

Genesis 33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 33 But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.

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.

Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last, Joseph and Rachel drew near.

And they bowed down. Esau said, What do you mean by all this company that I met? Jacob answered, To find favour in the sight of my Lord. But Esau said, I have enough, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself.

Jacob said, No, please, if I have found favour 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.

[1 : 25] 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. Then Esau said, Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you.

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. 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.

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 favour in the sight of my Lord. So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir.

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. 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. 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.

[2 : 44] There he erected an altar, and called it El Elohe Israel. In Genesis chapter 33, Jacob has just been blessed by the angel after wrestling with him, and has been given a new name.

Maybe at this point it would be worth just commenting upon the importance of the angel. Later on, when he blesses Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob references the angel who has redeemed him from evil.

The angel is a figure who seems to play an important role within the story of Jacob, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. The angel appears to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre.

The angel is the one who interrupts, just as he's about to sacrifice Isaac. And the angel here seems to be a divine figure. A figure who's associated with Yahweh himself.

And so, it's not surprising that people have reflected upon the presence of the angel within the book of Genesis and elsewhere, and seen within it a reference to the second person of the Trinity.

[3 : 44] As we look back upon these events, in the light of the New Testament, there are places in the New Testament that suggest that sort of association. Jacob now lifts up his eyes and sees Esau coming with 400 men.

The expression, lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, is used on a number of occasions in Genesis. And in each occasion, it seems to be a particularly charged one. This is a significant sight that he's seeing.

Seeing Esau's company approaching him, he divides his people into four flocks, as it were, with Rachel's flock last, much as there were four flocks when Jacob first met Rachel, with Rachel's flock being the last to arrive at the closed well.

There is, however, an implicit favoritism here. The children of the maidservants are placed in the most dangerous position, Leah and her children next, And then finally, in the safest position, Rachel and Joseph.

It's very clear that Jacob favors Joseph over his other children, much as he favors Rachel over Leah and the handmaids. And the favoritism that is on display here is something that has negative effects throughout the rest of the book of Genesis, not least in the chapter that follows.

[4 : 56] Jacob, however, goes before them all. He bows to the ground seven times to his brother. But Esau's response is surprising. Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, falls on his neck and kisses him.

The word for embracing used here is not dissimilar for the word used for wrestling. The brothers clutch each other, but it is a brotherly embrace, not a wrestling move as they might have had in the past.

Esau falls on the part of the neck, which Jacob had once covered up with goat skin to imitate him, and kisses it, much as their father had kissed Jacob in his blessing. And previous to this, there have been two cases of people lifting up their voices and weeping, separated from each other.

After he loses the blessing, Esau lifts up his voice and weeps. And then when Jacob meets Rachel, he lifts up his voice and weeps. The two brothers both lifting up their voice and weeping, but separated from each other.

But now the two brothers weep together like twins who have just been reborn. And Jacob insists that Esau accept the princely gift that he has sent on ahead of him, all the flocks and the livestock.

[6 : 06] And being willing to surrender such an extensive amount of his property is a sign of Jacob's trust in God as the true source of his provision. He's able to live as a wanderer and as someone who holds his possessions lightly because he knows that God is the one who will provide for him.

And Jacob also repeatedly refers to Esau as his lord and himself as Esau's servant. And here it is very important to note that Jacob is performing to Esau the blessing that he took from him.

If you look back in Genesis chapter 27, this is the blessing that is given to Jacob. See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed.

May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let people serve you and nations bow down to you. Be Lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you.

Curse be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you. And so what we're seeing here is Jacob performing to Esau the blessing that he once took from him.

[7 : 15] It's a very significant and powerful action. And he's able to do this to give back the blessing as he has been blessed and named by God himself. And he explicitly calls it a blessing that he wants Esau to accept the blessing that he's given.

Earlier on in chapter 30, Rachel overcame the rivalry between herself and Leah, giving to Leah what her father originally stole from her with Leah.

The marriage bed of Jacob. And now Jacob does something similar, healing a past wrong. Note that in verse 10, Jacob declares that he has seen Esau's face, which is like seeing the face of God.

Now Jacob has just seen God face to face and named Peniel after that encounter. What is going on here? What is the allusion back to the previous chapter doing here?

First of all, we need to recognize that the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, etc. is an entire story. It's not just lots of episodic events, as you might see in an older TV show.

[8 : 19] So this is a consistent story and themes recur and things that happen are connected to things that have happened before. So this story is connected to the previous chapter and it's connected to all these other events that have gone before.

The stealing of the blessing. It's going back also to the events of the womb. These events need to be brought to mind if we're going to understand what's happening here between the two brothers.

So why the reference to seeing the face of Esau like the face of God? He has wrestled with God and been spared. And now he sees his brother and he's spared again.

And there's a recognition, I believe, of God's favour in the favour of Esau. It connects the story with that which precedes it, but also connects the recognition that arose from that story.

You have wrestled with God and with man and have prevailed. And Jacob is now meeting his brother and he's seeing in the peace with which his brother meets him, the peace and the favour of God himself.

[9 : 26] And so as he sees the peaceful face of his brother, his enemy throughout the story to this point, he recognises that ultimately this is about God's favour. It's not just Esau.

This is God's favour that he's experiencing. And he's able to look at these events in a new light after he has had that encounter at Peniel. Once he has seen the face of God, he is able to look at human faces and see that in those human faces, God is at work relating to him through these people.

Esau offers to journey with Jacob, but Jacob turns down the offer. Esau's offer of a bodyguard to be left.

With his company. And after having done all of this, Jacob comes to Succoth and builds a house and some booths for his cattle. Once again, this may seem to be a strange, incidental detail.

Why mention the building of a house at a place called Succoth? Well, if we read the story of the Exodus, it is a place called Succoth that is the first place that Israel goes to after leaving Egypt.

[10 : 58] It's the place where they leave behind the houses in which they've celebrated Passover and dwell in booths. It seems as if what's happening here for Jacob has a certain symmetry or similarity with what's happening with Israel later on.

Jacob has undergone his own Exodus experience. He's been reduced in status. He's been mistreated. He's been abused by someone who used to be favourable towards him. And then God is with him.

God brings him out. He's pursued. There's a showdown. And then there's also this struggle at the crossing of the water. And now that he's come out, he's going through other Exodus patterns.

And here I think Israel is supposed to look back at characters like Jacob as they do with Abraham and see in these characters their own experience to recognise that what they're experiencing later on in history has resemblance with what their forefathers experienced.

They are walking in the footsteps of their ancestors. After this, he goes on to Shechem and buys the second tract of land that Israel owns within Canaan. No longer is it just the cave and field of Machpelah.

[12:10] He also owns this place near Shechem. Shechem is another significant site in the story of Abraham. It's the first place that he goes to in the land near the oak of Moreh.

And there he builds an altar. And Jacob follows the same pattern. He arrives at this place. He pitches his tent. He buys the land. And then he erects an altar and names it for God, the God of Israel.

This is a site that is, again, putting down roots in the land, anticipating the fulfilment of the promise that God first made at that place of Shechem to Abraham, that his descendants would own that land.

And so, in that place, Jacob buys a tract of land. A question to consider. In the story of this chapter, we see a transformation in the relationship between Esau and Jacob.

A transformation that is made possible in large measure because of a prior transformation in the way that Jacob sees God's action and presence in his circumstances.

[13:18] The changed way that he relates to God after wrestling with him enables him to change the way that he relates to other people. I would encourage you to reflect closely upon the difference that is made and how exactly that difference is made.

How does this encounter enable him to change the way that he views everything that has happened to him prior to that point and the way that he relates to people going forward?

One further detail of the story to reflect upon. Jacob buys a parcel of land near Shechem. This is not the only time that we hear about this parcel of land.

It's mentioned again at the end of the book of Joshua, where a significant event happens there. What is that event? And why do you think it happens at that site?