

Genesis 33:1-20, No. 55
"Christ in the Face of Another"
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Text Comment

- v.1 The narrator has not relieved the suspense. We do not yet know what Esau is planning to do.
- v.2 His best-beloved he puts last, furthest from harm's way. The family, alas, is still divided in this way.
- v.4 "They wept." Esau was obviously well-disposed toward his brother and planned him no harm. The reconciliation was genuine and heartfelt. Jacob may have addressed Esau as his lord, but Esau embraced Jacob as his brother.
- v.12 Esau was asking Jacob to return with him to Seir, that is to Edom. But Jacob had been told by the Lord to return to the Promised Land. Not wanting to put any strain on their new-found brotherhood, Jacob courteously rejected his brother's offer to accompany him or to leave men to accompany him because, true enough in any case, his entourage must travel so slowly.
- v.14 Jacob left undetermined when he might come to Seir. The brothers would meet again at least once (35:29) but otherwise we hear nothing of any further relationship between them.
- v.17 As soon as Esau left for home, Jacob turned around and headed north to Succoth, where he stayed for some time.
- v.19 Abraham had come to Shechem and had built an altar there when he first arrived in the Promised Land (12:6-7).
- v.20 Here we have a summary statement that takes Jacob on to his more permanent settlement later in the Promised Land. (When chapter 34 begins, Jacob's sons were all grown men.)

"El Elohe Israel," is literally El, the God of Israel, Israel being Jacob's new name. Remember, Jacob had made a vow to the Lord at Bethel, at the time of the vision of the staircase leading up to heaven, that if God brought him back to the land of his fathers, the Lord would be his God. Jacob was fulfilling that vow. On the other hand he had also promised the Lord that he would worship the Lord *at Bethel*. It would take him ten years to fulfill that vow! The years that follow, alas, are years of spiritual idleness; not what we expect of Jacob after Peniel! More on that next week.

We come now to the final and climactic third scene in the narrative of Jacob's return to the Promised Land. It bears pondering that this account of Jacob's reconciliation with his brother Esau is the climax and clearly intended to be the climax of this part of the narrative of Jacob's life. We might well have thought that Peniel and Jacob's struggle with the Lord himself through the long night

would have been the climax. But, it is not. Peniel was the prelude to and preparation for something else, and that something else is what we have read this morning. And so it must be in our lives. God's work and presence in our lives must always lead to something else. It is never for its own sake.

What you have in this account of the brothers' reconciliation is not simply two estranged brothers finally at peace. That was God's blessing, no doubt, and part of how God kept his promise to bring Jacob home safe to the Promised Land. But there is something more than that here. Here Jacob is acting in true faith. Here Jacob is finally the very reverse of the grasping, cowardly man he had been years before. Divine grace had done its work in him. And how do we know that? Well, we know it from the way in which Jacob sought to undo the sins he had committed against his brother. Here is a man who was repudiating what he was and what he had done, and giving glory to God in his relationship with his brother. We wish we saw more of this in the world, people repudiating what they had been and what they had done!

Jacob came toward Esau, we read in v. 3, bowing down seven separate times as he approached. Then Jacob had his entire family do the same, bow down to Esau as they approached him. This was not groveling. The seven-fold bowing was, in that day, the customary show of respect by a vassal toward his lord. We know that from the *Amarna Letters*, an archeological find that has provided scholars with much information about the culture of that time and place. In other words, Jacob was not acting in fear. He had already met the Lord and received the Lord's promise of blessing. The limp with which he walked as he approached his brother was a constant reminder of his new name, "Israel." The Lord himself had told Jacob, apparently just a few hours before Jacob met Esau, that, having struggled with God and man, he had overcome. Bowing down to his brother was not an act of desperation, an effort to manipulate him. It was an act of faith, of freedom, of humility, and of obedience. [Sarna, 229]

We see here a penitent man doing what was right. He ought to treat his brother in this way; he ought to humble himself before Esau. He ought to give back to Esau the blessing that he stole from him twenty years before. And that is exactly what Jacob was doing – giving back the blessing. At least so far as that could be done on the human level, Jacob was doing it. You see, Jacob's bowing down to Esau *exactly reversed the blessing that Jacob stole from his brother years before*. Isaac, remember, had said to Jacob, when he thought he was Esau, "...may the sons of your mother *bow down to you*." [27:29] But here Jacob was reversing that order and bowing down to Esau.

You see that same reversal in other things Jacob did. He waited for his brother to speak first in v. 5. This too was the etiquette of a vassal/lord relationship, as was Jacob's addressing his brother as his lord and referring to himself as Esau's servant. The blessing that Jacob had stolen years before amounted to the promise that the elder would serve the younger. But here the younger, by his own choice, out of the freedom of his faith, was taking the form of a servant toward his brother.

All of this is confirmed in the most powerful way in v. 11. The word the "blessing" is precisely the same word we find in 27:35, 36, where we read Esau lamenting *the blessing* his brother had stolen from him. What Jacob had stolen, he now sought to give back. Jacob, by the grace of God, was free to give back the blessing and wanted to do so. In this way he expressed both the forgiveness he had received from God and his gratitude toward God that he now had the wealth to enrich his brother as

compensation for what he had stolen from him years before, those 550 animals that he had sent ahead as a gift. Jacob was showing his strength in God by taking a position of weakness relative to Esau. The gifts he gave to his brother had not come from Isaac. They were his property to give freely. What is more, it was legally Jacob's right to expect his brother to bow to him. His father's blessing, after all, had been given to him, no matter the deceit that had led Isaac to bless Jacob instead of Esau. But Jacob now knew that he did not need to manipulate or beguile or cheat to find God's favor for himself and his loved ones; he did not have to worry about his welfare. The Lord would provide; he had promised Jacob that he would. This confidence delivered Jacob from his fears and enabled him finally to treat his brother in a manner consistent with his faith in God and secure a reconciliation that would have been impossible on any other terms. Remember, Esau was not being bought off here. He was powerful enough to take everything he wanted. He had his four hundred men. But Jacob was fresh from Peniel. His faith in God was at full flood.

Years ago I preached at a Banner of Truth pastors' conference in San Diego. And when I wasn't preaching I listened to the preaching of others. One of the sermons was that of the late John Marshall, then the long-serving pastor of a Congregational Church in Hemel Hempstead, northwest of London. In that sermon he recollected having conducted a wedding some years before. The bride was the daughter of a man who had served on a merchantman during the dark days of the German blockade of Great Britain during the Second World War. He had been a marine engineer, responsible for the ship's power plant. He was down in the engine room when his ship was torpedoed and was only just able to get out in time. Others working in that same place did not escape because the heavy water-tight doors shut when the ship was hit and then could not be reopened. This man made it to the deck, but because of the steep pitch of the now sinking ship, the lifeboat swung in its davits and struck him in the head, knocking him unconscious. He fell to the deck and was badly burned, for the ship was not only sinking but was on fire. A man who scrambled into the lifeboat told the ship's engineering officer, a Scot, who was already sitting in the same boat, about what had happened. That officer left his seat in the lifeboat, scrambled up the grappling net, put the unconscious and badly burned man over his shoulder, and carried him down the net to the boat. When the man woke up he had no idea how he had gotten into the lifeboat. The ship's officer, however, had seen someone else in need when he was on the deck rescuing this man and went back to get that man. The ship took both of them down with her when she sank.

John Marshall said that his point in that wedding sermon was this: "We wouldn't be here today if it weren't for that Scot." You can't have a wedding without a bride, you can't have a bride without a daughter, and you can't have a daughter without a father. We wouldn't be here today without that Scot, without the sacrifice he made at such terrible cost to himself.

Now he wasn't saying that the Scottish hero was a Christian, apparently there wasn't any evidence of that. But he was saying that the world that we live in is supercharged with meaning, and, in particular, is supercharged with intimations of the unseen world and its reality, of the gospel and its nature and character. Here was a man who lived because of the sacrifice of another, a man who had nothing to do whatsoever with his own deliverance and owed his life to another. The application to the gospel and to Christian faith is so obvious it did not need to be stated. *The Scot was Christ and we are the marine engineer!* It is moving and wonderful to hear such stories precisely because we all feel the beautiful goodness, the supreme goodness, in such an act. And what is the gospel but a message about a supreme self-sacrifice, more terrible by far, yet infinitely more wonderful, a

sacrifice that accomplished the salvation not of one man, and not his temporal deliverance only, but the eternal salvation of a multitude no man can number.

Christianity, you know, is the only religion in the world that has such a supreme sacrifice, such love and self-giving at its very heart. I am reminded of the remark of Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist, alas no friend of Christianity and certainly no friend of the Spanish conquest, who nevertheless wrote:

“One can only imagine the astonishment of the hundreds and thousands of Indians who asked for baptism as they came to realize that they were being asked to adore a God who sacrificed Himself for men instead of asking men to sacrifice themselves to gods, as the Aztec religion demanded.” [In *FT* (May 1999), 37]

Well, we have a similar intimation, a similar picture here. Jacob is a Christ-figure in this history. In humble self-effacement, he gave up his rights and humbled himself and so reconciled his brother. In the same way the Son of God gave up his rights and humbled himself in order that he might reconcile the world to himself. Reality is here woven into history! Or, better, Christ has left his fingerprint on this history.

I don't mean to say that we should necessarily think that the point of this history, as it is recorded in Genesis 33, is precisely to foreshadow the self-giving of Christ. The Scot officer did not save the marine engineer in order to illustrate the gospel, however wonderfully his act did in fact call to mind Christ's sacrifice. There are, after all, some very important differences between Jacob and the Lord Christ. Jacob was seeking to undo the consequences of his own sins and Christ had no sins of his own to repent of or seek to undo. Esau was not, by any stretch of biblical teaching, an image of the people of God who are saved by the self-sacrifice of Christ. He was precisely *not* that by the express teaching of the Bible.

But, surely, we are to take notice of the fact that as soon as Jacob received his truly Christian name, the name that was his reward for a true and living faith in God, he acted in a truly Christ-like, humble, self-sacrificing way and accomplished in a small way precisely that reconciliation that our Savior accomplished in the greatest conceivable way by his own self-giving.

But it is not simply that in Jacob's behavior toward Esau he took a Christ-like part and revealed for us the self-effacing and self-sacrificing character of the Lord Jesus. More than that, Jacob served and honored his Savior in his brother Esau, in this brother whom he had wronged long years before. *It is not just that we can see Christ in Jacob. It is also the case that Jacob saw Christ in Esau.*

Surely the statement that caught your attention as we read the text, is the statement Jacob made to his brother in v. 10: “For to see your face is like seeing the face of God,” a statement made more remarkable by its close similarity to the statement Jacob made at Peniel just hours before (32:30) to the effect that he had seen God's face and yet his life had been spared. *Jacob, now saw things as he had not before.* He was seeing his relationship with his brother in a way he had never understood it before. Now he was looking upon the world and upon his circumstances with true faith in God. And so it was that he saw Esau and treated Esau as one who stood in God's place.

Now it is not easy to explain how this was so. For Esau was not like God in any particular way. He was not. He had not even chosen to remain in the Promised Land; he was living in Moab. He was not a man who was concerned with the covenant God had made with his family. However attractive a character he may have been in other ways at this moment, he had no taste for divine things and for the life of faith. It was not Esau that made his face seem like God's face to Jacob.

It was Jacob's faith and Jacob's experience of God's mercy that turned Esau into a representative of God to him and caused him to see in Esau's reconciliation with him the acceptance and the reconciliation he had been granted by God. Everything now for Jacob had to do with his relationship to God. In Jacob's eyes, even his offended brother Esau, even the Esau he had so much feared, was important primarily for the way in which Esau played a role in Jacob's own relationship with God. Esau's weeping with him, receiving him, and being reconciled to him was to Jacob the living proof of what *God had done* for him. Esau was the mirror in which Jacob saw the Lord. Esau's hand was God's hand extending favor to Jacob.

Our Savior taught us a similar thing when he said that when we clothe the naked, or visit the lonely, or give food to the hungry, we are as much doing all of that to him. In that way we see our Savior's face in the face of others, in the face of everyone whom we treat in a way that betrays our faith in Christ, in the face of everyone who is or can be for us in some way a mirror of the merciful and gracious Lord as we have experienced him ourselves. And precisely because we have to do with our Lord and Savior in every one we meet and in every relationship of our lives, relationships with others and our treatment of others become the stage upon which our faith acts out the drama of our encounter and walk with God. You remember how St. Patrick put this in his *Breastplate*:

“Christ beneath me; Christ above me; Christ in quiet; Christ in danger; *Christ in hearts of all that love me; Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*”

It is for this reason that over and over again Jesus taught us that we are to treat others, we are to conduct ourselves toward others *in imitation of what he has done for us and given to us. That is, our relationship with Christ is to determine the character of our relationship with others.* We are to walk with God and Christ in and through the interchange we have with others. His way *with us* is to shape and determine our way *with others.*

This is what Jacob did. He didn't explain all of this to Esau, but he treated his brother as a man should who had learned to hate his sins, who was grateful for an immense mercy shown him, and who was now happy to leave the issue of his life to the one who had promised to care for him. He sought to honor God in Esau so Esau became the face of God to him.

And so Paul tells us to be kind and compassionate and to forgive others *as we have been forgiven in Christ*, to live a life of love just *as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*, and to carry each other's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. And Peter tells us to bear the insults of others humbly and patiently and graciously as Christ did when he suffered the hatred of others for our sake. Faith had made Jacob *Christocentric*; Christ defined the meaning of his life and Christ's love ordered his behavior and was shaping his relationships with others.

If you and I, brothers and sisters, were only more sharp-sighted, we might see countless times a day the Lord Christ in the face of others, even our children, and would find countless opportunities to express and to embody our own experience of God's grace in Christ in our conversations with and treatment of them. Only rarely does such an opportunity arise to go back aboard a burning ship to lay down one's life for another. But there are in this fallen world unending opportunities to draw out of one's own experience of God's grace an appropriate way of dealing with other human beings and so find Christ in their faces. If he or she is someone who has sinned against us, the forgiveness that Christ has extended to us should make us forgiving toward him or her. If it is someone we have sinned against, God's mercy to us in defiance of our sins should cause us to forsake our pride and acknowledge our sins and seek forgiveness from that person. If it is someone who is in need or suffering in some way, God's meeting our desperate need ought to make us the most caring friend. And on it goes. Let me illustrate this.

There was a man who lived in England at the end of the 18th and through the first half of the 19th century. He was an enemy of the church and the gospel of Christ. His name was William Hone. He was regarded as the 'arch-blasphemer' of England in his day and for some of his blasphemous parodies of the Litany, the Athanasian Creed, and the Anglican Catechism he was arrested and tried at the Old Bailey. He was acquitted, though primarily for technical reasons having to do with the precise wording of the law against blasphemy. Still he was widely regarded as an arch-enemy of the Christian church; the Mary Baker Eddy, Larry Flynt, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, or Christopher Hitchens of his day.

But the tragedy of William Hone is that he was the product of a Calvinistic Christian home. His parents belonged to a particular sect of Calvinists in England in those days, the followers of William Huntington, who were distinguished by their antagonism toward Arminianism and Arminians. These people spoke with open hatred of John Wesley, the Arminian leader. To the Huntingtonians, Wesley was the apostle of error and a child of the devil because of his denial of sovereign grace.

It happened that Hone was educated in a school, strange to say, whose headmistress was a Wesleyan. Well, she fell ill and the boy, because he was one of her favorite pupils, was allowed to visit her. Once when he was with her in her sickroom a visitor was announced and it proved to be none other than John Wesley himself in his old age. The boy at first was thoroughly alarmed because, of course, he had been brought up to regard Wesley as the devil incarnate.

“There entered the venerable old man, his silvered hair hanging down to his shoulders, his complexion fresh and placid, his smile sweet. To the boy's amazement he seemed to have the countenance of an angel. He ministered to the lady, spoke comforting words, knelt down, prayed, and took his departure, saying to the awe-struck lad as he did so, ‘God bless you, my child, and make you a good man.’”

In later years Hone recollected that scene and said, “I never saw Mr. Wesley again; my [old teacher] died; but from that hour I never believed anything my father said, or anything I heard at chapel. I felt, though I could not have expressed it, how wicked was such enmity between Christians; and so I lost all confidence in my good father and in all his religious friends, and in all religion.”

Now, I cannot leave it there. For, though the story is too long to tell this morning, William Hone, after years of never looking at a Bible and mocking everything connected with the Christian faith, was saved himself by the grace of God, repented deeply of the sins he had committed against the gospel of Christ, and spent the rest of his life preaching the gospel he had tried for years to destroy. He wrote a poem commemorating his conversion that began with the lines

The proudest heart that ever beat
 Has been subdued in me:
 The wildest will that ever rose
 To scorn thy cause or aid thy foes,
 Is quelled, my God, by Thee.
 [All the above from S.M. Houghton, *My Life and Books*, 75, 78-81]

But consider: what had been the cause of Hone's rejection of the gospel? Parents and a church who did not treat others as God had treated them, who were not gracious as God had been gracious to them, who did not express their faith in Christ in their relationships with others. A child could not read the gospel out of their words and deeds, as you can so easily read it out of Jacob's words and deeds in Genesis 33. They did not make the gospel attractive by their words and deeds, as Jacob did here.

There is your calling and mine, brothers and sisters. Let us be sure that in our conversations with others God's grace and mercy toward us can be detected; that in our actions toward others, God's way with us can be seen, that in the way we treat others we betray the faith we have in a Savior who loved us while we were yet his enemies. *Our calling is both to be Christ to others and to find Christ in others.*

Peniel led to reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. But what it led to first was Jacob wearing his faith, his confidence in God, and his understanding of what God had done for him on his sleeve, and expressing it in his behavior toward his brother – for the very first time. And it is to be so with us. We should be finding Christ's own face in the face of everyone we meet every day. And we should so speak with them and treat them that they may be able to find Christ, the merciful Savior, in us as well. Jacob found Christ in Esau; Esau, if only he had eyes to see, could have found Christ in Jacob.