

“Reconciliation” | Genesis 33 (He Who Wrestles with God: A Study of the Life of Jacob)

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(Small Group Discussion Questions on Page 7)

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks, “**Why is it often easier for us to acknowledge our sins before God than before another believer?**” God is holy, a perfect judge. And yet it is easier to rely our sins to him than to speak them before a brother or sister.

This is a good question, and raises a point. When it comes to spiritual vitality, we often separate our relationship with God from our relationships with people. But what if our willingness to be honest with another, to be loving toward another, is as much a barometer of spiritual life as a morning quiet time?

The Bible will not let us separate the vertical and horizontal relationships. Not only does our life with God impact life with others. But our life with others, reveals and perfects our life with God: “**If anyone says, ‘I love God,’” writes John, “and hates his brother, he is a liar”** (1 John 4:20); “**If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”** (1 John 4:12). Our relating toward others is a barometer and boost to our relationship with God.

This truism comes to the fore for Jacob in Genesis 33. His relationship with God has been transformed through a night of wrestling with God (Gen 32). But this does not set him into a life of repose. Rather, he rises from the dust only to see his most challenging human relationship marching towards him:

And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him” (Gen 33:1).

The brother he deceived. The brother who wanted him dead. He will now have to face after twenty years of estrangement. How will we know if Jacob has been transformed by God? By how he relates to his brother.

Jacob’s reunion with his brother is a case in reconciliation. We’ll learn important movements about reconciliation through it: **(1) Jacob Must Right His Wrongs; (2) Esau Must Choose Mercy.** But we also must step back and ask how the vertical and horizontal axes relate in this passage—how does Jacob’s renewed relationship with God relate to his renewed relationship with Esau? *What does wrestling with God have to do with reconciling with another?* This will take us to a third observation: **(3) Spiritual growth is a 45-degree angle.**

So here is a roadmap: **(1) Jacob Rights His Wrongs. (2) Esau Chooses Mercy. (3) Spiritual Growth Is a 45 Degree Angle.**

I. Jacob Rights His Wrongs

As Esau approaches, we wonder what Jacob will do. Across a span of dessert, these four hundred men must have been a foreboding sight. Previously, Jacob's tactic has been to put everything he could between himself and Esau.

Several times in the previous Jacob had things "pass on ahead of him" (Gen 32:16, 21) toward Esau. His messengers. His gifts. The messengers were to say to Esau, "Jacob is behind us" (32:18). Worst of all, late in the previous night Jacob sent the women and children ahead of him, while he retreated across the Jabbok alone.

As our current scene begins, we worry he is doing the same—dividing up his camp to minimize losses, placing himself at the back for self-preservation:

"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. (33:1-2).

But then we get to verse 3, and realize that Jacob has been changed by his night with God:

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).

Jacob goes first, not knowing what might happen. He owns the risk. Jacob bows down as Esau approaches. And Jacob will present to his brother more than a gift, verse 11, he will offer to him a blessing: "Please accept my blessing that is brought to you" (Gen 33:11).

Jacob is preparing to right his wrongs, and doing so by three actions:

First, ownership. By going first, Jacob signals that he has to face Esau honestly, with nothing between the two men. This is very risky, but Jacob knows he must bear.

Second, humility. We see Jacob "bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother." (Gen 33:3).

This is not a slight bend at the waist. Jacob is laying prostrate with his "nose and forehead to the ground." It is "a symbol of submission made before a superior."¹ And seven times!

When Jacob stole Esau's blessing their father Isaac spoke over Jacob, Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you (Gen 27:29). Ironically, Jacob must know humble himself by bowing before his brother.

¹ The term denotes touching nose and forehead to the ground in a prostrate position as a symbol of submission before a superior." (Waltke, Genesis, 453).

Third, restitution. Restitution comes from the word meaning “restore.” It means to restore again what has been taken or stolen. With Jacob’s gift, we realize he is trying to repay Esau for the stolen blessing. Esau, taking in this entourage of animals and people, asked,

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.” (33:8-9).

But Jacob insists. “Jacob said, “No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand” (33:10a).

Then notice in verse 11 Jacob switches from calling his offering to Esau “my present” to calling it “my blessing”: “Please accept my blessing that is brought to you” (Gen 33:11).

Blessing! This is the very thing that Jacob had stolen from his brother. You might imagine what it felt like for Jacob to use this phrase, *my blessing*, before his brother. Jacob is trying to give back what he had taken.

Like Jacob, we experience broken relationships. And like Jacob, the fracture can be largely our own doing. If we have relationships that are broken, before we take any action to restore them, we should wrestle long with God. We ask God to prepare our hearts to take ownership for our part. God will reveal to us our wrongdoing. We ask God to give us the courage to move toward reconciliation, to go to the brother or sister we’ve hurt, knowing there is a risk of rejection. And only by living much before God, will we be able to humble ourselves, lower our pride, so we can admit to our wrongdoings not just before God, but before the face of those we have wronged.

Jacob’s night of wrestling with God transformed his relationship with God. But it also prepared him to right his wrongs before Esau. Esau, in fact, became the relationship that would test and grow Jacob’s relationship with God.

[T] Let us now see how Esau responds. And with this we come to our second point: *Esau Chooses Mercy*.

II. Esau Chooses Mercy

We know nothing about Esau’s life the past twenty years. Moving with four hundred men, it appears he has been successful in his own right—but we have heard nothing about whether or not his anger at his brother has abated or deepened. Sometimes time heals. Other times time embitters. And the tension of Esau approaching with four hundred men, while Jacob limps out in front, bowing to the ground again and again, heightens the shock of verse 4 (one of the most tender passages in the Bible):

But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (33:4).

If these words seem familiar to you, it's because it seems that Jesus may have evoked them in his parable of the prodigal son. There, the estranged and sinful son returns home, wondering what his father will do to him. "But while [the son] was still a long way off" Jesus says, "his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

The surprise—or better, the shock—of this scene unfolds in two ways.

Gives Jacob His Heart: First, Esau does more than keep his sword sheathed. Perhaps would could have anticipated a cordial greeting, where Esau gave Jacob at least a chance to explain himself. But instead, we find Esau running—something no self-respecting ancient leader of four hundred men would do. And Esau throws his arms around his brother and kisses him. Esau does more than give his brother a pass—he gives him his heart. As the two converse in verses 5-11, while Jacob continues to refer to Esau as "my lord," Esau instead refers to Jacob as "my brother" (v.9)!

Gives Jacob Freedom: Second, Esau gives Jacob relief, even freedom. How so? He does this by finally accepting Jacob's gift.

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. (33:10-11).

E.g., giving back \$100 dollars: imagine you have stolen a hundred dollars from someone. Years later you admit it. You offer to give them 100 dollars after you apologize. But they refuse it. You walk away and still have some guilt—they are out 100 dollars because of you. But if they accept it, they further your experience of relief.

Even when receiving a gift of restitution does not adequately make up for the loss, it is an act of mercy toward the offender, for it further frees them from the burden of their wrongdoing. If Esau rejects this offering from Jacob, he leaves Jacob burdened by his guilt. By accepting it, he relieves Jacob's guilty conscience, he frees his brother from the prison of guilt.

This is all part of the mercy that pours forth from Esau. Our passage has, in fact, a flavor of mercy. Though the word doesn't appear, twice we hear of God's "gracious gift" (vv 5, 11); and twice we hear Jacob asking for "favor" from Esau (vv 8, 10). It's all the same word in the original, which means "mercy, bending or stooping in kindness toward an inferior."²

Here we are reminded of the difference between an apology and reconciliation. It is always possible to offer an apology, to seek to make right what one did wrong. But reconciliation is two-ways. The offended party must answer the one making amends with mercy and

² חָנָן *chanan*, *khaw-nan*; to bend or stoop in kindness to an inferior; to favor, bestow; causatively to implore (i.e. move to favor by petition):—beseech, x fair, (be, find, shew) favour(-able), be (deal, give, grant (gracious(-ly)), intreat, (be) merciful, have (shew) mercy (on, upon), have pity upon, pray, make supplication, x very. "Strong's Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary of the Old Testament.

forgiveness. This, of course, is not always easy, not always so simple. And in this life, there will be times when a warm reconciled relationship just may not be possible.

Esau's reaction or mercy reminds us of something important. We who have been shown mercy by God, despite our sinfulness toward him, must follow His example and seek to show mercy towards others. This is especially true when others may offer us an apology and try (although imperfectly) to make up for what they've done.

If righting our wrongs means getting past our pride, so too does showing mercy.

[T] Finally, let's consider how this scene of reconciliation becomes a bigger spiritual breakthrough for Jacob; or, how this represents that spiritual growth happens at a 45-degree angle.

III. Spiritual Growth Is a 45-Degree Angle.

I want you to picture a graph with a *vertical* and *horizontal* axis. The vertical represents love toward God. The horizontal represents love toward others. Now consider two biblical examples where these two realities are intertwined.

- The Ten Commandments: The first four are all about our relationship with God. The following six are all about our relationships with other people.
- The two great commandments, quotes by Jesus and written in the Old Testament, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself."

Throughout Scripture this is a spiritual law: our relationship with God impacts our relationship with others; and our relationship with others both reflects and affects our relationship with God.

Jacob's Relationship with God shapes his relationship with Esau: It gave him courage to face the possible wrath of his brother. It humbled him. It made him more honest. Jacob doesn't walk humbly toward Esau unless he has first been humbled by God. Jacob's *relationship* with God impacted his relationship with Esau.

Jacob's relationship with Esau impacts his relationship with God: I want to also ask how Jacob's relationship with Esau impacts his relationship with God. For, I believe we see in this scene that by reconciling with Esau, Jacob sees more of the face of God, and finds more of the peace of God.

Discord Before: Consider the state of Jacob's soul before reconciliation with Esau. It was disfigured by a break at such a deep level—conflict and estrangement with one's own brother. There is a type of pain, even agony here, that would include fear, guilt, resentment, worry, dread. It included living under projections of the imagination—Jacob assuming Esau was coming

to murder him. And how can Jacob properly love God, while hating his brother? As Saint John states:

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 John 4:20).

Even as Jacob grows closer to God while he is alone at the Jabbok at night, there will still be a barrier to his intimacy with God and his experience of God's peace. And that barrier is his broken relationship with Esau

Peace After: But as he moves outward to reconcile that, he soars further upward in his enjoyment of God's blessing. Just consider the emotion again of verse 4, where we see a *breakthrough to reunion, to community, to life:*

At first verse four seems all about what Esau is doing: *Esau ran to meet Jacob; Esau embraced Jacob. Esau fell upon Jacob's neck. Esau kissed Jacob* (33:4).

But then, with the last words, the tense changes from singular to plural, and we read (not that Esau wept), "*and they wept.*"

Never together like this: Formerly, the brothers stand opposed, each doing different actions. Jacob is limping. Esau is running. Jacob is bowing down. Esau is embracing. Jacob is giving back. Esau is receiving. But now, for the first time ever (remember they were already in conflict in the womb, Gen 25), the brothers dissolve into one, united action: *weeping*. And we can almost feel the peace of God flowing through these tears. As the Psalmist sings:

"How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! ² It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!" (Ps 133:1-2).

In Life Together, Bonhoeffer further explains that by being honest with a brother or sister in Christ, by confessing our wrongs before them, we actually experience a *breakthrough to true life*. Why? Because such an act before another kills our pride—which God resists—and therefore ushers us into the presence of Christ:

In the profound spiritual and physical pain of humiliation before another believer, which means before God, we experience the cross of Jesus as our deliverance and salvation. The old humanity dies, but God has triumphed over it. Now we share in the resurrection of Christ and eternal life.³

I don't know if you have ever had this experience. The experience when, because you humbled yourself before someone, and sought to make right what you did wrong—and they forgave

³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Fortress Press), 111.

you—that you tasted of the love and peace of God in a way you scarcely ever have before. This is why, I think, Jacob can liken what’s happening with Esau to seeing God:

“I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God” (33:10).

He can say this, because seeing the face of a brother or sister with whom sin has been replaced by repentance and forgiveness, is to see the face of God, is to know God himself: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

Close: Let me close with two words—a caution, and invitation.

Caution: One example of reconciliation in the Bible does not mean any attempts we make at reconciliation will go like this. There will be times reconciling with someone is impossible, for many different reasons. And the astute reader will note that after this reunion, Jacob and Esau part ways—Esau going southward to Seir (Gen 33:14) (outside the promise land)—and Jacob heading north-west toward Succoth (33:17) then Shechem (33:18). Face to face they came, but they were not destined to live side-by-side. Sometimes this is the case here and now. We reconcile, but due to different callings, we go our separate ways. But no longer in hate, but peace.

Invitation: but more than any note of caution, the story of Jacob’s reconciliation with Esau is an invitation for all of us toward spiritual growth. Alongside our quiet times, our church worship, our private prayer, might there be an Esau in our life that God is calling us to make amends with? If so, wrestle with God about this. Let him prepare your heart. For it very well may be, that in pursuing the healing of that relationship lies a deeper breakthrough into the peace and joy of Christ than you could imagine.

But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (33:4).

That is a weeping we would rejoice to know more of.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. Consider Jacob’s actions as Esau approaches—he goes first (v.3) and he bows down (v.3). What does this tell us about the posture we must take when approaching someone we have wronged?
2. Consider Esau’s shocking response to Jacob (v.4). Have you ever been surprised by mercy like this? How does Esau’s reaction toward Jacob remind us of God’s reaction towards a sinner who repents? Do you picture God racing toward you to embrace you when you humble yourself before him?
3. Do you have a relationship that has been broken? How might wrestling with God impact how you think about that relationship? If you experience fear, or regret, because of things you’ve done in that relationship, how might wrestling with God help you face these things?
4. Read Ephesians 2:11-13. How does God reconcile us to himself and one another?