

## Chapter 13: The Reconciliation of Jacob

*Genesis 33:1–20*

Relationships are messy. Even under the best of circumstances, trying to navigate the desires and distrust of other people can be one of the most difficult things we do—especially if we are at fault for something that has hurt another person. With all of these challenges, are relationships really worth it? How hard should we work to restore broken relationships, and how important is relational reconciliation? If God has forgiven us through Jesus Christ, then do we really need to seek the forgiveness of human beings?

Our Lord Jesus taught that relational reconciliation is non-negotiable in his kingdom. Jesus went so far as to say that you should leave in the middle of worshipping God to reconcile with your brother if you suddenly remember that he has something against you (Matt. 5:23–24). This does not mean, however, that living at peace with others is merely a hoop to jump through before moving on to what's really important in our relationship with God. Instead, this means that living at peace with others is both the prerequisite *and* the path of a right relationship with God. In the reunion of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33, we see that *God reconciles us to our brothers in order to restore us to himself*.

### Reconciling Us to our Brothers (Gen. 33:1–11)

Jacob has now faced two adversaries in rapid succession: first Laban (Gen. 31:25–55), and then God himself, who appeared as a man (Gen. 32:24–30). Now, after spending an entire evening wrestling one *man*, Jacob lifts up his eyes to see the approach of Esau and his 400 *men* (Gen. 32:24; 33:1):<sup>1</sup>

[1] And Jacob lifted up 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 female servants. [2] And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. [3] He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. (Gen. 33:1–3)

Here, Jacob's transformation to become Israel will be put to its first, major test. Before his direct encounter with God, Jacob made very similar preparations to what he does now. Then, Jacob also *divided* his camp, with the intention of making sure that if Esau attacked one of his camps, the other camp could escape (Gen. 32:7–8; cf. Gen. 33:1). Also, Jacob earlier took the form of a servant with Esau, calling Esau his lord; here, Jacob similarly bows himself seven times before his brother (Gen. 32:4–5, 18, 20; cf. Gen. 33:3). Is Jacob still playing favorites with his family's lives and groveling at Esau's feet to try to buy off his brother's mercy? Did his nighttime encounter with God leave no permanent effect on Jacob, so that he behaves faithlessly, just as before?<sup>2</sup> Has he so quickly lost faith

that God has *delivered* him from his brother Esau (Gen. 32:11, 30)?

### Jacob the Vanguard

In fact, there is one critical clue that something has changed for Jacob, even if not quite yet everything. The previous evening, Jacob sent his servants before him with droves of animals as presents while he himself remained behind (Gen. 32:13–21). His purpose was twofold: (1) to shield himself and his family from the dangers of Esau, and (2) to purchase Esau’s grace toward him. Now, however, Jacob does not cause others to pass before him, but, rather, he himself passes on before all the others “and offers himself as a victim, if necessity demanded it.”<sup>3</sup> This gesture is significant, since it reflects Jacob’s transformation into *Israel*. The name *Jacob* has to do with serving as a rearguard, whether to protect or to exploit someone’s vulnerable backside. The name *Israel*, on the other hand, describes someone who will more directly strive with God and with man (Gen. 32:28)—that is, from the frontside, not the backside. This different approach reflects Jacob’s “radical shift of position—from rearguard to vanguard.”<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Jacob’s actions reshape our understanding of Jacob’s motives in dividing and organizing his family. Jacob is not trying to position his family in order to give his favorite family members the best chance for escape; rather, he is “arranging his family in order of precedence, so that they may be presented to prince Esau in the correct way.”<sup>5</sup> To be sure, Jacob is still displaying his favoritism in a way that will eventually bring him extraordinary pain (cf. Gen. 37); however, Jacob takes the majority of the actual risk upon himself. By faith, Jacob trusts that God has delivered him from Esau. He may take many of the same actions as before, but he approaches this encounter with Esau from a position of cautious confidence, rather than from a position of weak willingness to do anything necessary to survive.

### Taking the Form of a Servant

Why, though, does Jacob bow down seven times before Esau (Gen. 33:3)? Once again, we should remember the blessing oracle that Isaac prophesied to Jacob: “Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you” (Gen. 27:29). According to the blessing, Esau should be bowing down to Jacob, not the other way around! This is all the more surprising when we realize that, in the Bible, the number seven represents a sense of completion. Therefore, bowing down seven times before Esau reflects Jacob’s complete subjection to his brother.<sup>6</sup> This is a greeting fit for high officials (Gen. 23:7, 12; 42:6; 43:26, 28; cf. 37:7, 9, 10), as well as for God and his angels (Gen. 18:2; 19:1; 22:5).<sup>7</sup> Does this mean, however, that Jacob is forfeiting and relinquishing his God-given blessing?<sup>8</sup> Is Jacob trying to undo his blessing, and to turn it to Esau?

Certainly, by calling Esau his servant and bowing down to him, Jacob acts contrary to the terms of his blessing. Nevertheless, in my opinion Kenneth Mathews is correct when he observes that Jacob’s “concession should not be taken as a signal of reversing the blessing...but rather the response of humility. Jacob fully admits that his success derived from God’s grace alone, not by his superiority to Esau or any other (v. 10).”<sup>10</sup> Jacob has done nothing to deserve the blessing, so it only comes from God’s free grace toward Jacob. Furthermore, we must remember that Esau disqualified himself from the blessing by marrying two Hittite women and then an Ishmaelite woman (Gen. 26:34–35; 28:9). God had promised to dispossess the people of the land of Canaan (including the Hittites; cf. Gen. 15:20), and to give the land to the offspring of Abraham and Isaac (but not Ishmael; cf. Gen. 17:20–

21; 21:10–13; 25:5–6). Abraham recognized that for Isaac to marry those whom God promised to dispossess from the land of Canaan would be tantamount to forfeiting the land of Canaan as an inheritance (Gen. 24:2–4). Esau, on the other hand, married three women from peoples who could not inherit the land.

The problem, then, was not *that* Jacob gained the blessing, but *how* he gained the blessing: through deceptively taking the form of his brother Esau to trick Isaac into him the blessing instead. By now taking the form of a servant and calling Esau “lord,” and by bowing down seven times before Esau, Jacob is not giving the blessing back to Esau. Rather, Jacob is merely humbling himself before his brother. By these actions, Jacob is demonstrating that he is not the man he once was, but that he has matured through his suffering in the house of bondage with Laban, and through wrestling directly with God the night before. Esau can immediately see the difference from his brother’s current humility and his brother’s ruthless, entitled arrogance twenty years earlier.<sup>11</sup>

### The Return of the Prodigal Brother

Esau reciprocates his brother’s humble approach, but not with the same formal, ceremonial stuffiness.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Esau runs to reunite with his brother: “But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept” (Gen. 33:4). Esau’s running creates one last moment of tension, since Jacob still does not know his brother’s intentions. After his wrestling match, Jacob can only limp, and is unable to flee from his brother (Gen. 32:31).<sup>13</sup> Instead of harming Jacob, though, Esau greets Jacob as a beloved relative by embracing him, falling on his neck, and kissing Jacob (cf. Gen. 24:17; 29:11–13; 45:14, 15; 46:29; 48:10); however, while *Esau* alone did those things to Jacob, we should then note that *they* wept together (Gen. 33:4).<sup>14</sup> Once Jacob knows that his brother is willing to be reconciled, Jacob is overjoyed and relieved, and he weeps right along with his brother.

We know the story of how Jacob’s heart changed over these last years, but we never learn the story of how Esau’s heart changed. Certainly, we know that God has been at work to bring about this reconciliation.<sup>15</sup> How, though, did this transformation happen, and when? Did Esau quickly turn from his intention to murder Jacob twenty years ago, shortly after Jacob departed for Laban’s house? Or, did Esau’s hard heart soften gradually over time? Or, perhaps, did Esau set out with four hundred men because he *did* intend harm for Jacob, only to be transformed by God on his way like Abimelech’s confrontation of Abraham and Laban’s confrontation of Jacob (Gen. 20:3–7; 31:24)?<sup>16</sup> We simply do not know.

Nevertheless, there are two sets of clues that we should consider. First, the narrative explicitly links Jacob’s encounter with God by the Jabbok with Jacob’s encounter with Esau. Jacob prayed for God to “deliver” him from Esau, and Jacob’s life was “delivered” after wrestling with God (Gen. 32:11, 30). Also, there is a close wordplay between Jacob’s *wrestling* (אָבַק; *’ābaq*) with God and Esau’s *embracing* (חָבַק; *hābaq*) Jacob.<sup>17</sup> Later, Jacob will speak of seeing Esau’s face as being like “seeing the face of God” (Gen. 33:10; cf. Gen. 32:30).<sup>18</sup> From this set of clues, we might think that Jacob’s encounter with God was the decisive event to change the nature of this encounter from revenge to reconciliation.

The second clue comes in the way that Jesus uses the language describing Esau’s reconciliation with Jacob to describe the father’s approach to his prodigal son (Luke 15:20; cf. Gen. 33:4).<sup>19</sup> In that parable, Jesus gives the sense that the father has been waiting and watching for his son for a long

time, since he sees his son “while he was still a long way off” (Luke 15:20). From this clue, we could perhaps argue that Jesus suggests that Esau waited a long time to be reconciled with his brother. It is impossible to know for sure what to make of the little evidence we have. Ultimately, the Genesis narratives only tell us *that* God changed Esau’s heart, without telling us the timeline or the circumstances of that change.

### Jacob’s Children by Grace

Earlier, Jacob “lifted up his eyes and saw” the four hundred men coming with Esau (Gen. 33:1). Now, the narrator uses the same phrase to describe how Esau lifts up his eyes and sees the great number of people with Jacob. Seeing Jacob’s large family prompts Esau’s first question:

[5] And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” [6] Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. [7] Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. (Gen. 33:5–7)

The word “graciously” (חָנַן; *hānan*) is the verb form (lit., “...the children God *graced* to me...”) of the noun “favor” (חֵן; *hēn*) that Jacob sought from Esau (Gen. 32:5). Along with the word “deliver” (Gen. 32:11, 30) and seeing the face of God (Gen. 32:30; 33:10), this word *grace* establishes one more link between the story of God’s kindness toward Jacob and the story of Esau’s forgiveness toward his brother.<sup>20</sup> The noun and verb forms of the word *grace* appear several more times through the rest of this narrative (Gen. 33:8, 10, 11, 15).<sup>21</sup>

At this point, Jacob’s family present themselves and bow down before Esau in reverse order of their standing with Jacob. In this way, not only does Jacob humbles himself against the terms of his blessing, but his whole family with him, so that “Esau is now ‘lord over his brothers’ (i.e., relatives), ‘his mother’s sons bow down before him.’”<sup>22</sup> First, the female servants Bilhah and Zilpah draw near to Esau, with their children, and bow down (Gen. 33:6). Then comes Leah with her children, bowing down (Gen. 33:7a). Last come Joseph and Rachel, bowing down before Esau (Gen. 33:7b). Strikingly, the text places the emphasis on the approach of *Joseph* rather than Rachel, while none of the other children are named. The place of prominence that Jacob gives to Joseph is an early example of the rivalry that Jacob himself stokes between Joseph and Joseph’s brothers (Gen. 37:1–4).<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the fact that the narrator here names only Joseph among Jacob’s children anticipates the fact that Joseph’s brothers will one day bow down to Joseph, just as Esau’s brothers are bowing down to him here (cf. Gen. 37:5–11; 42:6; 43:26, 28).

### Jacob’s Blessing of Wealth

Esau’s second question changes the subject from Jacob’s large family to Jacob’s vast wealth:

[8] Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor in the sight of my lord.” [9] But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” [10] Jacob said, “No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of

God, and you have accepted me. [11] Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.” Thus he urged him, and he took it. (Gen. 33:8–11)

The word that the ESV translates as “company” in Genesis 33:8 (מִחָנֶה; *maḥāneh*) is the same word translated as “camp” in Genesis 32:2, 7–8, 10, 21. In reality, Jacob actually sent a “present” (מִנְחָה; *minḥah*; Gen. 32:13, 18, 20–21; 33:10) in an attempt to buy his brother’s favor/grace (חֵן; *ḥēn*; Gen. 32:5; 33:8).<sup>24</sup> The wordplay between these words underscore their close connection in this passage. Nevertheless, where Jacob called Esau “lord” and referred to himself as Esau’s “servant,” Esau addresses Jacob as “my brother” and urges Jacob to keep his present for himself (Gen. 33:9).<sup>25</sup> Jacob’s response is polite, but insistent. The phrase, “Please, if I have found favor in your sight,” is a common introduction to someone’s urgent, but polite, plea (cf. Gen. 18:3; 30:27; 47:29; 50:4; Ex. 33:13; 34:9; Judg. 6:17; 1 Sam. 27:5).

Why, though, is Jacob eager for Esau to keep the present? Earlier, sent the present ahead of him (1) to atone Esau’s face, so that (2) Esau might lift his face (Gen. 32:20). This was a wrong-headed approach to Esau, since Jacob was seeking to buy Esau’s grace. Now that Jacob has *seen the face of* Esau just as he has *seen the face of God* (Gen. 33:10; cf. Gen. 32:30), Jacob straightens out his sacrificial logic. Instead of insisting that Esau take the present *to gain* the grace of Esau, Jacob insists that Esau take the present *to confirm* the grace that Esau has already extended to Jacob.<sup>26</sup> Gordon Wenham illuminates the sacrificial logic of this passage:

Jacob finally persuades Esau to accept, because as he says, “I have seen your face which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.” The verb “accept” (רָצָה) is an important sacrificial term used to describe God’s receiving of sacrifice (e.g., 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 (e.g., 4:3–5; Lev 2:1, 3–7), as God would.<sup>27</sup>

Jacob’s present does not allow him to see Esau’s face or to find acceptance with him; rather, by receiving Jacob’s present, Esau demonstrates further that Jacob has found favor in his sight.

Jacob takes this one step further when he asks Esau, “Please accept my blessing...” (Gen. 33:11). Jacob cannot divest himself of God’s blessing, and that is not what he is intending to do. Instead, Jacob is seeking to provide a blessing for Esau out of the bountiful blessing that God has given to him—the blessing he stole from Esau.<sup>28</sup> This may also help explain why Jacob referred to his children as the *gracious* gifts of God, rather than as the *blessings* of God to him (Gen. 33:5). The word *blessing* is much more common in the book of Genesis, appearing eighty-eight times compared to the seventeen references to *grace*.<sup>29</sup> Still, Jacob does not want to bring up the touchy subject of the blessing until he can first give Esau a blessing. By accepting Jacob’s blessing, the lifelong feud of the siblings comes to an official end.

### Blessing our Estranged Brothers

Jacob’s actions in this passage exemplify the kind of reconciliation that God calls his people to pursue. Certainly, Jacob’s actions are marred to some degree by the favoritism he demonstrates among his wives and children, but his behavior toward Esau is radically different from how he acted

twenty years earlier. First, Jacob lays down his rights of being lord over his family and over his brother. He moves from being the rearguard to the vanguard, offering himself up as the sacrifice to protect his family, who is the fledgling nation of Israel. Furthermore, he takes up the form of a servant before Esau, bowing himself seven times before his brother rather than clinging to his claims of being lord over his brother. In humility, Jacob counted his brother more significant than himself (Phil. 2:3).

Second, Jacob not only passively takes the form of a servant before his brother, but he also actively seeks to bless his brother. In this, Jacob begins to fulfill God's commission to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 27:29; 28:14). Of more immediate importance, Jacob for the first time looks not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). Jacob is not begrudgingly fulfilling a requirement, but joyfully seeking reconciliation with his estranged brother. To secure this reconciliation, Jacob stretches himself beyond what is merely required to honor the brother whom he dishonored so many years before.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to relational reconciliation is when we are stingy with what we "owe" to other people. We make careful calculations of who has done what to determine what we believe the other person deserves, and we stubbornly refuse to go any steps beyond this. Certainly, there are times when love requires us to prevent someone from abusing our generosity for the sake of their own soul; however, Esau's story demonstrates that not all people are out to squeeze us for everything they can take from us. In any case, we should not begin our efforts at relational reconciliation by protecting ourselves from hypothetical abuses from the other person.

Jesus, in fact, teaches us to begin relational reconciliation precisely by making ourselves *vulnerable* to abuse. He tells us *not* to resist the one who is evil, but to turn the other cheek when someone has already slapped us; to give our cloak when someone defrauds us of our tunic; to walk two miles when someone compels us to walk only one; to give to whoever begs from us; and to lend to whoever asks to borrow from us (Matt. 5:38–42). These are not empty words, for Jesus made himself vulnerable to abuse through his incarnation, when he took the greatest possible form of a servant by humbling himself to obedience all the way to death on a cross (Phil. 2:6–11). Pointing to this example, the Apostle Paul commands us that we must have *this* mindset in us to guide our actions through self-sacrificial humility. Reconciling broken relationships is painful, but Jesus both commanded us to do it and also modeled for us how to do it.

### Reorienting Us to God's Call (Gen. 33:12–17)

Why, though, does God require this kind of relational reconciliation? What fruit comes from these bitter seeds that he insists that we sow? In this passage, we see that relational reconciliation is a prerequisite toward reorienting Jacob to the call that God has placed on his life—a call that has taken a twenty-year detour through Mesopotamia and back again. Now that Jacob has finally reconciled with his kinsman, he must return to the land of his fathers in Canaan (cf. Gen. 31:3). Esau, on the other hand, wants his newly reconciled brother to return with him to the land of Seir:

[12] Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you." [13] But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail, and that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die. [14] Let my lord

pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.”

[15] So Esau said, “Let me leave 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.” [16] So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. [17] But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth. (Gen. 33:12–17)

It is strange for Jacob to claim that his children are frail, and that his flocks and herds would die if they are driven hard for even one day, since Jacob’s children and flocks have already traveled a great distance. Indeed, it would have been more plausible for Jacob to claim that he now needed to move over after receiving a debilitating injury in his fight with God.<sup>30</sup> What is going on here?

### The Deception of Jacob

The text does not tell us why Jacob does not go to Seir. It is possible, therefore, that Jacob initially intends to follow his brother to Seir, and that the Lord later redirects Jacob to Canaan.<sup>31</sup> This explanation, however, is unlikely. It seems more likely to believe that Jacob never has any intentions of following Esau to Seir, since Jacob travels northward to Succoth rather than southward to Seir.<sup>32</sup> Instead, he is reverting back to the deception that he employed at an earlier stage of his life.<sup>33</sup> Jacob even fibs to turn down Esau’s offer to provide an escort, which would have been valuable if Jacob did indeed have many frail children and animals to lead through the dangerous territories.<sup>34</sup> To be sure, Jacob’s deception here is not as harmful stealing the blessing from Esau by tricking their blind father, Isaac. Nevertheless, while we have seen some progress from Jacob, we also recognize that his life has not completely turned around. Indeed, the patriarch is still called *Jacob* in this passage, rather than by his new identity, *Israel*.

### The Call of Israel

Setting aside the actual deception, though, we do see why Jacob does not accompany Esau. Jacob is a man under orders from God himself to return to the land of Canaan. At Bethel, God promised to cause Jacob to *return* to Canaan, and to be with Jacob *on his way* (Gen. 28:15). As Esau *returns on his way* to Seir (Gen. 33:16), we see that God has completely fulfilled his promises to Jacob.<sup>35</sup> God has been with Jacob, blessing Jacob in the face of not only Laban, but now also Esau. God has blessed Jacob, so that now Jacob returns to the land God has promised to give to him and his offspring forever. Jacob cannot sidetrack to Seir; he must fulfill the remainder of God’s mission for him.

### Reconciliation is a Prerequisite to Obeying God’s Call

Jacob’s renewed enthusiasm to return to the land of his fathers demonstrates that he has done all that is necessary to end his long detour away from the Promised Land. Jacob’s path must lead him to Canaan, but the path to Canaan has run through Jacob’s estranged brother. Indeed, relational reconciliation is a prerequisite to obeying God’s call. We cannot move forward to accomplish the mission Jesus has given to us while there remains relational wreckage behind us. If our brother has something against us, we must first deal with that before we may move forward with whatever else God has planned for us (Matt. 5:23–24).

## Restoring Us to God (Gen. 33:18–20)

As Jacob settles back in the land, the narrator both tells us of Jacob’s peace and hints at Jacob’s coming war:

[18] And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city. [19] And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent. [20] There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel. (Gen. 33:18–20)

Literally, the word “safely” is “peace” (שָׁלֵם; *šālēm*).<sup>36</sup> This is one more connection back to the scene at Bethel, since Jacob vowed to set up another pillar at Bethel and to give a tenth of his wealth if the Lord brought him back to his father’s house “in peace” (בְּשָׁלוֹם; *bešālôm*).<sup>37</sup> Some read Jacob’s settling in Shechem as falling short of that vow to return to Bethel, especially when we never clearly see Jacob’s promised tithe.<sup>38</sup> Jacob does later return all the way to Bethel and builds a pillar there (Gen. 35:9–15), and it is possible that he considers the “hundred pieces of money” to purchase a piece of land in Canaan as his tithe.<sup>39</sup> The main point of emphasis in this text, however, is in regard to God’s faithfulness to bring Jacob back, just as he promised to do.

### Purchasing the Promised Land

Should Jacob have purchased this land, though? Some commentators argue that Jacob should not have purchased this land, since Jacob was called to live by faith in God’s promise rather than buying up real estate with wealth.<sup>40</sup> Abraham also bought land, but only as a burial place for his wife, not (like Jacob) as property on which he could live.<sup>41</sup> It is even possible to read Jacob’s altar not as an act of grateful worship, but as an attempt to purchase God’s favor (as Jacob originally tried to do with Esau) after sinfully purchasing land that Jacob did not have permission to buy.<sup>42</sup> The text does not clarify whether or not Jacob should have bought the land; however, the text does tell us *from whom* Jacob buys the land: from Hamor and Shechem. In Genesis 34, we will discover that Jacob’s entanglement with these men will bring devastating consequences.<sup>43</sup> Although God has brought Jacob to Canaan in peace, the peace will not remain long: “This seems the right place to end the story of Jacob, but as so often in Genesis, what promises to be the ultimate resolution proves to be the making of another crisis.”<sup>44</sup>

### Building an Altar to the God of Israel

When Jacob builds an altar, he follows in the footsteps of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac (Gen. 12:7–8; 13:18; 26:25).<sup>45</sup> As God’s people have entered the Promised Land, they have been careful to build places of worship to the true God, in contrast to the false worship of the original inhabitants of the land of Canaan.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, this is the first time that God’s people name the altar that they build.<sup>47</sup> Here, Jacob builds an altar to commemorate not only that God has brought him back to the land of Canaan, but also that God has changed his identity along his way. This is an altar for God, the God of *Israel*.

## God's People Worshiping in God's Place

The winding story of Jacob's life, then, has led him back to where he began, but in an entirely different condition from the younger man who left his home two decades ago. Instead, this man has experienced hurts and humiliations, griefs and grace, promises and protections. At every step, God has been with him, even when being *with* Jacob has led Jacob into pain that God has used for Jacob's sanctification. Now, at long last, Jacob returns to Canaan with a teeming family and expansive wealth. Not only that, but Jacob has properly dealt with his two great enemies in life, Laban and Esau. Making peace with both of his enemies required Jacob nothing less than wrestling with God himself, but Jacob is now ready for the mission that God originally gave to him: to be a holy people in God's holy place worshiping their holy God.

Sometimes, we imagine that it would be nice to leave our problems behind in order to gain a fresh start somewhere else. God is gracious, however, when he insists that we remain in our problems, at least as long as is necessary to bring those issues to peaceful resolution. The purpose of all the pain of relational reconciliation, however, is not to rub our noses in what we have done wrong. Rather, God's purpose is to refine the impurities from our lives so that we may be wholly devoted to his mission. So long as we continue to carry around unresolved baggage, we are not free to serve him in the way that he has called us to do.

The gospel, then, announces that we can gain a fresh start, but not by ignoring our past. Rather, the gospel announces that Jesus himself has laid down his life in order that we might be forgiven by our holy God. Once we have been delivered from our sins by God, then we can have confidence to humble ourselves before our estranged brothers. In this way, God transforms us into limping, humble people who are wholly devoted to him. To be sure, this path is painful; however, it is infinitely better than the alternative of allowing the wounds of our sin to fester. God leads us to reconcile with our brothers in order to restore us to himself.

## Discussion Questions

1. How does Jacob lay aside his rights when he moves from remaining behind as the *rearguard* (Gen. 32:13–21) and instead begins to lead as the *vanguard* in this encounter with Esau (Gen. 33:3)? How did Jesus lay aside his rights in the form of God to take the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6–7)? What rights do you possess that are getting in the way of relational reconciliation?
2. How does Jacob's blessing his brother contrast with Jacob's actions in the past (Gen. 33:11; cf. Gen. 27)? How did Jesus seek to bless us in his actions? Beyond forfeiting your own rights, how might you bless someone you have hurt? Why should we do good to our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and bless those who curse us (Matt. 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36)?
3. Why does God prevent Jacob from settling in Canaan until he reconciles with Esau? Why can we not love God without loving our brothers (1 John 4:20)? What relationships must you reconcile before God can reorient you to his mission? What kingdom value might you be forfeiting by allowing (so far as it depends on you; Rom. 12:18) a relationship to remain broken?

4. What is the ultimate goal after Jacob's reconciliation with Esau (Gen. 33:18–20)? What is the new covenant equivalent of Jacob's dwelling in the land of God's inheritance? What is the new covenant equivalent of Jacob's building an altar? How does God sanctify our hearts through relational reconciliation? What other good does relational reconciliation bring?

## Notes

1. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 342.
2. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 223.
3. Calvin, *Genesis*, 205. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xi.i.html>>
4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 343.
5. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 298.
6. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 223.
7. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 298.
8. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 560–67.
9. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 298.
10. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 566.
11. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 223–24.
12. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 564.
13. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 343.
14. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 298.
15. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 567.
16. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 567.
17. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 343.
18. Kidner, *Genesis*, 182.
19. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 298.
20. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 225.
21. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 298–99.
22. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 224.
23. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 567.
24. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 299.
25. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 345.
26. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 226–27.
27. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 299.
28. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 227–28.
29. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 298–99.
30. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 347.
31. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 573.
32. Kidner, *Genesis*, 182.
33. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 211–12. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xi.i.html>>
34. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 347.
35. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 229.
36. On the other hand, some argue that this is the name of a city, Salem: “Now while Hebrew שלם ‘to Salem’ could be translated ‘in peace,’ nowhere else in the OT is it used in this way as an adverb qualifying a

verb. And elsewhere in the phrase ‘the city of X,’ X is usually the name of someone who lives in the city, such as its king, rather than the name of the city itself (e.g., 24:10; Num 21:26–27; 22:36; 1 Sam 15:5). Finally the ancient versions all regard ‘Salem’ as a place name, and it may be identified with the modern village of ‘Salim’ about three miles east of Tel Balata (biblical Shechem).” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 300.)

37. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 199.

38. Kidner, *Genesis*, 182–83.

39. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 199.

40. Kidner, *Genesis*, 183.

41. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 300–01.

42. Kidner, *Genesis*, 183.

43. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 574.

44. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 304.

45. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 301.

46. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 213–14. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xi.i.html>>

47. Walton, *Genesis*, 609.