

God had now accepted him after the immense struggle of faith that he had endured through so many years in Mesopotamia, Esau now accepted him. This, for Jacob, was a sufficient physical sign of the spiritual reality of the forgiveness of his brother that he so desperately needed. In the light of his recent experience with the man at Peniel, it was 'like seeing the face of God!' Forgiveness and reconciliation is always part of the way God shows Himself to all His servants.

### Application

Within the complex social messages being played out in this passage of Scripture, one thing is certain; God was working to bring about reconciliation. In order for that to be effective, both men needed physical evidence of the forgiveness that undergirded their reconciliation. For Esau, the physical sign was the gift that Jacob gave which included the symbolic offering of 'blessing', the very thing that Jacob had stolen from him, and for Jacob it was the fact of Esau's acceptance. Each man's needs for physical evidence were met, and at the end of the passage, we can assume the reconciliation was complete.

Too often, we talk about reconciliation and forgiveness in unhelpful ways. We imagine that they can be achieved with a word spoken here or there. This is rarely true. Real forgiveness is not a matter of words, but a matter of deeds, and we all know what it is like for someone to say 'I forgive you' and behave as if it were not so. We know it is a shame. Jacob paid great attention to detail in order to make sure that his request for forgiveness from his brother was met positively and that both of them could demonstrate their reconciliation. It was time well spent.

We can learn from this something of the importance of making sure that when it comes to forgiveness and reconciliation, our actions truly demonstrate our declared intent. But more than this, the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau was a pointer towards God's own reconciliation with humanity, for the physical sign of His forgiveness of our sin is our Saviour Jesus Christ, on the Cross; and the sign of our acceptance of this is our faith in Him who died for us and our obedience to His call. Both are needed for that reconciliation to be real.

*Space for notes*

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## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Looking back over recent texts, how much of what Jacob experienced in the previous twenty years was a preparation for reconciliation with Esau?
2. Discuss moments of reconciliation that you have experienced, and try to identify what the crucial features of this were, and whether they are similar to what has been described in today's study.
3. Are there different forms of embrace and greeting within your own culture? Are some reserved for family only, and are some of them general?

## Discipleship

Finding the right way to make amends for something we have done wrong, or even seeking to restore a relationship with someone who has sinned against us is never easy. We can help the process by prayerfully considering the proper steps that can be taken to assure people of our good intent and our desire for reconciliation. Every situation will be different, but it is important for us to work these things through carefully.

## Final Prayer

Jesus, our Lord and Saviour; may we never be oppressed by the troubles we endure, but offer You the words we say, the deeds we do, the love we share, the hopes we have and the joys that brighten our lives. Lift our hearts we pray, this and every day; AMEN

## Prayer

You have made wonderful things, O Lord; the infinite variety of words and music, the subtlety of colour and the complex changing of the seasons. We praise You for these things, and ask that we may never take for granted the wisdom and power by which You sustain the world as well as save it; through Jesus Christ we pray; AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Young families and the Church

Pray for children where there is abuse in the home. Because we do not like to think of it, we often avoid the thought that some of the children who come to our Sunday Schools may have a parent who acts in an abusive or inappropriate way towards a child. It happens, and we must both pray for such children and seek to help them.

## Meditation

You know the Lord is at work;

When prayers are answered before they have been finished;  
When no-one of God's people has to ask to find help;  
When even the church notices make you want to say 'great!'  
When children are welcomed by all God's people, all the time;  
When a place of worship is obviously loved by those who attend;  
When God's people have a good name in the local community;  
When new people come to church and don't want to leave;  
When both pastor and people know when to repent before God;  
When all God's people find fulfilment in the church and each other.

Then, you know the Lord is at work!

## Bible Study - Genesis 33:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming together with four hundred men, so he divided the children between Leah and Rachel and the two maidservants. <sup>2</sup> He put the maidservants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. <sup>3</sup> He went on ahead of them himself, bowing down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.

<sup>4</sup> But Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, and took him in his arms and kissed him; and they wept. <sup>5</sup> When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, 'Who are these people with you?' and Jacob answered, 'They are the children God has graciously given your servant.' <sup>6</sup> Then the maidservants drew near, together with their children; and they bowed down. <sup>7</sup> Next, Leah and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.

<sup>8</sup> Esau then said, 'What was the purpose of the herds of livestock that I met?' Jacob answered, 'To find favour with my lord.' <sup>9</sup> But Esau said, 'I have plenty, my brother; keep what is yours for yourself.' <sup>10</sup> Jacob said, 'No, please; if I have won your favour, then please accept this gift from me. You have received me with such favour, to see you is like seeing the face of God!' <sup>11</sup> So please accept the blessing I offer you, because God has dealt graciously with me and I have all I need.' Because Jacob insisted, he took it.

## Review

Jacob emerged from the mysterious incident of wrestling with the man at Peniel somewhat the worse for wear, and with a limp (32:31). There was no time for dwelling on the amazing events

of the night before, for Jacob immediately faced the meeting with Esau he had been planning ever since Laban left him and returned to Mesopotamia (31:55). What happened next was something that was an amazing part of the wider providence of God; for the meeting between Jacob and his estranged brother Esau which Jacob thought would be his most difficult proved to be not only the easiest, but a totally unexpected and remarkable story of reconciliation. We know nothing about Esau's life since Jacob left for Mesopotamia to look for a wife, and the last we heard of him, he was causing his parents distress by threatening to kill Jacob(27:41)! The two of them met and greeted each other like the long lost brothers they truly were, showing remarkable affection and generosity to each other under the circumstances.

The meeting itself happened like this. Apparently, Esau had met the herds of goats, sheep, camels, cattle and donkeys that Jacob had sent on ahead as presents (33:8) and then came across Jacob, walking alone in front of his entire family. This was not the arrangement that had originally been envisaged (see 32:7,8) in which everything including Jacob's family were divided into two so that at least one group might escape if Esau attacked. Other herds of Jacob's flocks may have been elsewhere, but his entire family now stood behind him as Esau came towards them. Jacob's direct personal approach, bowing down low to the ground, indicated to Esau that the herdsmen he had met had told him the truth; Jacob was indeed acting like a 'servant' before a 'lord'. Contrary to what had happened in their youth, Jacob was no longer a scheming and grasping younger brother, but a respectful and generous brother who presented himself accordingly. Esau was probably astounded to see his brother so changed; but he did not know that the spiritual change had happened the previous night!

This passage of Scripture is so clearly a story of reconciliation between two men who had fallen out so grievously over twenty years previously, and we can rejoice in this, even finding in the subtle bargaining of the last few verses the hints of respect and reparation which made the reconciliation complete. But underlying the thin veneer of the story lies the providential hand of God. Jacob, a reformed man after his close experience with God the night before, stood in front of his family, taking full responsibility for them in confidence that his life and theirs were in the hands of Almighty God; his previous plan of division was not put into effect. Esau, a man who held a grudge and whose ancestors were noted throughout history as being opponents of Israel (the Edomites), was emotionally melted (33:4) not so much by Jacob, but by the evidence of God's work in him which made it possible for reconciliation to take place. The presents and gifts cemented not what Esau and Jacob did, but what God had done. God is a God of peace and reconciliation, and though our paths over the years may seem strange, his goal remains the same; peace between all, and His own reconciliation with fallen people.

### Going Deeper

The whole story is apparently straightforward, but the detailed behaviour of both men was very different. By looking at what they did and how they handled the meeting, we can learn more about how genuine forgiveness and reconciliation works. Too often, we assume we know about these things, but God's Word always has more to teach us.

#### ***Jacob, the new man.***

It is fascinating to see that although Jacob had been named 'Israel' by God the night before (32:28), neither he nor the Scriptures used this name for Jacob immediately. When Abraham (17:5) and Sarah (17:15) were renamed, their new names were used immediately, but Jacob had to wait until God spoke to him a second time, after he had re-entered the Promised Land (35:10f.). The new name of Israel was then used as Jacob endured the death of his favoured wife Rachel in childbirth (35:21,22) and the remainder of the 'Jacob' stories in Genesis. This seems odd to us, but it would have been significant for ancient people, for whom this re-iteration of an important truth would have been important. The first naming took place in the context of a mysterious story full of intrigue, but the second was a personal vision of Almighty God given to Jacob after he had completed the journey that God had commanded of him, and which included reconciliation with Esau. As so often in Scripture, and as I have recently explained in these notes, a gift is given by God in the form of a promise before it is given in its fulness, and it is dependent upon the completion of a command. God commanded Jacob to return to the Promised Land (31:13), and the fulfilment of that task would be the key to the full

and final gift of the name. The last major obstacle to this was Jacob's facing up to his past, and his brother.

When Jacob arranged his family in preparation for the meeting, he put his least favoured concubines and children in front (the two maidservants – 33:2), and the most favoured wife and child last (Rachel and Joseph – 33:2) with Leah and her seven children in the middle. We might suppose that the least valuable wives and children would be less of a loss if things went wrong; but that would be to miss the point. Jacob made this arrangement because it was the standard way that a 'vassal' tribesman (inferior leader) would present himself to a superior prince. There are many ancient documents which tell us about this, and it seems clear that no other explanation is necessary. Jacob was a reformed man, and he took time over every detail to ensure that the right impression was given to Esau as he approached.

The other detail was that Jacob bowed down seven times in front of Esau as he approached. Again, this message was completely clear, for the number seven was a sign of completeness, and it said to Esau that Jacob was completely sorry for his wronging of his elder brother. He wanted his brother to be in no doubt about his intent, for any detail left out of the correct procedures might imply trickery on Jacob's part, and if Esau saw anything out of place, the consequences could have been dire.

We may not appreciate all these details now, but all of them were of great importance if reconciliation was to take place.

#### ***The meeting***

Under the protecting hand of God, Jacob's plans worked well, and Esau observed the signs correctly. The meeting of the two men (33:4) was an intimate moment in Scripture. Esau took the initiative and ran to Jacob to embrace him, and they both wept; the mixture of emotions in a moment such as this was too great for words. It was also the moment of reconciliation, and after the two of them had felt the same emotions together, maybe for the first time in their lives, they could begin to talk.

It was the responsibility of Esau, now recognised as the senior of the two of them, to begin the conversation, and he asked firstly about the women and children. Although we know that large families were far more common in ancient times than today, Jacob's family must have been an impressive sight, and Esau received each of the groups of Jacobs concubines and wives, and their respective children (33:6,7). Jacob did not let his guard down, however, even though Esau apparently spoke warmly, and continued to speak of himself as 'your servant' (33:5) and Esau as 'my Lord' (33:8). This implies that Jacob may well have continued to be tense, for there was still the matter of the 'gifts' to be negotiated.

Esau's comment 'What was the purpose of the herds of livestock that I met' was not casual; it was his way of saying 'let's get down to business'. Jacob confirmed that the herds were gifts intended for Esau, but it was entirely correct for Esau to turn away from accepting the very substantial gift that he was offered. It was 'not done' to be seen to accept such generosity too quickly. We should not read the words of the negotiation too literally, for words such as 'I have plenty' (33:9) were all part of the bargaining, which was always going to end with Esau's acceptance of the gifts. There are two features of the whole bargaining scene, however, which we can easily fail to see.

Firstly, having talked about the 'gift' up to the very last part of the bargaining (see verse 10), Jacob finally insisted that Esau accept the gift, but he changed the word he used to refer to the herds and flocks they were negotiating over, and called them 'the blessing I offer you ...!' (33:11) Yes, Jacob did want Esau to accept the gift, but he was offering Esau more than that; he offered Esau some of the 'blessing' that he had taken from him so many years before. He emphasised the point by adding 'because God has dealt graciously with me' (33:11), then urged Esau to accept the gift because by so doing, the trouble of the past could be put behind them. The gift was a physical sign given in order to overcome the spiritual problem that had existed between them, and Jacob needed Esau to accept; but He did.

Secondly, as Jacob spoke to Esau, he said something very surprising; 'you have received me with such favour, to see you is like seeing the face of God!' The favour Jacob had received from Esau was simply his acceptance, of course, and this is what Jacob was referring to. Just as