

Genesis 33: Reunited & Reconciled

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The narrative continues immediately after God wrestles with Jacob and renames him Israel. The latter portion of the chapter (stopping in Succoth and settling near Shechem) covers an unknown period of time.

In this passage we see how God changed two hearts: turning Jacob's heart of fear into **courage**, and Esau's heart of hatred into **forgiveness**.

After wrestling all night and being wounded, Jacob would not have had the strength either to **fight** or **flee**. He had no choice but to face his brother in humble reliance on God.

"Jacob lifted up his eyes"—perhaps meaning that he was approaching Esau with a renewed spirit. (Gen 33:1—compare to Gen 29:1, "Jacob lifted up his feet," Young's Literal Translation)

Jacob now **realigns** the camp and goes out in front to lead the procession. (Gen 33:3)

Try to picture the absurd scene: Esau arrayed with 400 soldiers on his side; Jacob with four wives, twelve children, a few servants, and an assortment of livestock on his side. Which was stronger in the world's eyes?

Jacob bows before Esau **seven** times: just as a vassal would bow in the court of his king.

Jacob continues to address Esau as **lord** (*adown*), but Esau addresses Jacob as **brother** (*ach*—the Hebrew word can refer to brother, kinsman, ally, or friend). (Gen 33:8-9)

Jacob and Esau embrace and weep: Jacob out of **joy**, Esau out of **shame**.

Jacob wept for joy, to be thus kindly received by his brother whom he had feared; and Esau perhaps wept for grief and shame, to think of the bad design he had conceived against his brother, which he found himself strangely and unaccountably prevented from executing.

—Matthew Henry

Only moments earlier, Esau's intentions were to **kill** his brother Jacob. Either that, or Jacob was paranoid.

...we cannot suppose [Jacob] to admit of a groundless fear...nor that the Spirit of God would stir him up to pray such a prayer as he did for deliverance from a merely imaginary danger....

—Matthew Henry

One of the strange ironies of this meeting between Jacob and Esau is that they try to outdo each other in **kindness**.

One of the marks of forgiveness is illustrated in this narrative: there is no **mention** of past offenses.

Esau shows by his question ("Whose are these?") that he had no prior **knowledge** of Jacob's family. (Gen 33:5)

Jacob acknowledges that his children are **gifts** from **God**. (Gen 33:5)

Esau's question about the flocks (Gen 33:8) suggests that his anger had already **turned away** before his first encounter with Jacob's gift.

How does Esau's disinterest in Jacob's gift serve as an additional illustration of his change in heart? Esau neither takes the gift out of **greed**, nor does he want it as a form of **payment** for past offenses.

We would all do well to emulate Esau when he says, "I have **enough**." (Gen 33:9)

While the gift of livestock is no longer necessary for Esau's appeasement, it now serves the purpose of ratifying his **friendship** (acceptance of the gift *and* the giver).

Esau, for his part, needs [the gift] not, either to supply him, for he was rich, or to pacify him, for he was reconciled. —Matthew Henry

Once again, Jacob petitions Esau for only one thing: **grace**. (Gen 33:8, 10)

Jacob likens his reunion with Esau as "seeing the face of God"—perhaps because it was by grace that his **life** was spared in the encounter.

Esau intends for Jacob to **return** with him to Seir. (Gen 33:12)

Another notable irony in this passage is that the army that Esau brought to destroy Jacob is now offered for his **protection**. (cf., Prov 16:7)

There is some disagreement about this exchange: whether or not Jacob intended to **deceive** Esau, or whether Jacob later came to Seir even though no such trip is mentioned. We do know that Jacob and Esau came together again to bury Isaac 23 years later. (Gen 35:29)

After Esau returns to Seir, Jacob journeys **westward**. (Gen 33:17)

We know Jacob didn't give away all of his livestock because he built **booths** for them in Succoth. (Gen 33:17)

Deliverance from immediate peril is a fitting occasion for **gratitude** toward God.

Diseases and dangers should teach us how to value health and safety, and should help to enlarge our hearts in thankfulness, when our going out and coming in have been signally preserved.
—Matthew Henry

Jacob builds an **altar** in Shechem and names it *El-Elohe-Israel*—"God, the God of Israel." (Gen 33:20)

Jacob's desire to buy land and settle down unwittingly places his family in **danger** in the next part of the narrative.

This plot of land remains significant in the course of redemptive history: it is the burial place for **Joseph's** bones after the conquest of Canaan (Josh 24:32), and the meeting place for the woman at the well in John 4.