

“Facing the Giants”
Genesis 32:1-21
February 12th, 2017

It seems appropriate to begin with a Presidential illustration on the birthday of one of our greatest.

In the White House collection is a letter from a child to President Grover Cleveland, written in September 1895:

“To His Majesty, President Cleveland: Dear President, I’m in a dreadful state of mind; and I thought I would write and tell you. About two years ago, I used two postage stamps that had been used before on letters. I didn’t realize what I had done until lately. My mind is constantly turning on that subject, and I think of it night and day.

Now, dear President, will you please forgive me? I promise I will never do it again. Enclosed find the cost of three stamps (6 cents total), and please forgive me, for I was then but 13 years old, for I am heartily sorry for what I have done. From one of your subjects.”

Repairing broken relationships can take much effort, patience, and grace - on the part of *both* (or all) parties involved. Though some people seem to thrive in making messes of their relationships with others, a characteristic mark of believers in Jesus Christ is that we are about the business of reconciling with others, especially so with those closest to us – spouses if married; children and siblings, if we have them; and fellow church members and Christians.

For sure, Jesus teaches this to His followers. **Matthew 5:9** reads, “Blessed *are* the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” *But, it’s not easy to reconcile with someone else with whom you’re in conflict, is it?* The scars from those we love can run deep.

Since Genesis chapter 25, we’ve studied the life of Jacob, the second born of twin sons to Isaac, the son of Abraham. For a patriarch of the Christian faith, Jacob was quite the rascal, at least early in his life. He seized his older brother Esau’s birthright, and deceived his father to secure the blessing due Esau as firstborn. And, Jacob’s relationship with his shrewd uncle Laban was nothing short of distorted.

The last 12 verses of Genesis chapter 31 show Jacob and Laban entering into a covenant with each other, a treaty of nonaggression, unless one of them crossed over into the other’s property, at which point all-out war could begin. Essentially, they agreed to disagree, which isn’t true reconciliation; it’s merely the cessation of hostility, at least for a time.

As chapter 32 begins, Jacob finds himself between a rock and a hard place, (Laban and Esau). Jacob had left Laban; he could not go back. He had nowhere to go but forward, and there, he would find the brother he jilted some 20 years earlier.

Genesis 32:1-21:

“So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ²When Jacob saw them, he said, “This is God’s camp.” And he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

³ Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴ And he commanded them, saying, “Speak thus to my lord Esau, ‘Thus your servant Jacob says: “I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. ⁵ I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.”’”

⁶ Then the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men *are* with him.” ⁷ So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that *were* with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies. ⁸ And he said, “If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape.”

⁹ Then Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you’: ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. ¹¹ Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me *and* the mother with the children. ¹² For You said, ‘I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’”

¹³ So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother: ¹⁴ two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵ thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten foals. ¹⁶ Then he delivered *them* to the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, “Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves.” ¹⁷ And he commanded the first one, saying, “When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, ‘To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose *are* these in front of you?’ ¹⁸ then you shall say, ‘They *are* your servant Jacob’s. *It is* a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also *is* behind us.’” ¹⁹ So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, “In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; ²⁰ and also say, ‘Behold, your servant Jacob *is* behind us.’” For he said, “I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.” ²¹ So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp.”

Truly, we see here Jacob planning to reconcile with his brother, as unlikely as that may seem.

Some time ago, Zadok Nager and France Peretz, both of Kfar Sava, Israel, were married to each other for the second time, proving that love conquers all. Even the 13 submachine gun bullets he shot into her!

The couple, who had already divorced each other, were courting again when Nager suspected his ex-wife of being unfaithful and shot her.

After recovering from the shooting, Miss Peretz visited Nager in jail, pending his trial for attempted murder. Nager told a district court judge in Tel Aviv, “She forgives me and we love each other.”

Guarded by two plain-clothes policemen, the two married. Then Nager was escorted back to his cell.

The events of today’s passage can be separated into a spatial pattern:

MP 1 – Looking to the Past;

MP 2 – Looking at the Present;

MP 3 – Looking to the Future.

Verses 1 and 2 cause us to **look to the past**. “So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ² When Jacob saw them, he said, “This *is* God’s camp.” And he called the name of that place

Mahanaim.” *It’s been awhile, but do you remember what happened when Jacob left his home in Canaan?* Genesis chapter 28 details Jacob’s departure from Canaan for his mother’s family in Padan Aram. On the way, exhausted from his travels, he finds a place to sleep. In a dream, he sees “a ladder...set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” (Genesis 28:12) In that dream, God spoke words of comfort to encourage Jacob on his travels to and through unfamiliar territory.

And, now, here at the beginning of his return trip, angels appear once again to Jacob to strengthen him for his encounter with Esau.

In verse 2, Jacob calls the place where he met the angels, “Mahanaim” which means, “two camps.” It could mean that Jacob observed there were two camps – a camp of angels was alongside his camp. Or, as we’ll see in a few moments, it could refer to the two groups Jacob divides his family into.

For now, we note that God comforts, encourages, and protects all His people in like manner. The Psalmist notes in **Psalm 34:7** – “The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.”

And, in **Psalm 91:11-12** – “For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. ¹² In *their* hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.”

Application - Believer in Christ, no matter where you go, you are never truly alone. The Creator of the heavens and the earth goes before you, walks beside you, and delivers you from all affliction. To those who are skeptical or outright hostile to God, the same cannot be said of you. You are yet in your sin, and without true guidance, companionship, and deliverance. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, Who made the heavens and the earth, and is King of Kings and Lord of Lords – and you will be saved from your life of meaninglessness and futility.

Thus emboldened, we find Jacob in verse 3, **looking at the present**, sending his own messengers (angels are messengers) to Esau to set up a meeting where Jacob can give him gifts and seek reconciliation. Now, it’s important for us to remember that when Jacob left Canaan 20 years earlier, the last he’d heard about Esau was that he set his mind to kill his brother. So, it is with at least some fear and trepidation that Jacob reaches out to his brother.

Verse 6 teaches that the messengers return with the news that Esau was heading to see Jacob with 400 men...not exactly the encouragement Jacob was looking for! Verse 7 reveals that Jacob was now “greatly afraid and distressed.”

So, Jacob divides his family and livestock into two groups, in the hopes that not all will be taken or destroyed by Esau. At this point, Jacob does something we haven’t yet seen him do – he prays to Almighty God. And what a prayer it is! (Verses 9-12).

He clearly knows to Whom he prays - “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD...” (Verse 9) Jacob addresses the faithful covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Jacob recounts God’s promises to him - ‘Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you’ (verse 9) and ‘I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the

sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.” (Verse 12) You can never go wrong taking God’s written word and offering it as your own prayer!

Jacob also rightly understands he is a sinner undeserving of God’s goodness and grace – “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant;” (Verse 10). For the first time, we have evidence that Jacob is becoming a humble man.

In verse 10, Jacob offers his petition to God – “Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me *and* the mother with the children” Though it was as a last resort that Jacob turned to God, he rightly asks God for help.

Application – *Are you like Jacob when it comes to prayer?* “When all else fails, try prayer.” Jacob should have prayed first; then he could avoid fear and lack of direction. It is only when he is at the absolute end of his resources that Jacob consults with God. A lack of prayerfulness is “certainly the reason for the spiritual weakness of so many professing Christian people today. We talk in religious terms. We even set up pillars and give the significant persons and locations of our lives religious names. But we do not talk to God. We do not pray.” (Boice, 811)

Finally, we see Jacob **looking to the future**, at least regarding his plan to reconcile with Esau. Verses 14 & 15 detail more than 550 animals that Jacob intended to give Esau – a king’s gift! And, to present them to Esau, Jacob planned they’d come to Esau in four waves, hopefully to overwhelm him. Or as Jacob says in verse 20 – ““I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.”

The Hebrew word for “appease” is *kippur*, meaning “to cover” as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement was when the high priest covered the ark with blood to hide men’s sins from God. Jacob hoped his gifts might “cover” his wrongs toward Esau and so remove Esau’s anger.

Jacob knew something needed to be done, but he evidently didn’t yet have a full grasp on what that could be. That would come, as we’ll see when we get to the rest of the chapter.

Application – *Is there someone you’re at odds with?* We have a great advantage today that Jacob didn’t have at this point in his life. We have the apostolic teaching of the New Testament that clarifies how we become reconciled with God and with each other. Hear the Apostle Paul’s words to the church at Corinth in his second letter to them - **2 Corinthians 5:18-19** - “...God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

Like Jacob, we have no real safety until we stop trying to cover our sin and self-reliance by our good works. We must look to God for the covering He provides in the shed blood of His only begotten Son, Jesus!

Two days before Valentine’s Day, I’m reminded of what is probably Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s most famous lines (from Sonnet 43):
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“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach,
when feeling out of sight
for the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's most quiet need,
by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.”

Not as well-known is the fact that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's parents disapproved so strongly of her marriage to Robert that they disowned her.

Almost weekly, Elizabeth wrote love letters to her mother and father, asking for reconciliation. They never once replied. After 10 years of letter writing, Elizabeth received a huge box in the mail. It was from her parents!

When she opened it, to her dismay and heartbreak, the box contained all of her letters to her parents. No one of them had ever been opened!

Today those love letters are among the most beautiful in classical English literature. Had her parents opened and read only a few of them, a reconciliation might have taken place.

Dear ones, don't miss out on the opportunity to bring wholeness back to your relationships. Put others ahead of your own wants and desires; humble yourselves and seek rather to be wronged than to be right and continue suffering in crippled marriages and friendships.