

Family Reunions (Genesis 32-33)

Introduction:

Summer is the season for family reunions (with social distancing, of course). Reunions are often fun, festive occasions. But, it's not *always* parties, cornhole and BBQ. Many of us face family reunions with far more trepidation. Many of us struggle for years to resolve tangled or broken situations. Sometimes, without any apparent success.

That's the sort of situation facing the twin brothers Jacob and Esau in the passage that we just read. The story of their reunion gives us hope for our own tangled and toxic relationships. But, even more profoundly, it points us toward a future reunion that cannot be spoiled, no matter how dysfunctional our lives are now, or how dysfunctional they continue to be. So, this morning, we'll look at the fear of Jacob, the face of Esau, and the future of the promise

Fear of Jacob

As these events unfold, the brothers haven't seen each other in twenty years. Because Jacob had stolen Esau's birthright and blessing through extortion and deception, then left home to avoid his brother's murderous vengeance. Jacob left empty-handed. He returns with flocks, herds and servants. In an agricultural society, Jacob is flush.

Normally, someone so successful would be eager to return home with stories of their accomplishments. But, Jacob didn't leave things well with Esau. He knows he must address past wrongs. We might wonder, "Why bother? Why not let sleeping dogs lie?" Especially shaggy sleeping dogs like Esau with well-documented anger- and impulse-control issues. If we're honest, we know that doesn't work. Unresolved issues continue to plague us, even when we try to avoid them. Jacob realized that the only way to move *forward* was to move *toward* Esau. But Jacob himself probably wondered why he had bothered when his messenger returns with news that Esau is approaching... with 400 men.

At the very *least*, Esau's approach is ambiguous. Years before, their grandfather Abraham had gone to battle with 318 men against four local kings who had captured Abraham's nephew Lot. Is Esau approaching on search and rescue, like Abraham did for Lot, or to seek and destroy, like Abraham did with the kings? There's something comical about Jacob's fear. He had just encountered God's angels. Jacob declares, "This is God's camp!" and calls the place Mahanaim. That's a dual form of the Hebrew word for camp. Mahanaim is the place of two camps: Jacob's camp and God's camp. And angelic camps are usually military: God's heavenly armies.

God has just revealed to Jacob that he is accompanied by an army of God's angels. But Jacob is still freaking out about Esau's 400 men. He's already forgotten the assurance of God's presence. Admittedly, Jacob has no exit strategy. Right before this, Laban, Jacob's uncle, boss and father-in-law, had just chased down Jacob with his own sizable force, after Jacob left town without notice, taking along Laban's daughters and grandchildren and a sizable portion of his wealth. For years, Laban and Jacob had been counter-swindling each other. Only God's own direct intervention in a dream stayed Laban's hand from exacting vengeance on Jacob.

First Laban, now Esau. Jacob's fear makes sense. But we also might ask, why are all of Jacob's relationships so messed up? There's a demotivational poster with a picture of a chain, and the middle link has snapped. The text says: "Dysfunction. The only consistent feature of all your dissatisfying relationships is you." The common link in all of Jacob's dysfunctional relationships is... Jacob.

If we keep ending up in the same sort of problems, we might ask ourselves, is there something I'm contributing to these problems? Are there recurring patterns connected to how *I'm* treating others? Or, why do I keep getting sucked into the same sort of unhealthy relationships and situations?

No wonder Jacob's afraid. He'd swindled Esau just like he swindled Laban. Plus, Jacob has no track record of successfully repairing *any* of his messed up relationships.

Face of Esau

When Jacob faces Esau, his fears will either be relieved or confirmed. So, fearful Jacob prepares to face Esau. In this encounter, we actually see three people employ three very different strategies.

Jacob's Strategy: The first strategy is Jacob's. Ever the schemer, Jacob hatches a plan. In his first message, Jacob strikes a very deferential tone. He places himself as a servant, and Esau as his lord. Jacob continues to do that when they speak face to face, even when Esau addresses Jacob as his brother. Along the same lines, Jacob delicately avoids mentioning anything that might recall past insults. For example, he seeks Esau's favor, not his blessing. But, Jacob also makes pragmatic preparations. He splits his company into two camps to minimize risk in the case of an attack. He showers Esau with gifts, hoping to quench any lingering bitterness.

How ironic. His cleverness had gotten him into this very mess, and he keeps relying on it to get himself out of it. This is symptomatic for Jacob. It's what he does over and over. Some people have joked that the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over, expecting a different outcome. In those terms, Jacob has long been "out of his mind." There's a dark humor in it for us as spectators. But like Jacob, we're all prone to return to our favorite strategies and behaviors to manage and deflect fear, even after their repeated failure.

At the same time, Jacob is making progress. In 32:9-12, Jacob prays to God. The only prayer to God by Jacob recorded in the Bible. That's progress! His prayer shows an increasingly humble man. He appeals to God's own words, acknowledges God's goodness and his unworthiness, and honestly seeks God's help. He's considering others and not just himself. He appeals on behalf of the mothers and children with him.

God's Strategy: But God's strategy is quite different from Jacob's. God prepares Jacob to meet Esau by hobbling Jacob. We didn't read this part of the story, but Jacob's wrestling match with God sets Jacob's conflict with Esau in its proper context. Jacob's broken relationship with Esau is collateral damage that has flowed out of his flawed relationship with God himself.

From the start, Jacob has tried to control and manipulate God's plan to happen on his own timeframe. That's why his relationship with Esau was so broken. Before they were born, God had promised that the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob). And for their first forty years, Jacob kept angling to make God's promise happen now. Perhaps, Jacob was simply impatient. Forty years is not a short time. Or, Jacob doubted God's plan to follow through. Especially as the years and decades passed and he saw his brother Esau only rising in his father's esteem. Jacob's ruined relationship with Esau was the direct result of a faulty relationship with God. Jacob took advantage of Esau, because he didn't trust God. How we interact with God directly impacts how we interact with other people. The two are inseparably linked. There's a vivid illustration of that here: Jacob is afraid of Esau. Right before this story, Jacob refers to God as the Fear of Isaac. Fear colors Jacob's vision of both God and people.

That's why the divine wrestling match is so transformative. Jacob experienced both God's overpowering, irresistible might, as well as God's abundant mercy and self-restraint. Like all other OT believers, Jacob knew that a direct encounter with the holy God should mean death. As fire consumes a match, God's holiness should consume human beings who, even in our best moments, are inextricably tainted with selfishness, impurity and evil. But Jacob's life was spared. Notice the result. Jacob's strategy with Esau takes a significant step forward after this encounter. Before, Jacob loitered behind his family, like *they* are *his* human shield. Now *he* stands in front, shielding *them*. Now, Jacob is not only deferential. He bows seven times as Esau approaches. He not only *speaks*, but also *acts* like a servant before a lord.

He presses Esau to receive the gifts he has sent. The Hebrew for present (in 33:10) is often used of sacrifices offered by Israelites as part of their worship of God. A sacrifice to acknowledge guilt and to restore fellowship with God. At the very end, does Jacob insist that Esau accept "my blessing." Do you see what Jacob is doing?

Jacob had sought to fulfill God's prophecy by his own underhanded scheming. Here, Jacob is undoing his mistreatment of Esau. He's making restitution. Restoring to Esau what he had taken unfairly. The younger is serving the older. Jacob is symbolically returning the stolen blessing. How has your faulty view of God damaged your relationships with those around you? Are there ways that you need to make restitution for your mistreatment of others?

Esau's strategy: Jacob had his strategy to change Esau. But God intervened with his own strategy to change Jacob. Because God didn't need to change Esau. Esau's strategy was entirely benevolent. Jacob has ridiculously over-reacted. Esau is rushing to greet Jacob in order to welcome him and to offer protection. And if Jacob hadn't been consumed by guilt and fear, he probably would have realized that if Esau were really coming to attack Jacob, he probably wouldn't have sent Jacob's messenger back to spoil the element of surprise.

The whole time, from the moment he received Jacob's message, Esau's intention was to race to meet his brother, and to embrace and welcome him. We get many hints that Esau's not a particularly perceptive individ'l. He impulsively bargains away his birthright, perhaps oblivious to Jacob's simmering jealousy of Esau's status as firstborn and favorite of Isaac their father. He is utterly unaware of the offense that his selection of wives is to his parents, and also to God. He harbors vengeful fantasies that were likely to lead to his own exile or execution for murder. And he also fails to anticipate Jacob's lingering sense of guilt.

Yet here, Esau serves as a stunning model of grace. Jacob says that seeing Esau's face is like seeing the face of God. Remember, Jacob had, in fact, *just seen God face to face!* But don't just take it from Jacob. In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of a wayward son's welcome home by his father. How does Jesus describe that father? Running, embracing and kissing his son. Just like Esau ran, embraced and kissed his brother. The wording is so similar that Jesus is probably modeling the Father's welcome in his parable on Esau's real life welcome of Jacob. Jesus is saying that one of the best pictures of God the Father as he joyously welcomes lost men and women back into his family, is how Esau welcomes back his brother, despite all that Jacob had done to him.

That's kind of surprising. Esau's relationship with God is pretty murky. He shows little respect for the privileges that God had given to his family. In this encounter, Jacob speaks often of God, while Esau does not. (*Although we've also seen that Jacob is prone to use God-talk in underhanded and manipulative ways.*)

But Esau's exemplary forgiveness highlights a counterintuitive opportunity to speak of God's grace in the gospel. God might give you glimpses of his grace through people who aren't believers. So that you can say, "The way that you treated me was really kind. I didn't deserve it. But thank you. The way you treated me gave me a glimpse of the way God tells me that he treats me in Jesus."

Future of the Promise

Jacob's reconciliation with Esau leaves one question: Esau's face has calmed Jacob's fears, but what's the future of the promise?

Jacob's restitution undoes his swindle of Esau. He has voluntarily surrendered and returned the blessing he wrongfully acquired.

But God's original promise about Esau and Jacob is still outstanding. How will the older serve the younger? How will God fulfill through Jacob the original promise to Abraham: that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's family (and Isaac's family, and Jacob's family)? And how could both of those promises exist side by side? How could Esau's family be blessed through Jacob's family, while Esau serves Jacob?

If we listen carefully, this story points us to the fulfillment of the promise, and the resolution of the seemingly contradictory promises of primacy and blessing. The delicate dance of reconciliation that Jacob and Esau navigate is a dress rehearsal for how God paves the way for the reunion of lost humanity into his presence.

Esau's open-armed welcome of Jacob is a magnificent picture of God's favor. But for Esau to welcome Jacob, a price has to be paid. In this story, eventually, reconciliation is deep and lasting because both brothers come to a point of willingly paying that price. Graciously, Esau has abandoned his bitterness against Jacob. That would have been costly. That would have meant Esau relinquishing his rightful claims to justice in the face of Jacob's underhanded deceptions.

Esau also finally does what he'd previously resisted. Esau may have resented God because of the prophecy of Jacob's eventual primacy. But Esau's could have submitted his pride to God's plan, accepting and embracing his role joyfully. Maybe the solution to humanity's

problems wouldn't come from his own children. Does that really matter? He gets to be a great uncle of the Savior of humanity. He could have accepted his role that the pathway to true blessing was through Jacob. In a sense, Esau finally does that here. He accepts blessing through Jacob.

Like Esau, do you need to accept that the place God has given you in his plans is different than what you desire?

Likewise, Jacob has finally recognized his own contributions to their fractured relationship. To make it right, Jacob symbolically returns what he'd wrongfully stolen: Esau's primacy as firstborn and a costly, tangible blessing.

The first part of God's prophecy about Esau and Jacob was that two peoples would be divided from the womb of their mother Rebecca. Division marks their relationship. The twin brothers are divided, their parents affections are divided, the family is divided. There are divided camps woven throughout this story: God's camp and Jacob's. Jacob's camp and Esau's. Division within Jacob's own camp between differing groups of mothers and children.

What will end the division? The author has given an extra hint in the Hebrew. But we can see how it works even in translation. The words for camp, favor, and present all sound alike in Hebrew. What will end the division? What will bring the hostile camps together? Whether inside of families, between families, or between humanity and God? Divided *camps* will be reunited through a *present* that is received with *favor*. Through a present, a sacrificial offering, that acknowledges the wrong that was done, and bears the cost willingly, so that favor may be extended to the undeserving.

That's a picture of the gospel. The Father, Son and Spirit, one God indivisible, conspire together to overcome the estrangement between humanity and our Creator. An estrangement that is our fault, for our impatient and arrogant grasping after his gifts and promises, like Jacob. But the Son joins himself to humanity in the person of Jesus. He does what we can't. What we aren't willing to do. What we aren't able to do. He makes restitution for us. He offers the costly present of his own sacrificial death. So that we might know the face of the Father as he knows it. Not a dark and angry face, clouded with judgment. But a face beaming upon us with delight.

No matter how many of our relationships remain unreconciled and unresolved, you may be certain of the ineradicable joy of that reunion. Though we limp our way there, the Father races toward us, with arms open to embrace us.