

Jacob celebrated his settlement in Canaan by both purchasing a plot of land and also setting up an altar. The Hebrew word used in this sentence for the setting up of the altar is different from other words used for those times (Abraham 'built' an altar, for example). We do not know enough about why this difference exists, but what we do know is that Jacob named the altar 'El-Elohe-Israel'. This is a name that was highly important to the people of Israel, for it was the first occasion when their name 'Israel' was formally associated with the word 'El' which was the Canaanite word for 'God'. In this way, Jacob used the name God had given him and also claimed the name of God within the Promised Land of Canaan and used them both for the worship of the God of his fathers who had brought him on his long journey. It was the completion of one story, but as we shall discover tomorrow, the beginning of another. Entry into the Promised Land was not as wonderful as we might think!

Application

You will see clearly from the Bible study that I have already pointed out the importance of making sure that reconciliation does not lead to domination. All too often, forgiveness and love are mistaken for weakness either by those who do not know the love of God or who do not allow the love of God to rule in their lives. That, unfortunately, can be true even within the church. The truth about the reconciliation between Esau and Jacob was that it allowed both to go the way that God had given them, and even though one of them (Esau) thought that their future lay together, he was eventually able to see that this was not so. True reconciliation leads to liberty, not to bondage or domination, or the assumed right of one person to do what they want at the expense of another. That is the way of the world, not the way of Christ.

This small but meaningful passage also teaches us that it is important to complete God's plans. Clearly, Jacob began to settle somewhere east of the Jordan, but had to abandon the first house he built in Succoth and then buy a plot of land on which to live, within the Promised Land. God was not going to make the 'Promised Land' out of anywhere Jacob wished to live; it was God's land to give, and Jacob realised this in making the move over the Jordan to Saleem near Shechem.

I have always loved the way that the forefathers set up or build altars in order to worship the Lord. We tend to just 'turn up' to worship these days, but the activities of those of ancient times reminds us that effort and planning need to go into our worship. It is only a small point, perhaps, but one that we would do well to note. The worship that Jacob offered was of a different kind to that which we offer, because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross; but many of the principles are the same. It cost Jacob money, time and labour to worship the one true God, and I often wonder whether if this was true today, we might find more loyalty and commitment within an activity that has, for many Christians, become very optional.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss whether it is possible for a reconciliation to be meaningful if it takes place in a brief period of time and the participants never see each other again?
2. Discuss why it was important for Jacob to begin to settle in the Promised Land, when his grandfather and father had remained nomads. Why was this necessary?
3. How can we put more effort into the worship of Almighty God in our churches today?

Discipleship

I suggest that you consider carefully whether you have completed what God has called you to do. In writing this, I have no idea what you may have been led by God to do or to accomplish in your lifetime. Nevertheless, each of us will be called by God to account for what has been asked of us, and there is good reason to ask the question now before we have to face our maker. It is very easy today, to forget spiritual things and live according to the world's agenda!

Final Prayer

Almighty God; You have led you servants through the ages to pass on the Faith they have received. Thank You for the great figures of faith such as Jacob, who were faithful even after great struggles. Help us to live up to their example in Your strength and through Jesus Christ; AMEN

Prayer

Make our lives a sacrifice of praise to You, O Lord our God and our Redeemer. May we always be ready to sacrifice our time to help others, our money to assist the poor and our efforts to preach the Gospel; indeed, anything You require of us. Make us content in You and may we be fulfilled in all we do, for the sake of Your Name Lord God; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Our Homes

Pray for the Lord to bless each room in your home, and as you do so, think of what happens there. Pray also for the Holy Spirit to guard your home against the evil one and claim this protection. This is not some kind of magic, as if we have to use words properly to 'get it right'. The Lord will lead us in how to do this in a way that is right for us and our circumstances.

Meditation

Jesus, the world is full of people who do not know You.
People in other countries, other religions or cultures,
Or even people living close by, who never hear Your Name.
We can walk past hundreds every day in the streets,
Shopping, talking, driving, and going about their daily work.

Yet Your love for each and every one knows no bounds;
You have a plan for each, including such a time
As they might hear the Gospel and respond
If someone else will be obedient to You and tell them.

We ask You, raise up men, women and children of grace
Who break down religious and cultural barriers
And talk to people of the Christ who loves them;
People who know the Gospel call is for everyone.

Use them to bring Your saving love to all the world,
And make Your compassion visible, there for all to see,
So that people may be saved, Lord Jesus, by Your love.

Bible Study - Genesis 33:12-20

¹² Then Esau said, 'Let us continue our journey, and I will go with you.' ¹³ But Jacob replied to him, 'As my lord can see, the children are frail. Moreover, I am concerned about the nursing flocks and herds. If they are driven too hard in one day, they will die.'

¹⁴ Let my lord travel on before his servant; for I must go slowly according to the pace of the livestock ahead of me and the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.'

¹⁵ So Esau said, 'Let me at least leave with you some of my men.' But Jacob replied, 'for what reason? Let me find favour in the eyes of my lord.' ¹⁶ So that day, Esau turned back towards Seir.

¹⁷ Jacob, however, journeyed towards Succoth, where he built himself a house, and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Succoth.

¹⁸ Then, after coming from Paddan-Aram, Jacob arrived at Saleem (near Shechem) in the land of Canaan, and he set up camp within sight of the city. ¹⁹ And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought a plot of land on which to pitch his tent, for one hundred pieces of silver. ²⁰ He erected an altar there and called it El-Elohe-Israel.

Review

There are three important parts to this text. The first is a continuation of the previous story of Jacob's reconciliation with Esau, in which the two brothers agree to go their own way (33:12-16) and then a brief sentence (33:17) which records Jacob's immediate response to leaving his

brother by staying near to where he was. The third part (33:18-20) is a small introduction to the story which follows in chapter 34, in which Shechem and Hamor play an important role.

Although this passage reads quite easily, there is some very complicated Hebrew in each of these three sections and also a good deal of uncertainty as to what the text actually means. I will guide you through some of this in the main body of the Bible study, but you will notice the differences if you read this in another Bible, in which the order of some of the sentences and the place names appear to be different. One difficulty that we have when reading Scripture from ancient times, like this story of Jacob, is that we have no idea of the real timescale unless we are told about it clearly by the text. Mostly, we are left to guess; for example, Succoth (33:17) is a small place a little to the north of the Jabbok river, and it seems strange that Jacob should go there after leaving Esau and after the famous crossing at Peniel in which he wrestled with a man, and with God (32:22f.). Nevertheless, Jacob built himself a house there (33:17); but it seems strange that Jacob should settle there and then move to a place called Saleem, which was 40 miles away on the other side of the Jordan, near the city of Shechem (modern Nablus)! However, the Bible does not give us any indication of how long Jacob stayed in any of these locations, so all we can assume is that over a period of time, he moved his tent and his home from the East of the Jordan, to the West, and therefore fulfilled the promise of God that he would return to the Promised Land (28:15, 33:18). We cannot underestimate the importance of this, for God always fulfils His promises, and this story was probably told as an example of precisely this.

It was nevertheless difficult for Jacob to break away from Esau, having been reconciled to him just previously (33:1-11). After this emotional event, we might expect that Jacob would spend some time with Esau. His brother was a long way from his own territory, and Jacob could have offered the customary nomadic hospitality; at least welcome him into his tent and spend a week or so feasting. Each brother, however, had more pressing concerns. Jacob had no intention of following his brother Esau to Seir; his destination was the Promised Land, not the homelands of his brother. Esau had clearly established a strong enough presence in Seir (to the south East of the Dead Sea) to be able to command four hundred men, and his desire to return (33:12f.) indicated that he had other things on his mind.

Separating ourselves from other family members is a hard thing to do, as is setting up home in new surroundings. Jacob was called to do them both in order to follow God's will. If he had remained under the domination of his brother, he could not be the man of God he was called to be, and if he did not settle in the Promised Land, then he was not where God called him to live. Put like this, you will see that this passage does indeed have some significant spiritual value.

Going Deeper

If we dig deeper, of course, we will find more. The conversation between Jacob and Esau took place in a form of polite code which made it clear that although Jacob would honour Esau personally, he would never be his servant. Jacob's movement next to Saleem within the Promised Land was cautious, and as we shall discover, not without difficulty.

The parting of Jacob and Esau

As the conversation opened between Esau and Jacob after their poignant meeting (33:1-11), their opening words indicted their main concerns. Esau had just been greeted by his younger brother in abject obeisance, and Jacob had accepted for the first time in his life that Esau was the elder brother and senior of the two. Esau naturally assumed that his 'servant' (33:5) Jacob would obediently follow him. He said; 'Let us continue our journey ...' (33:12) for he was now the 'man in charge'. Jacob immediately responded with what seems to us to be excuses and prevarication; 'the children are frail ... I am concerned ... about the flocks ... I must go slowly ...' (33:13). We should not be too hard on Jacob, for he was in a difficult situation. He had the directions of God to follow, and having done what was right by making peace with his brother, he could not merely just do what he said! Something like this is not too far from the truth of human relationships that we see played out all around us, for when peace is established between people, a 'senior' partner will often immediately assume that others will therefore do what they say – but that is domination, it is not God's will!

Jacob's reply to Esau also reveals the difference between the two brothers. In their youth, Esau had been the hunter and Jacob had been the one who 'stayed at home' (25:27), but this

translated into Esau the adult War-lord and Jacob the adult Shepherd. It was Jacob whose life reflected the character of Almighty God and not Esau, and although reconciliation had been achieved, God had a separate will for each of them. There could be no future for them together, or even for Jacob under the protection of Esau; Jacob was genuinely concerned for the range of people under his care as well as animals, but Esau was only concerned about his warriors. Although Jacob and Esau left on relatively good terms, the history of their descendants, Israel and Esau is littered with trouble and war.

It is sometimes said that Jacob's statement that he would 'come to my lord in Seir' (33:14) in disingenuous, even indicating some trickery on his part to try and escape the clutches of his brother. Unfortunately, some use this to try and demonstrate the on-going character of Jacob for deception, but the truth is that the Bible presents Jacob as a man reformed and re-made by God after the experience at Peniel (32:22f.), and this passage does not illustrate anything more than Jacob's concern to leave Esau. For all we know, Jacob did indeed keep his promise to visit his brother at a later time, but it is not important to the writers of Scripture to include anything except that which tells us of the salvation history of humanity.

In the final exchange between Jacob and Esau, Esau offered Jacob the protection of some of his men; it was a generous offer, and we should see from this that Esau had probably accepted the different paths that the brothers now walked. It was a gesture that Jacob politely rejected, for it would leave him dependent upon his brother and not on God alone; the God who had brought him on an incredible journey in terms of time and length of travel, and of maturity and also faith. God had not let him down, and he was under God's protection.

Settlement at Succoth

For an unknown period of time, Jacob settled at Succoth. The place has been traditionally identified as an ancient mound (archaeologically indicating a place of settlement) to the north of the Jabbok river in the Gilead hills. There is in fact no particular reason for this identification, other than Jewish tradition associated with the site. We should not be too worried about the exact location, because neither is Scripture. The word 'Succoth' is the same word used in the sentence to refer to the sheds or shelters that Jacob built for his cattle (33:17).

The important thing about this sentence is to note that Jacob began to act like a man who was about to settle down, for he 'built a house' (33:17). Clearly, he moved on from this region (in the next sentence) but this small episode is inserted into Scripture to indicate to us that Jacob was speaking the truth (33:13). After the long journey (around 400 miles) from Paddan-Aram in Mesopotamia, the family and the flocks and herds needed substantial rest before Jacob could embark upon the final phase of his God given call; to settle in the Promised Land. It is only a small verse, but it indicates care and providence on the part of God, through Jacob.

Arriving in the Promised Land

Jacob's arrival in the Promised Land is an important moment for Scripture. If you read many versions of the Bible, you will read something like this 'Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem ...' and you will notice that I have not translated the passage in this way. I have taken the arguments of the evangelical scholar Gordon Wenham (in his Word Commentary on Genesis) in which he points out that the word usually translated 'safely' is in fact a form of the word 'shalom' which was a common place name in ancient times; here, Saleem. This was a small settlement near to a place called 'Shechem'. This last fact is a little confusing, because the next story in Genesis (Gen 34) is a story about a man called Shechem whose father was Hamor, and he is mentioned in verse 19 of our passage.

Shechem was an ancient trading city situated in the main Canaanite hill range between Mount Ebal (to the north) and mount Gerazim (to the south) and is now known as Nablus. It is common in Scripture, however, for place names and people's names to be similar, and this is a case in point, so we must be clear that the main reference to Shechem in this passage is to the man we meet in the next chapter of Genesis (34) rather than to the city. Jacob began his settlement of Canaan by buying a plot of land near the settlement of Saleem from Shechem's father Hamor. The price paid for a substantial plot was one hundred of some measure of money or silver that is unknown. This makes it difficult to know whether Jacob had a good or a bad bargain, but it was a far larger settlement than Jacob's grandfather Abraham had previously purchased from the Hittites (23:17f.)