

Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgot

- ¹ And 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.
- ³ He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.
- ⁴ But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.
- ⁵ And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant."
- ⁶ Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down.
- ⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.
- ⁸ Esau said, "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."
- ¹⁰ Jacob said, "No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.
- ¹¹ 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.
- ¹² Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you."
- ¹³ But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail, and that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die.
- ¹⁴ Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir."
- ¹⁵ So Esau said, "Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord."
- ¹⁶ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir.
- ¹⁷ But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.
- ¹⁸ And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city.
- ¹⁹ And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent.
- ²⁰ There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel. (Gen 33:1-20 ESV)

Genesis 33:1-20

Auld Lang Syne

Robert Burns once wrote:

Should Old Acquaintance be forgot,
and never thought upon;
The flames of Love extinguished,
and fully past and gone:
Is thy sweet Heart now grown so cold,
that loving Breast of thine;
That thou canst never once reflect
On Old long syne.

These words quickly became stuff of folk song legend, and today many people sing a variation of it on New Year's Eve. But what does it mean? That is the question Harry on *When Harry Met Sally* wondered. "What does this song mean? My whole life, I don't know what this song means. I mean, 'Should old acquaintance be forgot?' Does that mean that we should forget old acquaintances. Or does it mean that if we happened to forget them, we should remember them, which is not possible because we already forgot them?" "Well, maybe it just means that we should remember that we forgot them or something," Sally reasons. "Anyway, it's about old friends."

I was reminded of Burn's song/poem not only because of the time of year (three days ago we kicked off a new year), but because the story before us today is kind of the exact opposite of the poem. It is sort of the Anti-Auld Lang Syne. And, sort of, not. It isn't about old friends, but **long separated brothers**. Usually, brothers are friends, but not in this case. But because they are not friends, a question arises in mind of one of them. What do you do when there is something or someone you want more than anything to forget, but it comes back to haunt and potentially destroy you?

In the poem, **we forget the good thing**—past friends and love, even though we don't really mean to do that. But what if we really do *want* to forget because it is so *bad*? What if we want to forget, but can't? Isn't this where the silly song actually ends up taking many people? Many are hoping that 2015 will be better than 2014. It was a year to forget. Since we are still only three days in, the obligatory New Year's Resolutions are still in full swing, as people look to improve or change things they don't like about themselves. But what if you can't change it? What if it is completely out of your hands? What do you do then?

Should Old Acquaintance

This is where Jacob now finds himself. Today, we will look at **Genesis 33**. It is a continuation of a story that began back in the previous chapter. As Jacob left his uncle Laban in Haran, was had gone many miles towards the land of Canaan, when suddenly he was met by some angels as he camped near the brook called Jabbok. After this meeting, he sent out messengers who quickly returned with information that his brother Esau, whom he had not seen for 20 years, was coming with four hundred men. The last thing Jacob knew about Esau was that his twin brother wanted to kill him for stealing his birthright.

Upon receiving this frightening news, we saw Jacob enter into a series of actions, each meant to stave off the inevitable doom. He sent a giant present to Esau in order to appease his brother's wrath. He prayed a heartfelt prayer of deliverance to God. He positioned his immediate family near the back of a series of lines, in hopes that they might somehow be able to escape, should things get out of hand. And then he wrestled with God.

An important word appears in that chapter a couple of times. It is the word "face." Jacob said, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me" (**Gen 32:20**). Later, this word appears in the context of the wrestling match. Again Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (**Gen 32:30**). This word will appear one more time in the story today (**33:10**), and what it says gets at **the heart of the theology of this chapter**. But before we get to that, let's look at what comes first.

Like any good story-teller, Moses begins to slow his story down. The suspense is already high. Once it is gone, it is lost forever. So he plays on this for a little while longer. After all we have seen Jacob do, his moment of testing has finally come. "And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming" (**Gen 33:1**). A shiver runs down his spine. The huge lump gets caught in his throat. The Imperial March of Darth Vader begins playing on the radio. Woe is Jacob. Esau is coming.

Not only that, but "four hundred men with him." Jacob had known about the four hundred in the previous chapter (**32:6**). Now he sees that his present did not work. Esau is not alone. An army is behind him, and Esau is their champion. Imagine the panic. Jacob has nothing but a bunch of sheep, women, and children with him. Esau, hell-bent on murdering him, now approaches with an army. Jacob is out in the open. There are no walls to protect him, few weapons to fight with, and no army to back him up. He is utterly alone.

“So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all” (2). This may be more detail of what was happening earlier in the night or it may be a new strategy. But I want you to think about this from the point of view of **these family members. Put yourselves in the shoes of his wives, concubines, and sons.** How would you like to have been Gad or Asher, lined up in the front with their mother Zilpah? Why did dad put us up here? Are we that important that he wants us to meet his brother first, or are we that disposable that he wants us to die before anyone else? Now imagine all ten brothers and one sister lined up with their respective mothers and little Joseph and Rachel are protected at the very back. How would this make you feel towards Joseph and Rachel? Are there **seeds of anger and rivalry** beginning here, because of Jacob’s actions? Jacob clearly has a favorite son.

And notice how he is called “**Jacob.**” Just a half dozen verses ago God said that he would now be called “**Israel.**” But here he is being called Jacob again. Is this a sign to us that the old man still remains, though a new one has been born? The first couple of verses thus raise a series of questions that will play out as Genesis continues to unfold. However, for now, they return us to the eminent danger of Esau. What would you have done? I can’t say that I blame Jacob, though it is odd that he acts like this given that he has just prayed to God and had this same God come to him and wrestle with him only moment earlier. How quick we are to forget old friends.

But then, with his hip is still hurting, **something unexpected** happens. Rather than hide in the back with Rachel, it says, “**He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother**” (3). With a severe limp from having been bested and humbled by God, Jacob comes to the front lines. He then waddles slowly over towards his brother. After a few steps, **he bows.** He walks some more and **bows again. Seven times** he does this. This was the custom throughout the ancient world when a subject would approach a lord. The 14th century Egyptian *Amarna Letters* (named for the mound in which they were discovered in Middle Egypt) tell of one Rib-Addi who, “**Spoke to the king, his lord, the Sun-god of the lands. Beneath the feet of the king, my lord, seven times, and seven times I fall.**”¹ Isn’t it curious how the number seven is so important, even among the pagans?

¹ Amarna Letters, 137.4, in James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East an Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, 3rd ed. with Supplement. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 483. Reference in Wenham, Genesis vol. 2, 298.

But this gesture seems to be doing something else. Not only is Jacob humbling himself, he may very well be telling Esau that he would do everything differently if he had the chance. For on that day long ago when he fooled his father Isaac, Isaac—thinking he was blessing Esau—said, “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). Now, Jacob is bowing to Esau. Thus, some commentators believe Jacob is trying to undo the great act of deception whereby he cheated Esau of his blessing.² This is consistent with a man who has just tried to give Esau such a huge present, as if to say, “What I have really belongs to you, brother. Take it. It is yours.” We must remember, that Jacob expects only retribution from Esau at this moment, and so this makes what happens next so very unexpected.

Be Forgot?

We can feel the dry mouth that must be Jacob's at this moment. Will an unseen arrow silently shot out from the army quietly pierce his heart, ending it all? Will Esau personally come out to finish what God started, twisting the hip, but Jacob's neck out of joint, so that the younger brother will fall to the ground, dead on impact? It says, “But Esau ran to meet him...” Oh no, this is it! And in the next breath, we do find Esau going after Jacob's neck.

But then again, something even more unexpected happens. “... and embraced him and fall on his neck and kissed him” (4). He went after Jacob's neck alright, but only as a brother who has forgotten old hurts so deeply felt in days gone by. He kissed him and “they wept” together. After all of these chapters with this inevitable storm that has been looming on the horizon, after all the things Jacob did and underwent in the previous chapter with angels, messengers, and God himself, this was not expected at all.

Perhaps this is all the more unexpected for some of us Reformed Christians, because we of all people take Romans 9 and what it says about Esau seriously. “God hated Esau” (Rom 9:13). So how can Esau act like that? In light of this well known verse, I would like for this phrase to become the context into which we now think about what is before our eyes in this passage.

We basically know two things about Esau from the NT. First, as we have just seen, God loved Jacob, but hated Esau. Some, who do not have the biblical categories clearly defined in their minds, believe this means God had only hate and no love whatsoever for Esau. We have seen several chapters back that this is not true. Nor can it help us explain what we will see in the rest of this chapter either. The other thing we know is that we are not to be like “unholy like Esau, who sold

² Cf. *ibid.*

his birthright for a single meal” (Heb 12:16). Here, a particular point in Esau’s life is held up as an example of what we are not to emulate in our own actions. That event was the moment twenty plus years earlier when Esau sold his birthright to Jacob. Esau was not a man of faith when he did this.

When these two pieces of information are combined, it becomes nearly impossible for some people to explain Esau’s actions now. Here we have a reprobate man forgiving the chosen seed in a way that puts much Christian forgiveness to shame. This is one of the most overwhelmingly happy moments in all of the Bible. Yet, it is inexplicable to some people. It is full of grace, forgiveness, mercy, kindness, and love. But **how can Esau act like this?** What would cause a man like this to forgive his brother?

There is no definitive answer to this, but we can 1. Look at what comes next to see if we can discern any hints of an answer and 2. Look to the speculations of past preachers of this passage to see what they suggest. We will begin answering this question by looking further at the story.

“And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, ‘Who are these with you?’” (Gen 33:5). Why does Esau want to know this? He can clearly see that Jacob is not here to wage a war. But where did all of these people come from? When last they were together, Jacob was alone. Now he has a mighty company with him.

“Jacob said, ‘The children whom God has graciously given your servant’” (5). Jacob is now internalizing the promise. When you see a man like Jacob internalizing God’s promises in Christ, you know that you most certainly should do the same. Have you? That is always a question that must be answered when we come to God’s word.

Jacob uses the common word “Elohim” for God here. Esau would have understood this to be **the God of his father Isaac**. Notice also that Jacob points to God’s grace. The word for “**grace**” is *chanan*. This is the first time it appears in the entire Bible.³ This is the same word that is translated “**I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy**” in **Exodus 33:19** and **Romans 9:18**. A similar word was found earlier, however, with Noah. Noah found “**favor**” or “**grace**” (*chen*) in the eyes of the LORD. The point is, Jacob is telling Esau that his family is a gift from God, and Jacob knew that this gift had absolutely nothing to do with his own obedience, but rested solely on the promise of God to Jacob to bless him. That is what grace is. It is the opposite of works, so that no one can boast. Jacob can finally see that clearly.

³ The LXX translates it as *elee* or “mercy.”

Next, Jacob has his servants and their children now draw near to Esau and they bow to the mighty man of Edom (**Gen 33:6**). This refers to Bilhah, Zilpah and their four boys Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. Then Leah and her children draw near and bow. Finally, Joseph and Rachel draw near and bow down (7). Jacob has his entire family show submission to Esau. He is in their hands.

“But Esau said, ‘What do you mean by all this company that I met’” (8)? Esau is probing Jacob for answers. Is Esau a man who has forgotten what happened, who honestly can’t understand why Jacob would act in these ways? That thought seems incomprehensible. But one never knows the true heart of another. Perhaps he had spoken murderous words twenty years ago, but never actually had the heart to carry through with them. Why wouldn’t his twin brother have realized that? Or, maybe Esau is simply delusional? Perhaps he is he fishing for something and this is all a ruse? What’s with the twenty questions? I suppose that may be what Jacob was thinking.

Or, could it be that Esau is breaking the ice with a little humor? That is something most of us can’t see, being English speaking people. It is something a Hebrew speaking person might have noticed. For he says, “What do you mean by all this company I have met.” The word “company” is *machaneh* (). But earlier we read that “from what he had with him he [Jacob] took a present for his brother Esau” (**Gen 32:13**). Present is the word *minchah* (). (It is just a reversal of the two middle consonants). Esau is making a pun as if to say, “Jacob, are you giving your family (company) to me as a present?”

Now, it is highly doubtful that Jacob was in fact offering his family and himself to Esau as a present, and we have to know that Esau understood this too. Nevertheless, the humor would not have been lost on Jacob. Still, he answers by saying, “[this company is] to find favor in the sight of my lord” (**Gen 33:8**). “Favor” is the word *chen* again. God has shown Jacob grace, now Jacob seeks to gain the graces of Esau by giving him everything.

But again, unexpectedly, Esau says, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself” (9). Again, I must ask, how can Esau continually act like this, with such grace? Since we do not really get into the head of Esau other than this statement, it is time to consider some thoughts of others. Luther once preached on this story. He speculates:

Esau investigated this promise very carefully, for his experience corresponds to the promise. “To me the sword was promised,” he said. [he refers to Isaac’s blessing in 27:40]. “Therefore I am justly a warrior and a leader. My brother is a shepherd, a poor exile! The fatness and fruitfulness of the land belongs to me. I am not subject to any

man, and I have now shaken off the yoke of my brother.” This vainglory and insolence arises from the material blessing, for this is what meets the eye and has much splendor and pomp in the world. Jacob also had material blessings, but they were not so splendid. For Edom had kings and dukes before his brother Israel. The spiritual blessing is always covered with a very insignificant and wretched outward appearance.

This vainglory of Esau helped greatly in effecting a reconciliation. For he thought: “I am the lord, and since no danger threatens me from my brother, why should I treat him too unkindly? For I have not only words of blessing, as Jacob has, but the reality together with the words. For I abound in resources, power, and a large number of friends; I have been born from the flesh and blood of the holy patriarchs. Therefore God has not rejected me, even though Jacob stole my blessing.”

But then he adds these interesting thoughts, and I say that knowing that no one believed more strongly in predestination and Romans 9 than Martin Luther:

It is also likely that in the end Esau was saved. God made this distinction between Jacob and Esau and likewise between Isaac and Ishmael to show that His kingdom is purely spiritual. There is no doubt that many of the offspring and posterity of Esau were saved. For many of the Edomites were joined to the people of God in Israel and circumcised, and many came up annually to Jerusalem for the appointed celebration of the festivals and worshiped there. Accordingly, Esau hoped that he would participate in the grace of God and the spiritual blessing, and he noticed that he was also being blessed and enriched in a material way. Then he saw the humiliation of his brother, and all of this served to soften and mitigate his heart so that he became truly reconciled to his brother from the heart and came to this conclusion: “Why should I kill my brother? Why should I vent my anger on his lovely children and wives? God forbid that I should become a parricide!” Esau was just as delighted with the wealth and good fortune that had fallen to Jacob’s lot as if they belonged to himself.⁴

You can see how Luther is also struggling with how a man like Esau could act in this way. His speculation is unprovable either way. Calvin is more cautious saying:

That Esau meets his brother with unexpected benevolence and kindness, is the effect of the special favour of God. Therefore, by this method, God proved that he has the hearts of men in his hand, to soften their hardness, and to mitigate their cruelty as often as he pleases: in short, that he tames them as wild beasts are wont to be tamed; and then, that he hearkened to the prayers of his servant Jacob.⁵

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 6: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31-37*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 6 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 165–166.

⁵ John Calvin and John King, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 207.

Without a doubt, the material blessings that Esau had been given were from God. Whether Esau recognized this as such or not, we are never told. But we are told about how Jacob responded to his brother. “Jacob said, ‘No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand [he is not referring to his family, but to the many animals offered in the previous chapter]. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me” (Gen 33:10).

The Face and Image of God

Here, then, we see the return of this word “face.” Consider now the three examples of this word in these two chapters. First, Jacob fears the face of Esau. Then, Jacob sees the literal face of God, as he wrestles with Christ in his angelic form. Finally, he sees in Esau the face of God. What does this mean?

It means that Jacob has realized that the entire wrestling episode, from his wrestling in prayer to his literal wrestling with a man, happened so that God might impart faith to Jacob. He realizes that God has answered his prayer. In Jacob’s weakest moment, God was strong. Esau is not going to destroy him. Rather, Esau shows great and undeserved kindness, not even willing to take a present from his brother. It is, apparently, unconditional forgiveness that is extended by of all people—Esau. And to Jacob, this is what it means to see God now.

How incredible is it that Jacob says that he sees the kindness and love of God in the face of his unregenerate brother? What does this teach us about the image of God that remains in all human beings, even the likes of Esau? Furthermore, what might it say about Christians when they refuse to act in ways that even non-Christians can act? Beloved, you and I can sometimes have a very hard time forgiving other people. Yet, this is the epitome of the love of God. If someone like Esau can show such a thing, how much more ought Christians who are commanded to forgive seventy times seven act in such ways? Even when people do not ask for it, as Christ himself demonstrates on the cross to the very people who are putting him to death: Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

If you are having difficulty reconciling these actions of Esau with his sinful, unregenerate nature, then you have two options. You can go the route of Luther, who believed Esau must have eventually been saved. There is nothing that mitigates against that absolutely in Scripture, though it is also difficult to reconcile this with Romans 9. The Scripture never says outright that Esau was not elected to salvation, but the gist of the argument seems to strongly imply it.

Better, it seems to me, is to keep the order of things in Genesis properly in our minds and to let this inform our theology. [All humans were and remain image bearers](#). Often, this theology, which comes first in the Bible, loses itself in our Reformed minds because of depravity. Nevertheless, it is still true. They bear the image of God. Is this not what Jacob is alluding to here, when he says he sees the face of God in the face of Esau? That is what an [image](#) is, a [reflection](#). Only after our creation in God's image did we fall into sin. This sin has separated us from God, so that we are born into darkness, born God's enemies, born under his wrath, born needing to be reconciled to a holy God. But depravity does not make us as bad as we could be. This is partly because we still bear the image of God.

Total Depravity does not mean that man is pure, unadulterated, undiluted, unmitigated evil. It means that sin affects everything that he does. There is not any part of us that is unaffected by sin, much like when you put [red dye into water](#), there is no part of the water that does not turn red, even though the more dye you put into it, the deeper the red becomes. Good, kind, loving, forgiving acts of unbelievers are not evil, unkind, hateful, non-forgiving acts because they are committed by the unregenerate. They are good, kind, loving, forgiving acts that nevertheless do not merit God's favor or bring them into a right relationship with Him. But as Jonathan Edwards used to teach, if you will not accept Christ, then at least do good and obey his law, because those in hell would give the world for the number of their sins to be reduced by just one if they could. Whether or not that is true, it gets the point across that unbelievers can do acts of good. They cannot do acts *of faith*. But they can reflect the image of God when they do what they are supposed to do towards other people, that is, when they obey the law.

We'll Take a Cup of Kindness Yet

I know that this can be hard to process for a number of people, because some have been taught in some forms of Calvinism that unbelievers are *only* capable of doing evil things. If it isn't from faith, then the act is evil. That is incorrect. If it isn't from faith, then the act does not merit any kind of pleasure from God in terms of gaining his favor. But that does not mean he hates it when unbelievers obey him and do what is right.

[Esau is not acting with any kind of evil here](#). There is no malice. There is no hidden agenda. There is no secret desire for retribution. It is not a ruse. As I have often stated, Esau acts better than Jacob does much of the time. You can't help but get that sense when you read through these stories as a unit. That is part of the wonder of why God would choose who he chooses. Were it by works, God would have chosen Esau. What makes us differ is not that we do good and they do evil.

That kind of thinking, ironically, returns us back to “works,” as if Christianity is just about making people more obedient.

We have got to stop giving people the impression that what makes us Christians is that we are good people and they are bad people, and that becoming a Christian is about becoming a good person. While God does, in fact, make us better people, the “betterness” comes from within, and this is what makes any outward fruit acceptable. But what makes us differ is, first and foremost, as Jacob realizes but Esau is silent about—**God’s grace**. Notice, Esau says nothing about God’s grace. Yet, in all the uses of grace in Genesis, a full 1/3 of them occur in our story today. This is a story about grace and Jacob finally understands it. Esau, not so much.

Notice how Jacob returns to this theme again. “**Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously (*chanan*) with me, and because I have enough**” (**Gen 33:11**). God’s grace has now become sufficient for Jacob. He is, truly, **a changed man**—*in the spiritually inward sense of the word*, not just the outward sense as is obviously true of Esau. Esau is changed too, but do we get any hint that it is because he has been humbled by God and changed by saving grace?

Jacob is so comfortable living in God’s grace, that he doesn’t even need the material blessings. He **begs his brother to take the gift** as a sign of his goodwill and sorrowful repentance for stealing the birthright—something that, while in God’s sovereign will, was certainly also a violation of the law against stealing. Please understand that. Jacob’s stealing of the birthright, while in God’s sovereign plan, was still a sin. “**Jacob’s argument is that since you have received me with forgiveness as God has, so you must accept my ‘present,’ a term also used for sacrifice (e.g., 4:3–5; Lev 2:1, 3–7), as God would.**”⁶ It is the only right thing to do, when such harm has been done. He can’t and won’t just let bygones be bygones. Justice demands satisfaction. “**Thus he urged him, and he took it**” (**11**). Esau took the gift.

But Esau then returns the favor. You give me a present; I’ll give you one in return. “**Then Esau said, ‘Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you’**” (**12**). What Esau is saying here is that **he will lead Jacob** back to his home in Edom or Seir. We know this by **vs. 14** which tells us that Jacob will eventually come to see Esau in Seir and from **vs. 17** which tells us that Jacob is going to make himself a home somewhere.

In a strange way, this is where we may get a hint that Esau’s kindness is not because of faith in God. He will give Jacob land *in Edom* where he can settle down. It isn’t out of malice or a trick or something. But neither is it looking at the promises.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 299.

But Jacob will not settle in Esau's kingdom. Why? Well, Jacob tells him, "My lord knows that the children are frail, and that the nursing flocks and hers are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir" (13-14). Jacob is essentially giving Esau an excuse for not going with him to Edom. Esau will not take "no" for an answer.

"So Esau said, 'Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me'" (15). If you will not come with me now, at least let my men protect here you in this place until you arrive. Jacob has to become a little more firm, but still gentle enough to not look like he is insulting his brother. "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord" (15). The question becomes, why? Why does Jacob not want to go with Esau?

Some suggest it is **out of fear**. Jacob has been a deceiver all his life, and he does not believe that Esau's kindness will last forever. This is certainly possible, but there isn't really hint of this in the text. Another possibility lends itself from the context. "So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir" (16). "But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth [meaning 'booths']" (17).

This is a foreshadowing of a **festival** that will later become enshrined in Mosaic Law when the people would travel to Jerusalem and set up temporary dwellings while attending the feast. It is called the Feast of Succoth or the Feast of Booths. Succoth is in what would later become the land of Sihon, "brother" of King Og whose bed was over 12 ft. long. It also will become the land of Gad in the distribution of land. Amos has a prophecy about it this, "In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,' declares the LORD who does this" (Amos 9:11-12). The feast is a foreshadowing of Christ himself.

The story continues, "And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city" (Gen 33:18). This passage serves **two purposes**. First, it sets up the next chapter, where something terrible will happen in the city of Shechem. **Vs. 19** adds more, "And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent." This introduces us to two of the characters that will come up in the next chapter.

But this information does something more important. It tells us where Jacob is pitching his tent. "In the land of Canaan." This was according to the promise of

God. “Then the LORD said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you’” (Gen 31:3; cf. 32:9). One more strange piece of information may help us see this even better. Verse 18 literally reads, “Jacob came in peace to the city of Shechem” (JPS). The LXX translates the word “peace” literally as Salem. He came to Salem, a city of Shechem (taking Shechem as the name of a king ala vs. 19, rather than as the name of the city). Hence, the foreshadowing is made even stronger. It probably isn’t the city we know as Jerusalem, but rather a smaller village by the Jordan with a similar name (like Salim). But the foreshadowing through a word-play on Jerusalem is still obvious.

The point is, God had told Jacob to return to *Canaan*. That was the promise. He was not to go to Edom/Seir. In other words, it isn’t that Jacob is afraid of Esau. Rather, it is that he is trusting in the promises of God and being obedient to God’s command, even as his grandfather Abraham had done. Jacob could not go with Esau, because his land would be the land flowing with milk and honey. God had promised it to him, and now Jacob finally realizes it.

For the God of Long-Ago

The last verse is really the high note of the whole chapter. Even after all of the restoration and reconciliation between these brothers, what is more important even than this is what Jacob does in vs. 20. “There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.” Notice that it is upon arriving in and purchasing land in Canaan that Jacob does this. The same was true of Abraham (12:7-8; 13:18) and Isaac (26:25) as they erected altars to God long ago.

Jacob had himself built monumental temple-houses to God at Bethel. But this time, he has a special name for God: El-Elohe-Israel. He uses his new name to say that El is the God of Israel. Now, this is really quite interesting, because El—as we saw last week—is the high God, the creator God of the Canaanites. And yet, Jacob is in this act claiming that Yahweh is El. He knew El through a second person also called Yahweh, the very God he had finished wrestling with and who changed his name to Israel.

Esau may be a very forgiving man, but there is no hint of any worship of God by him in this text. God may have been gracious to Esau in a common way, but he does not seem to recognize it. It is Jacob’s recognition of God’s grace that is key. This is the God who has transformed a deceitful, cowardly, cunning, cheat into a humble, honorable, brave evangelist. This is the God who has taken Jacob just as he promised and shown his love to him, simply because it pleased him to do so. Whatever may have happened to Esau in terms of his own relationship with God is, ultimately, not important. What is important is that God has kept his promises to Jacob and Jacob finally understands and believes it all. This, then, is the call to

everyone who hears the word today. God is gracious to us all every moment of every day, but that grace does you no good if you do not recognize it as such, call upon this God, and worship him.

May Jacob's declaration of faith in the God of Israel be your declaration in this New Year and in all the years to come. May God take what was old in you and conform it all into the image of his son. And may you not forget old acquaintances with friends or foes, with God or man, but may you—like these two brothers—love and forgive one another. And more, may you, like Jacob, learn that even in things you want to forget, that God has a will and purpose in all things, and that for the person who has faith in him and who is called according to his purpose, he works all things for the good of those who love him.