

“Stories of Jacob: Reunions, Regrets and Reconciliation”

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Text: Genesis 33: 1 - 17

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first flocks in Jacob’s procession as restitution for the hurts inflicted by Jacob (and perhaps even as a bribe) to appease Esau’s anger. But Esau’s first reaction was to reject the restitution. By doing that Esau created an opening for reconciliation to happen. And the effect on Jacob was remarkable. I think the old Jacob would have been happy with that outcome, and kept the flocks for himself. But this was no longer the old Jacob. The experience of being forgiven changed him. In that overwhelming experience, Jacob insisted, “No, please... accept my present from my hand.” He urged and urged Esau to take the gift, which was no longer a sacrifice, which was no longer a bribe. Jacob wanted to show his gratitude for being forgiven. Jacob said, “to see your face is like seeing the very face of God”. Rather than revenge, Esau was being gracious—like God. Grace is at the core of any act of forgiveness. Abraham Lincoln was frequently criticized for the positive things he said and did for the people of the southern states after the Civil War. But his answer reflected Esau’s actions, and Jesus’ teaching. He would say, “How do you destroy your enemies? By making them your friends”. Wise words.

The fourth thing Esau did was revise his feelings towards his thieving brother. Years earlier he wanted to murder the guy! And when Jacob unexpectedly returned, after all those many years, we read “Esau ran to meet him, and embrace him, fell on his neck, kissed him, and wept.” Until we can do that we have not fully forgiven someone. And this can be the hardest work to do. I think our head can lead us in offering forgiveness, but it can take longer for our heart to catch up. Jacob was gone more than 14 years. Esau had time to work out his anger. We hear people say “forgive and forget”. It is the forgetting that can take a while, and take conscious work. But we can have hope because we have seen how that has worked in God. The apostle Paul tells us that God no longer see sin in us (sin being what we do to hurt our relationship with God). God no longer sees sin in us because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus we see the face of God’s graciousness to us. When Esau expressed forgiveness to Jacob, having let those justified angry feelings go, Jacob said looking on his brother this way was like seeing the face of God’s graciousness. We become the face of God when we are able to let our hurt feelings go as well. God, above all, is gracious and forgiving. And we can tap into that, with God’s help, in being forgiving ourselves. Because reconciliation, which helps us maintain every relationship we have, is at the very heart of the Gospel. That’s what the cross is about.

The theologian Lewis Smedes wrote, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you”.

After more than 14 years with Laban, Jacob and his large family were now heading back to the land of his father. But there was one small problem: it was also where his brother Esau lived. The last time Jacob saw Esau, Esau was planning to murder him. After all, Jacob had taken everything from Esau. The question for Jacob was: how did Esau feel now? So Jacob sent messengers on before him to find out. The message they took was, “Jacob is finally returning home. And he hopes to find favour in your sight!”. When the messengers returned they said, “Esau is coming to meet you... and he is bringing 400 men with him”. And we read, “Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed” (32:7).

No wonder! So Jacob made a plan. He divided up his livestock, servants and family into different units. The animals in the lead flock were to be a gift for Esau. It contained 220 goats, 220 sheep, 50 cows, 30 donkeys and camels. Behind that were more of his flock. Next came the two maids which were his wives, and their children. Next Leah and her children. Then, furthest back, was Rachel and her son Joseph. He ordered everything in his life, putting what was least important to him in front – perhaps in harm’s way – and what was most precious to him in back. Jacob hoped his brother would receive him peacefully but just in case he devised two contingency plans. [1] If Esau still wanted to kill his brother Jacob, then the order of this procession created an early warning system that could provide Jacob with the time needed to escape. [2] If Esau was angry – but not murderous – Jacob hoped that the gift of these animals would appease Esau and satisfy him for the wrongs Jacob did to him in their youth. The gift was an act of restitution at best. At worst it was a bribe. In this plan we still see the character of the old Jacob, with his hope seen in 32:20: “I *may appease him* with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; *perhaps* he will accept me”. It was a big “perhaps”.

But Jacob still had to cover all his bases. Time for prayer. What Jacob asked of God was pretty self-serving. He confessed: yes, I know, I do not deserve the blessings you have showered down upon me. But I’m really in a tight place here. Please deliver me from the wrath of my brother Esau. He may be coming to kill me and my family, and I’m afraid. And then, Jacob tightened the screw on God in this prayer. He reminded God: “You have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring

as the sand of the sea, so numerous that they cannot be counted” (32:12). In other words Jacob was trying to leverage God’s promises in his own favour. Jacob, in his usual scheming way, had done all he could do. Now all he could do was wait and see how things unfolded.

When Jacob bowed down to his bother Esau my guess is that he was trembling. Then the least-likely thing happened. Esau ran to him, embraced him, kissed him, and wept for joy in finally seeing his brother again. Not confrontation, but peace. Not anger, but happiness. Not retaliation, but acceptance. Clearly Esau had forgiven and forgotten. Their relationship was more important than the injury of Jacob’s disrespect and thefts. Esau asked Jacob, “What was with all the flocks that proceeded you, so far out in front of you? Why were you doing that?” Apparently it didn’t occur to Esau that Jacob could be worried about him. Jacob said, “They are my gift to you, to find favour with you”. Surprisingly, Jacob was being half-way honest here. Jacob was saying he thought he had to appease his brother. Esau responded, “I have enough. Keep it. Let’s you and me walk home now, together.” Then Jacob gives this surprising response, saying, “No, no. We are travelling far too slowly. Go ahead, we’ll catch up.” It feels like Jacob was surprised and embarrassed by how Esau was treating him. And Esau agreed. “Ok”, he said, “but I’ll leave some of my men to help you”.

It was all too much for Jacob. With deep honesty and incredulity he asked, “Why are you being so kind to me?” Jacob was overwhelmed. He knew he did not deserve this kind of treatment. He got an immense, unexpected lesson in the character of Esau and by comparison an in-your-face lesson about his own very nature. It was all so humbling. Jacob was expecting an angry, unforgiving Esau, bent on retribution. But instead Esau accepted Jacob in all his humanity, forgiving him. Esau was gracious (giving something to Jacob that he neither deserved nor earned). Esau knew that love for his brother was more important than retribution and thus he wanted reconciliation more than restitution. All this for the Jacob who Esau experienced as his conniving, manipulative, theiving brother. Jacob was overwhelmed. So Jacob said, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

A powerful story about the realities of human relationships. Everyone here knows what it feels like to be hurt in relationships. I’m guessing everyone here knows what it is like to deal with the aftermath of hurting someone in a relationship. And how hard it can be to become reconciled. But the cost of not being reconciled can be great. I know a lady in our London congregation who years ago was deeply hurt by the words of her 20 year-old son. She cut him out of her life. When her son

graduated university, Karen did not go. When her son married, she went to the wedding ceremony so people wouldn’t think poorly of her, but she gave an excuse to not attend the reception. When her first grandchild was born Karen was not there. For the first two years of that little child’s life this woman never once saw her grandchild. True story. And she blamed her son for doing that to her. To her, it was her son’s fault that she didn’t get to celebrate the graduation, or enjoy the wedding, or see the baby. Pretty extreme, I know. But have we let that happen to ourselves in smaller ways? Jesus’ teachings about forgiveness have a wisdom deeper than we might first perceive. Forgiveness is the path we have been given to help us let go of the baggage of hurts inflicted upon us. Forgiveness is how we can deal with our pain so it need not remain an open wound that never heals. Karen finally saw what she had been doing to herself, and it became an overwhelming regret. Her son was ready – more than ready – to be reconciled, and they were. But the regret continued for Karen, for all those lost years. When Jacob left his family 14+ years earlier Esau was bent on killing him. But in the intervening years he let it go.

We can learn a lot about forgiveness from Esau’s actions. For the first learning I think we have to speculate a bit. I suspect Esau came to appreciate Jacob as a real, human person. We are all prone to mistakes and failures in relationship. When we are able to acknowledge the humanity of the one who hurt us – and our own humanity (how we at times have hurt people as well) – then we can begin to dismantle the wall hurt has erected. None of us are perfect. Perhaps Esau recognized his own humanity in the incident where he freely sold to Jacob his inheritance (something that serves you for a lifetime) for a bowl of soup (that serves you for a couple of hours). Esau may well have thought, what Jacob did was wrong but what I did was stupid. We are both human here, imperfect.

Second, it is clear in the story that Esau appreciated that there was something more important at stake than retribution because of this hurt. Jacob was his brother. When Jacob fled for his life in fear of Esau, Esau lost his brother, perhaps forever. For Esau regaining his brother was more important than holding a grudge and acting out on the hurt. As the Christian writer Anne Lamont puts it, holding a grudge “is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.” Esau didn’t do that. e wanted his brother back.

Third, Esau let go of the urge to hurt back, which was his first plan. Revenge can seem sweet initially, but it is too often hollow and unsatisfying. By not hurting back, Esau created an opening for Jacob to try to make things better, to complete the reconciliation. Remember the contingency plans Jacob made? Plan #2 was to use