

Genesis 32:1-21, No. 53
“How to Handle our Problems”
April 23, 2017
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Remember where we are. Jacob had left Haran after twenty years there a virtual slave of his Uncle Laban, but a wiser and a wealthier man, and had returned to the borders of the Promised Land. Finally separated from Laban, his grasping father-in-law, he now had to face Esau, his brother, who had been, you remember, the reason Jacob fled the Promised Land twenty years before. In the next section of this history we have three scenes, two in chapter 32 and one in chapter 33. In chapter 32 Jacob first prepared to meet Esau (vv. 1-21, our text this morning) and then met the Lord instead at Peniel (vv. 22-32). Then in chapter 33 we read of Jacob and Esau’s reconciliation. Along the way we are given, as we are given throughout these narratives, important instruction in the Christian way of life.

Text Comment

- v.1 We are probably to understand that these are the same angels who had met him at Bethel, it is in any case the same phrase, “angels of God” that we found in 28:12. Now they form a bodyguard, as it were, to escort him back to the Promised Land. Such a ministry is provided for all the saints, as we read in Psalm 34:4-8. In any case, the narrator opens the vertical dimension of the story before the horizontal, a point to which we will return. Jacob was being protected by an army of angels as the next verse suggests.
- v.5 Notice the way Jacob spoke to Esau. Jacob represented himself as the servant; Esau as the lord; the exact reverse of the blessing which Jacob had stolen from his brother years before. Remember, Isaac’s blessing, intended for Esau but given to Jacob, was that the elder, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob. But Jacob’s sin had made it impossible to enjoy, at least at present, the privileges of that blessing. Indeed, the blessing had become instead a threat to his very life. Or, perhaps, Jacob, now penitent, was as much as trying to give back the blessing to Esau that he stole from him years before, at least as far as it could be given back.
- v.6 The brevity and ambiguity of the report increase the tension. Is Esau coming to provide a royal welcome to his brother or to kill him? If the latter, why did he let the messengers return unharmed and so permit Jacob to prepare for Esau's arrival? Or does Esau want Jacob to quiver in fear until the blow is finally struck?
- v.8 Unable to retreat, which would violate the agreement he made with Laban, unable to flee with his large family and so much livestock, the most that Jacob can hope to do is to minimize his losses. [Sarna, 224]
- v.11 Standing on the banks of the Jabbok, he can point to the Jordan visible in the distance. [Sarna, 225]

- v.12 No longer able to manipulate situations to his own advantage, and recognizing that his destiny lies in God's hands, Jacob can only plead for grace. That he did so is certainly indication of a spiritual transformation in the man. [Waltke, 443]
- v.16 The purpose of the gifts, as Jacob will explain in v. 20, was to pacify or mollify his brother. And Jacob organized the gift to make the greatest possible impression! One herd followed on another, each making the gift seem larger and larger.
- v.20 The word translated "appease," is *kipper*, the ordinary Hebrew verb meaning "to atone," or "to offer a ransom," or "to propitiate." This is what the sacrifices in the tabernacle and the temple would do to God: pacify his righteous anger. "It is no less appropriate to pacify an offended brother than to appease an offended God" but, of course, we had no means of doing the latter so God had to provide the sacrifice himself, which he did in sending Jesus as a sacrifice for sin.

The threat that loomed over Jacob and his entourage as they neared the Promised Land was, of course, Esau, his brother, whom he had not seen for twenty years, but who long ago vowed to kill Jacob for stealing his blessing. Jacob had no reason to believe that his brother's attitude toward him had changed. But in an effort to find out where matters stood he sent messengers ahead with a greeting for Esau that was humble and submissive to the point of being obsequious. In any case, the old manipulative, scheming Jacob makes no appearance here. Jacob seems a very different man than the much younger fellow who fled Canaan years before. Here he threw himself on the mercy of his brother, virtually seeking with his words and his lavish gift to undo the crime he committed against him years before. His destiny he knew was in Esau's hands and God's. All he could do was hope for his brother's favor. In any case, there seems to have been no thought of his not returning to the Promised Land. He would have to face his brother; God expected that of him.

But the messengers returned with unsettling news. Unable to discover exactly what Esau's intentions were, they reported the disturbing facts that Esau had already heard of Jacob's approach, was coming to meet his brother, and that he was not alone; he had a standard size militia with him!

Jacob's response to this news was three-fold. First he divided his own entourage in hopes that, in the event of the worst, some would survive. And then Jacob prayed. *This is the first prayer of Jacob recorded in the Genesis history and, for whatever reason, the only extended prayer reported in Genesis.* And, finally, following the prayer, he sent ahead a very large and impressive gift to his brother – 550 animals – in hopes of pacifying him.

Here, I think very clearly the narrator presents Jacob as an example, a pattern for the godly to follow. Remember Jacob is the progenitor of the nation of Israel. They are to learn from him, both what not to do and what to do. This is not only a lesson in reconciliation with someone you have offended, as Jacob had offended Esau, but a lesson in how to deal with all the problems and fears of life. And the lesson comes in two parts.

I. First, Jacob attended to and established the right vertical relationship, his relationship with God, before attacking the horizontal problem, the danger posed by his brother.

The narrator teaches us the same lesson in the opening verses of chapter 32. The vertical must come first. The first thing to know about Jacob's situation as he returned to the Promised Land was that the angels of God were with him. The problems he had to face were to be considered only in view of the fact that God was with Jacob, as he had been with him to bless and keep him through the long twenty years in Paddan Aram. That had not changed. As John Newton put it,

His love in times past, forbids me to think,
He'll leave me at last in troubles to sink.

It's not very good poetry, but it is very good theology and sound faith. The first thing is always to remember that it is much more important that you have the angels of God on your side than that you have a powerful man against you. *If God be for us, who can be against us?*

And if that is true objectively – the supremacy of the Almighty – which is surely the first presupposition of a believer's life, then it follows by rigorous necessity that the love, the faithfulness, and the promises of God should be the first and foremost consideration in a believer's approach to any problem or difficulty. Here Jacob is obviously an example for us. He turned to God and uttered his prayer, a model prayer; we know that because it's the only prayer of any such length in the book of Genesis and because it is made so much more notable because of what we know about Jacob's past. *Jacob started with God; that is the point, something he had failed to do before.*

His was a prayer of faith. He embraced the covenant God made with his grandfather and father and then with himself, and also the promises that God had made specifically to him at Bethel twenty years before. He reminded God of the promise he made when he told Jacob to leave Paddan Aram and return to the Promised Land. In his prayer he repeated God's own words back to him and took his stand on the promises that God had made. "Lord, my God, I'm in terrible straits, *but you have said...*" It seems, it always seems when we encounter this in the Bible, a daring, a too-daring approach. It seems as if Jacob is almost lecturing God, warning him not to break his word, or that Jacob is reminding God of a promise he made to Jacob as if God might otherwise forget or fail to keep his word. Who is Jacob, after all, to lecture God!

But from the beginning to the end of the Bible that is the nature of true prayer. As one wise commentator put it, "To keep to his word the God who keeps his word is the way of all true prayer. Upon what else can Jacob rely but upon the promise of God, and how else can he do so but by praying?" [Delitzsch in Wenham, ii, 291] You always have this boldness in claiming God's word in the prayers of the Bible. It is characteristic of Moses' prayers, of David's prayers, of all the petitionary prayers of the Psalms, of Jeremiah's prayers. And so it has been true of the prayers of the saints through the ages as we have the record of them. It is the feature that one first notices when one takes up one of the greatest books of Protestant prayers, Lancelot Andrewes' *Private Devotions*. In prayer after prayer, we have simply God's own words prayed back to him; the man or woman of prayer asking nothing more nor less but that God should be true to his word on behalf of this poor man or woman who is kneeling before him. Virtually every line of those wonderful prayers is the Bible itself turned into prayer!

And, surely, you and I cannot read this prayer of Jacob and note its character as an appeal to the covenant and the word and the promise of God and not immediately confess that our prayers are far

too often defective in just this way. There is not nearly enough of God's own word and promise in them and in the argument of them. *There is too little of what God has said to us in what we say to God.*

Thomas Goodwin, that expert of all the many Puritan experts in the life of faith and prayer, used to counsel his theological students at Oxford to “thicken” their prayers with biblical teaching. [Whyte, *Apostle Paul*, 87] That is a good way to put it. You know what you want to ask of God. You know what you need and want from his hand in your present predicament or infirmity or danger or sorrow. But, your prayer would be more a Christian prayer, a prayer of real faith, if it were “thickened” with the Word of God and if you made your request in that form of words that made it an appeal to God to keep the promises he had made to you.

“Lord you have said that you will be a God to me and to my children, but my child worries me now for the lack of the evidences of true faith. Be a God to my son, my daughter, as you have promised, O Lord; as you made this promise the very cornerstone of your covenant, this promise to be my God and the God of my children; Lord now show your mercy unto your children’s children.” Or,

“Lord you have said in your Word that you will deliver your children from their sins, separate them from your children as far as the east is from the west, and remember them no more. Lord, I have sins I want you to forget just as you promised you would. As you promised, bury these sins of mine in the deepest sea, cast them behind your back, and trample them under your feet. And you have said that you live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. Lord, I beg you be true to that promise and that word that I read in your holy Word. Make me truly contrite and please, please dwell with me!”

And there need never be an end of praying like that because there is no end of the promises of God. Faith is the true condition of prevailing and effective prayer and this is the form that faith takes in biblical prayer – it repeats the words that God has spoken, it believes those words, and appeals to God to vindicate them. *That* is what Jacob did.

Now that kind of bold praying, that kind of holding the Almighty to his word, would be brash and utterly inappropriate if the request came from a proud heart; if one were telling God that he expected God to keep his word as if he deserved that God should wait upon him and meet his needs; as if God would be treating him unfairly if he did not do precisely as he asked.

But that is not Jacob’s spirit here. It might have been his spirit before, but, happily, it was no longer. “I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown your servant...” I suspect that confession and that humbling of Jacob’s spirit before the Lord was much longer in Jacob’s prayer than it is in this summary we are given of that prayer. I suspect Jacob went on at some length acknowledging to the Lord his utter lack of any claim on the Lord’s help. “Lord, I have broken your covenant; you could have cast me off with perfect justice. I am unworthy of the least of your mercies. I have cheated my brother in a mad dash to serve myself; I deceived my own father to get something for myself. I have been in love with myself for years on end. I have used people, sometimes terribly, and I have forgotten you and your covenant days

without number. I have no hope but your grace and no claim but your mercy and the fact that you made a covenant with me, miserable sinner that I am.” *There is the Christian spirit of prayer and that is the believer’s entire confidence in prayer.*

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” [Psalm 34:18]

“Though the Lord is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar.” [Psalm 138:6]

This bold appeal to the word and promise of God on the part of a humble and contrite heart is the prayer that avails with God, always has, always will. That is the first thing. Jacob betook himself to God and laid his case and his need before the Lord and plead for grace to help in his time of need. *Fundamental to his entire outlook was his conviction that his hopes depended absolutely upon the favor, the mercy, and the promise of God.*

II. But, then, in the second place, having laid the matter at God's feet and having looked to God for help, Jacob took appropriate action. He did not simply pray; he prayed and then he acted.

This too is the common pattern of faithful men and women in the Bible. It is a great theme in the Book of Nehemiah, for example. Again and again in that book we read of Nehemiah praying to God for help and then taking appropriate action. When enemies came against him during the rebuilding of the wall, he tells us what he did: “We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” (4:9). It reminds us of what is said to have been Oliver Cromwell’s instructions to his Puritan army, an army that never lost a battle: “Trust in God and keep your powder dry!”

Sometimes people can strike an overly pious pose, as if true faith prays but then does nothing more, as if activity on our part would suggest that we didn’t trust God to act himself. Having laid the matter at God's feet, we now wait on him to act! Were we to act it would be to admit we didn’t trust God to act. Nonsense. That isn't the Bible's teaching at all. God uses means.

I remember a delightful anecdote from a biography of Oswald Chambers, the author of one of the great classics of Christian devotion in the 20th Century, *My Utmost for Highest*. Chambers had a friend, William Quarrier, who was well known for his life of prayer. But he was also a man of action and never substituted the one for the other. One day he was driving a visiting minister to the station in a carriage. Seeing the train approaching the station and fearing he would miss it, the minister shouted, “Don’t you think we should pray about it, Mr. Quarrier?” “No, not yet,” Quarrier said, as he cracked the reins, “wait till we see what the horse can do!” [McCasland, *Oswald Chambers*, 71]

Well Jacob was now such a man. He prayed *and he took steps*. Now there is some debate about whether Jacob’s actions – sending this magnificent gift ahead to his brother – was a real act of faith, putting hands and feet to his prayer to God, or whether his actions demonstrated his lingering doubt and his fear as if he were thinking, “Just in case my prayer doesn't work, let me try this also.”

But I agree with those commentators, Calvin among them, who see Jacob, in getting the gift together and sending it on ahead, as a man of faith acting in faith. *His action was the appropriate complement to his prayer.* And chief among my reasons is this. In v. 20, where Jacob explained his reason for giving the gift of animals to Esau, he used a word, a word the ESV renders “appease,” that is also found in texts such as Proverbs 16:6 and 14.

“Through steadfast love and faithfulness sin is *atoned for*...”

“A king's wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man *will appease* it.” (v. 14) It is the same word in both cases.

The idea is to reconcile, to remove offense, by doing something. This is, as I said earlier, the same word that we encounter everywhere in the sacrificial ritual of the OT. Sin is atoned for or appeased, God is pacified or reconciled by the offering of the proper animal and the shedding and sprinkling of its blood, a picture, of course, of the death of Christ as a sacrifice for our sins.

On a human level that was what Jacob was doing: the very thing the Bible says one *ought to do*, the thing the wise man *will do*. “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him to drink.” That is what the Bible says you should do if you are estranged from someone: give that person something that he needs or wants. It is the best way to make a friend of an enemy. Give him or her something that will be valuable to them. Give them something that they will be grateful to receive. Nothing is so likely to change the way they think about you. And that is very easy to prove in human life and experience, isn't it? You tend to think well of people who are generous to you! And, very often, such a gift will make a person forget even a terrible injustice done long before, even an injustice that he or she has nursed for years.

One of the great preachers of 19th century America was John Jasper, pastor of the Sixth Mount Zion Church of Richmond, Virginia. Jasper had been a slave for years before he was converted, in fact, he was a slave *when* he became a Christian, some twenty-five years before the Civil War. He was, by his own admission, a wicked man. But then the Lord began to work in him. For some weeks, Jasper, who worked in a tobacco factory in Richmond, had been under intense conviction of sin. One morning he was working, stripping the stem from the leaf, and, as he put it, “my sins were piled on me like mountains, my feet were sinking down to the regions of despair, and I felt that of all sinners, I was the worst.” At that moment, in the midst of his work, he lifted his heart to God and cried out for mercy, and, he said, “before I knew it, the light broke; I was light as a feather, my feet were on the mountain.” He knew what had happened to him: the Lord had come to him, had forgiven his sins, and had made him a Christian, a son of God. And he couldn't contain himself, try as he might, standing there at his bench. There was an old man, up the table, who had been talking to Jasper about salvation with little success and Jasper stole away from his place, slipped round to where he was and whispered in his ear, “Hallelujah; my soul is redeemed!” Then he jumped back to his work station. But he was having a hard time concentrating. There was an old woman not far from him who he knew had been praying for him. So he slipped over to her and began to tell her what had happened to him, but couldn't hold it in and his voice got louder and louder. And soon there was a general uproar as the slaves and other workers figured out what was happening.

Then the overseer heard the commotion. Jasper recollected, “he barged into the room, and with a voice that sounded like he had his breakfast that morning on rasps and files, bellowed out: ‘What's all this row about?’ Somebody shouted that John Jasper has got religion, but that didn't work well with the boss. He told me to get back to my table, and he had something in his hand that looked ugly; it was no time for making fine points, so I said, ‘Yes, sir, I will; I meant no harm; the first taste of salvation got the better of me, but I'll get back to work.’”

Now it happened that the factory owner heard the commotion and asked the overseer what it was all about. When he learned the story he asked that Jasper be brought to him. He had John explain what had happened. For all John knew, of course, he was heading for trouble and punishment.

“Master Sam, ever since the 4th of July I've been crying after the Lord, six long weeks, and just now out there at the table God took my sins away and set my feet on a rock. I didn't mean to make any noise, Master Sam, but before I knew it the fires broke out in my soul and I just let go one shout to the glory of my Savior.”

“Then Master Sam did a thing that nearly made me drop to the floor. He got out of his chair, walked over to me, and gave me his hand and said, ‘John...your Savior is mine and we are brothers in the Lord.’ And then he said, ‘John, did you tell any of them in there about your conversion?’ And I said, ‘Yes, Master Sam, I told them before I knew it and I feel like telling everyone in the world about it. And then he said, ‘John, you may tell it. Go back in there and go up and down the tables and tell all of them. And then if you want to, go upstairs and tell them all about it, and then downstairs and tell the hogshead men and the drivers and everybody what the Lord has done for you.’ By this time Master Sam's face was raining tears and he said, ‘John, you needn't work anymore today. I give you a holiday. After you are through telling it here at the factory, go up to the house and tell your folks, go round to your neighbors and tell them.... It will do you good, do them good, and help to honor your Lord and Savior.’” And so John Jasper did and continued to do the rest of his life.

That is how you reconcile enemies. You take those actions that will mean the most to them and do the most for them. And John Jasper was still saying kind things about his old master, his one-time owner really – so sad to say – until the end of his life; about the man who gave him a holiday and told him to tell everyone of what the Lord had done for him. Not the years he spent as a slave; not the indignity, inhumanity, and the cruelty of that slavery; not the great evil that had been done to him; not even his betrayal by a fellow Christian, who should certainly have known better than to keep slaves; only the great kindness remembered, the holiday, the encouragement to share the news of his coming to faith in Christ. And so it will be: the years of Esau's bitter resentment over Jacob's deceit were forgotten; only the great gift was remembered.

So Jacob not only prayed, he did the wise thing, the responsible thing, the thing a man does who really wants to be reconciled to an enemy. He knew full well that without God's blessing, without a change in Esau's heart, his situation was hopeless, but he had done what he ought to do: he had prayed to God in a faithful way, and he had humbled himself before Esau and had given him a gift. Now he will await the will of God. *And if you would be wise you will do as Jacob did. Humble faithful prayer, followed by wise and responsible action. Trust in God and do what is right!*