob. The phrase “he is coming to meet you” can sometimes signal approaching danger (cf. 1 Kgs. 20:27; 2 Kgs. 23:29), but the phrase can also describe the approach of someone who represents no threat at all (cf. Gen. 24:65).¹⁹ In this case, Jacob knows that Esau formerly intended to murder him, and now he sees his brother coming with four hundred men without giving any word to explain his purposes. These actions seem dangerous, so Jacob becomes “greatly afraid and distressed” (Gen. 32:7), and he responds by planning (Gen. 32:6–8) and praying (Gen. 32:9–12).²⁰

Specifically, Jacob divides his own camp into “two camps” (Gen. 32:7).²¹ Earlier, Jacob rejoiced that his own camp was protected by God’s camp, creating a “pair of camps” (Mahanaim; Gen. 32:2). This time, Jacob actually divides his own camp into two camps as a strategy for avoiding total annihilation if Esau’s intentions are indeed harmful. This division of camps does not express Jacob’s confidence in God’s protection, as earlier, but Jacob’s growing fear, regardless of the angelic encampment that surrounds him for his protection. Sadly, this division echoes of Jacob’s earlier way of living, when the family of his childhood was divided into two camps: that of Isaac and Esau, and that of Rebekah and Jacob (Gen. 25:28).²²

The Faith of Jacob

How should we judge Jacob’s actions in this section? On the one hand, we see that Jacob’s sanctification is not finished. Jacob’s faith quickly turns to fear, and his actions to divide his family betray the frantic concerns of his heart. On the other hand, he rejoices when he recognizes God’s clear promise of provision (Gen. 32:1–2). On the basis of that confidence, he acts to seek reconciliation with his brother Esau (Gen. 32:3–5). Jacob goes literally out of his way to send for his brother from the distant country where Esau now lives, as Derek Kidner points out:

In Jacob’s pilgrimage, the way to the heights now led through a valley of humiliation which he made no attempt to skirt. Geographically, the call to Beth-el would take him nowhere near Esau, ensconced in the far south at Mount Seir; spiritually, he could reach Beth-el no other way. God had promised him the land (28:13, 14), and its borders must march one day with Esau’s; besides, to meet God he must ‘first be reconciled’ with his brother. The sequence of chapters 32, 33, culminating in 35:1–15, acts out powerfully the principles of Matthew 5:23–25a.²³

From this perspective, we can see clear growth in Jacob’s faith. He does what is right, even though seeking reconciliation with his estranged brother is difficult, and perhaps even deadly. There is no question that Jacob has grown spiritually since his last encounter with his brother twenty years ago. In the next section, where Jacob pleads with God for his deliverance, we will see yet one more step forward Jacob takes in his faith.

Sent Into the Shadow of Death

Before we consider Jacob’s prayer, however, we should notice God’s active role in sending Jacob into the shadow of death. God regularly calls us to go into places where we must die to ourselves—especially by seeking reconciliation with those who have something against us, as Esau had against Jacob. God recognizes our weaknesses in these situations, so he promises to send his angels to encamp around us, to deliver us (Ps. 34:7). More precious, however, is the promise that God himself will strengthen us by his own presence in the valley of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4).

Why, though, must God send us into death? In fact, God sends us into death so that we will live. Difficult trials and circumstances—and even death itself—do not represent our greatest problems and deepest needs. Rather, the greatest threat to our eternal good lies in our sinful self-reliance. What the shadow of death accomplishes that prosperity, ease, and comfort cannot is to convince us of our frailty, weakness, and mortality. Only when we despair of the limitations of our strength will we trust God in the ways that are necessary for abundant, joyful living in this world and the next.

Sustaining Us Within the Shadow of Death (Gen. 32:9–12)

In this case, the shadow of death forces Jacob to do something unprecedented in his own life: the fear of Esau leads Jacob to pray with fearful faith and fervor:

[9] And 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 kindred, that I may do you good,’ [10] I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. [11] Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. [12] But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’” (Gen. 32:9–12)

When Jacob addresses God, he echoes the language that God himself used at Bethel: “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac” (Gen. 28:13). It is rare in the Bible for humans to address God with such lengthy titles (cf. Gen. 28:10), but Jacob is purposefully calling to mind the Lord’s promises at Bethel.²⁴ It was the Lord who promised to *cause Jacob to return* (שׁוּב; *śûb*; ESV: “bring you back”; Gen. 28:15), and it was the Lord who commanded Jacob to *return* to his country and his kindred (שׁוּב; *śûb*; Gen. 31:3, 13).²⁵ The Lord did not use the words “that I may do you good” (Gen. 32:9), but Jacob is paraphrasing the meaning of God’s promise to be “with” Jacob (Gen. 28:15; 31:3).²⁶ By these appeals, Jacob grounds his prayers in the covenant God made with his forefathers, and with the specific promises and commands that God made to him.²⁷

The Unworthiness of Jacob

Importantly, Jacob is not complaining or somehow charging God with wrongdoing. This becomes clear in Genesis 32:10, when Jacob acknowledges the great grace that God has shown him, in spite of the fact that Jacob is entirely unworthy of receiving it: “I am not worthy of the least of all

the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.” This word “not worthy” (יָטוֹן; *qāṭōn*) literally means *little/small/insignificant*. Importantly, this word appeared earlier to describe Jacob as the *younger* son of Rebekah (Gen. 27:15, 42).²⁸ Once again, we see a dramatic change in Jacob in comparison to where he was twenty years ago:

Humbled by agonizing fear of death Jacob looks to God for help and advice for the first time. He who used to arrange his affairs himself so efficiently, preferably at the cost of his fellowmen, is now, for the first time, willing to be little, *qāṭōn*, thus not the first man. He used to be the “little” (*qāṭōn*, younger) son who could not wait to surpass the “big son” to become the self-made first-born. Now at last he wants really to be little, for now he admits: *qāṭontī* [“I am not worthy”].²⁹

Unworthy though he is, Jacob recognizes that he left Canaan with nothing but a staff, and he now returns as two full camps. Jacob is unworthy, but God has blessed him exceedingly so far! Jacob models humility in prayer by anticipating the objection that Satan will bring against us: “Who are you that you should enter the presence of God in prayer?”³⁰ Jacob teaches us the correct answer: we are unworthy! We come before God in prayer not on the basis of our own worthiness, but on the basis of Christ’s worthiness as we pray in his name. It is because of Christ that God demonstrates “steadfast love” (in Hebrew, plural: “steadfast *loves*”) and “faithfulness” toward us (Gen. 32:10). It is only because of God’s covenant loyalty to his people that he treats us according to his steadfast loves and faithfulness.

Rather than complaining, then, Jacob is pleading God’s grace and mercy. The logic of his argument runs like this: God, (1) if you have promised to protect me, and (2) if you have extended me great grace thus far, then (3) please deliver me from Esau now. Jacob acknowledges not only that he fears Esau, but that he also fears for the sake of his new family: “the mothers with the children” (Gen. 32:11).³¹ Finally, he closes with one last appeal to God’s promise of doing Jacob good, and multiplying his offspring as the sand of the sea (Gen. 32:12; cf. Gen. 28:14). Once again, Jacob is not claiming that he deserves anything from God. Instead, he is appealing to God’s grace as revealed in God’s promises. John Calvin writes strong words about this passage: “This is a holy boldness, when, having discharged our duty according to God’s calling, we familiarly ask of him whatsoever he has promised; since he, by binding himself gratuitously to us, becomes in a sense voluntarily our debtor.”³² God voluntarily makes himself our debtor by binding himself to his promises!

The Gethsemane of Jacob

At this point, we need to step back from the story to see the broader picture in this narrative. In this story, Jacob does not consider his status as the rightful possessor of the birthright and the blessing—the *lord* over Esau (Gen. 27:29)—something to be grasped. Instead, Jacob empties himself to make himself insignificant (*qāṭōn*; Gen. 32:10) by taking the form of a servant (Gen. 32:4), and he humbles himself by obediently seeking reconciliation with his brother, even to the point of death (cf. Phil. 2:6–8). As Jacob approaches the climactic moment where he may die, he prays in great anguish and distress (Gen. 32:7) with angels appearing to strengthen him for the task at hand (Gen. 32:1–2; cf. Luke 22:43–44). Furthermore, Jacob sacrifices himself in this way in order to bring the people of

God into the inheritance of God.³³ Jacob does not even pray for himself alone, but, as though he were a high priest, Jacob prays on behalf of those God has given him out of the world (Gen. 32:11–12; cf. John 17:6–26). This moment is the Gethsemane of Jacob, where his actions foreshadow the greater sacrifice of his most illustrious descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is in this moment of our greatest weakness that we discover the power of God. When Paul pleaded for God to deliver him from his thorn in the flesh, the Lord Jesus promised him instead that “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). This was a reality that Jesus himself knew experientially, for Christ’s own power was perfected in the moment of his greatest weakness at the cross. There, the Lord Jesus overturned the powers of the kingdoms of this world by manifesting the power of God unto salvation as he hung naked on the cross, bleeding out slowly in agony before a malicious, taunting world. While you and I do not replicate Christ’s single, once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, Jesus does call us to imitate him by taking up our cross to follow him (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27). When we are weak, we find the infinite value of God’s saving power through Christ. God sustains our faith within the shadow of death.

Saving Us By the Shadow of Death (Gen. 32:13–21)

While Jacob’s actions foreshadow the suffering, humiliation, and death of Christ in several significant ways, Jacob’s actions also fall short of Christ’s passion in three ways:

[13] So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, [14] two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, [15] thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. [16] These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, “Pass on ahead of me and put a space between drove and drove.” [17] He instructed the first, “When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, ‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?’ [18] then you shall say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.’” [19] He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, “You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him, [20] and you shall say, ‘Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.’” For he thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me.” [21] So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp. (Gen. 32:13–21)

Now, before we examine the ways that Jacob’s actions depart from Christ’s sacrifice, we should observe one more parallel in this last section of the passage: *darkness*. This section opens and closes during the night (Gen. 32:13, 21): “Darkness surrounds Jacob!”³⁴ To an even greater degree than what Jacob experienced, our Lord endured darkness during the night of his betrayal, and then, even during the day of his crucifixion, a great darkness covered the land (Matt. 27:45).

Jacob Shields Himself

The first way in which Jacob’s sacrifice falls short of Christ’s is in the way that Jacob shields

himself from Esau. He prepares an extraordinary gift of goats, ewes, rams, camels, cattle, and donkeys (Gen. 32:13–15). Rather than sending the gift to Esau all at once, Jacob separates each drove of animals under the charge of a different set of servants, and he instructs those servants to approach Esau one at a time (Gen. 32:16). When Esau asks them who they are and where they are going, Jacob tells them to inform Esau that their droves belong to Esau’s “servant” Jacob as a present for Jacob’s “lord” Esau, and that Jacob is coming behind them (Gen. 32:18–20). Certainly, Jacob has a clear strategy behind this arrangement. If Esau plans an ambush, he will exhaust himself by executing the ambush multiple times before Jacob arrives, and Esau will be encumbered by all the new droves and servants who will join him along the way.³⁵

Where Jesus negotiated himself in exchange for the free release of his disciples at his crucifixion (John 18:7–9), Jacob shields himself by sending all of his servants ahead of him. This is the first time that he allows *anyone* to “pass on ahead of him” (Gen. 32:21), but they pass ahead of Jacob not for their own benefit, but for Jacob’s.³⁶ In this way, the glory of Christ’s sacrifice shines all the brighter in contrast with Jacob’s self-centered sacrifice of his servants as human shields.

Jacob Seeks to Purchase Favor

Second, Jacob sends a “present” (Gen. 32:13, 18, 21) to solicit the favor of Esau. The word for present (מִנְחָה; *minḥah*) is very similar with another important word in this passage, “camp” (מַחֲנֶה; *maḥāneh*; Gen. 32:2, 7, 8, 10, 21); both words appear together in Genesis 32:21.³⁷ That is, Jacob sends the *present* in order to avoid war between his *camp* and Esau’s *camp*. Jacob makes his intentions explicit in Genesis 32:20–21, where he repeats the word *face* five times in a way that is difficult to bring out in a literal English translation:³⁸ “And you shall say also, ‘Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us,’ for he said to himself, ‘Perhaps I may cover *his face* with the present that goes *before my face*, and afterward thus I will see *his face*; perhaps he will lift up my *my face*. And the present passed over before *his face*...’” (Gen. 32:20–21; my translation). This elaborate repetition of *face* depends upon an understanding of a person’s *face* as the expression of a person’s favor (cf. Gen. 31:2; Num. 6:25). Essentially, Jacob is hoping that his present will purchase Esau’s favor. By offering a sacrifice, Jacob seeks to appease Esau’s wrath. As Victor Hamilton quips, “Jacob will do everything except ‘face up’ to Esau.”³⁹ In fact, Jacob uses explicit sacrificial language: “present” is the word for “grain offering” (cf. Lev. 2:1–14), and “cover/appease” (Gen. 32:20) is the Hebrew word for “atone.”⁴⁰ If Jacob’s present cannot cause Esau to lift Jacob’s face, the consequences will be severe, for the last brother whose *face* needed to be “lifted” was Cain (Gen. 4:7)—right before Cain murdered his brother, Abel.⁴¹ Will Esau lift Jacob’s face, or will Esau follow in the footsteps of Cain to kill his brother?

Notably, though, Jacob does not here ask for *favor/grace* as he did when he first sent messengers to Esau (cf. Gen. 32:5). The word *present* (מִנְחָה; *minḥah*) includes the two consonants of *favor/grace* (חַן; *ḥēn*), and it seems that Jacob begins to substitute the one for the other: “deep in his heart he does not want to live on mercy, he wants to buy off a conflict with property—for he can afford it.”⁴² That is, if he can send the *minḥah*, he does not need to grovel for *ḥēn*. Fundamentally, this is a pagan approach to reconciliation, as Derek Kidner points out:

Jacob’s sacrificial terms unconsciously illustrate the gulf between man’s thinking and God’s. The pagan approaches his deity as Jacob now approached Esau (cf. 33:10), reckoning that ‘a

man's gift maketh room for him' (Prov. 18:16). But in the Old Testament, a man's gift is first God's gift to him, before ever it is his to God (Lev. 17:11). As Jacob would soon discover, grace, not negotiation, is the only solvent of guilt.⁴³

In great contrast, when our Lord Jesus went to the cross, it was not to buy off God for some sin that Jesus committed. Rather, Jesus willingly endured and exhausted the full extent of his Father's wrath *against us*. Jesus *faced up* to the Father on our behalf, even as the Father turned his *face away* from Jesus. Jesus did this on the basis of loving obedience to his Father, and for the sake of the grace that he wanted to extend to us. Jacob is banking on his ability to *spend* his way out of trouble, while Jesus was willing to *be spent* in order to save us.

Jacob Doesn't Die

Third, Jacob will not actually die from this encounter. When Esau finally arrives, the two will be reconciled in joy and peace (Gen. 33:1–11). Esau's change of heart will not happen because of the success of Jacob's present, but because of the *grace* of God that Jacob forgets to seek toward the end of this passage.⁴⁴ Jacob approaches death, but he does not actually die. Just as God led Abraham to the brink of sacrificing Isaac before providing a substitute, so God leads Jacob to the brink of sacrificing himself before changing Esau's heart toward forgiving Jacob. By contrast, where God leads Isaac and Jacob to the brink of sacrifice only to pull them to safety, God turns away his face from his only begotten Son in order to pull *us* back from the brink of eternal condemnation in hell.

The Glory of the Cross

Thus we see the similarity, and the shortfall, of Jacob's humiliation and sacrifice. In some ways, Jacob faithfully represents the sacrifice that his greatest offspring will eventually offer; in other ways, Jacob falls so far short as to demonstrate his own need of that sacrifice. What Jacob cannot fully achieve, our Lord Jesus willingly takes upon himself for us and for our salvation.

In this way, we see not only that God saves us *in spite* of the shadow of death. More than that, God saves us *by* the shadow of death—the shadow of death that the Son of God entered into for us. Jesus is now crowned with power and glory not because he charted a path *around* death, but by tasting death on our behalf (Heb. 2:9). This is the glory of the shameful, wretched cross, for by it, Jesus Christ overturned the power structures of this world, decisively proved the paradoxical power of God, and purchased a people for himself. We are never more glorious than when we follow in the footsteps of Christ into the shadow of death, despairing of our own strength and trusting in his.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does God require Jacob to reconcile with Esau by sending Jacob to his country *and* his kindred (Gen. 32:9)? Why does God send *us* into the shadow of death? How does God promise to strengthen us as we go into the shadow of death? What obedience has God required of you when he has sent you into the shadow of death? How has that refined your faith?
2. Consider Jacob's prayer (Gen. 32:9–12). Jacob appeals to the covenant promises that God made to his forefathers. To which covenant promises can you appeal? How has God demonstrated his

steadfast loves and kindness toward you, in spite of your unworthiness (Gen. 32:10)? How should we pray for the broader people of God as we pray for ourselves (Gen. 32:11–12)?

3. In this passage, in how many ways does Jacob resemble Christ in Gethsemane? How do these similarities help us to interpret Jacob's greatest moment of weakness as his greatest moment of glory? What does it mean when God promises that his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9)? How was this true at the cross? How does this change how you see your own life?

4. In what ways do Jacob's actions in this passage fall short of Christ's sacrifice on the cross? In what ways is Christ's sacrifice unrepeatable in any sense? In what ways does Christ call us to follow in the footsteps of his sacrifice? How does following in the footsteps of Christ put the world's power structures to shame? How is God's glory displayed in our weakness?

Notes

1. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 185. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
2. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 197.
3. Mathews notes that the expression “angels of God” (rather than “*the* angels of God”) “appears only in 28:12 and 32:1[2] in the whole of the Old Testament. In Jacob's departure from Canaan and in his return, the angels of God appeared to him, suggesting their accompaniment of the patriarch during the entirety of his travels.” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 547.)
4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 317.
5. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 547.
6. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 185–86. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
7. Kidner, *Genesis*, 178–79.
8. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 541.
9. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 185. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
10. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 320.
11. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 199–200.
12. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 320.
13. “For although he departed voluntarily, yet, by the secret counsel of God was he deprived of that land which he had earnestly desired.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 187. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>)
14. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 200.
15. “Note the very deferential language used by Jacob in addressing Esau: ‘my lord...your servant.’ Even oriental courtesy would not lead to such extravagant humility toward a twin brother. Jacob's opening words thus hint at his fearfulness and guilty conscience, or at least constitute an attempt to reverse the relationship in which Esau would be Jacob's servant (25:23; 27:40).” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 290.)
16. Each of these implications are quoted from Walton, *Genesis*, 603–04.
17. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 290.
18. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 321.
19. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 322.
20. Kidner, *Genesis*, 179.
21. The earlier term is the dual form מַחֲנֵיִם. This phrase is literally “into two camps”: לְשֵׁנֵי מַחֲנֵיִם.

22. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 202.
23. Kidner, *Genesis*, 178.
24. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 291.
25. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 551.
26. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 291.
27. Kidner, *Genesis*, 179.
28. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 323.
29. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 203.
30. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 191–92. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
31. Kidner, *Genesis*, 179.
32. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 191. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
33. “The effect of...Jacob’s meeting with angels on his return to the land is to align the present narrative with the similar picture of the Promised Land in the early chapters of Genesis. The land appears to be guarded at its borders by angels. The same picture was suggested early in Genesis when Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden and ‘cherubim’ (apparently angelic beings) were positioned on the east of the garden to guard the way to the Tree of Life. It can hardly be accidental that as Jacob returned from the east he was met by angels at the border of the Promised Land.” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 197.)
34. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 205.
35. Walton, *Genesis*, 605.
36. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 206.
37. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 292.
38. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 206.
39. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 326.
40. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 292.
41. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 554.
42. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 207.
43. Kidner, *Genesis*, 179.
44. “True to form, Jacob then [after his prayer] made elaborate plans to save himself and his family in the face of Esau’s potential threat. He provided his servants with abundant gifts for Esau and instructed them carefully on how to approach Esau when they met. In it all, his thought was that he would pacify Esau and deliver his family from his hand. A very familiar picture of Jacob emerges in this narrative: Jacob the planner and schemer. As he had taken Esau’s birthright and blessing, as he had taken the best of Laban’s herds, so now he had a plan to gain Esau’s favor. As the narrative unfolds, however, it is not his plan that proves successful but his prayer. When he meets Esau, he finds that Esau has had a change of heart. Running to meet Jacob, Esau embraced and kissed him and wept (33:4). All of Jacob’s plans and schemes have come to naught. In spite of them all, God had prepared Jacob’s way.” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 198.)