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The Family of Abraham: Part 23—Jacob and Esau Reconciled

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I discuss Genesis 33 and the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 23rd in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we've arrived at chapter 33 of the book of Genesis, where Jacob meets and reconciles with his brother Esau, and then goes his way towards the city of Shechem. This is the climactic chapter, arguably, in the story of the Jacob cycle.

As we read through the story of Jacob to this point, it is dominated by his wrestling with his brother, and then his wrestling with Laban. And then you have the wrestling with the angel. He has wrestled with God and man and prevailed.

And at this point, that theme has been resolved, and now he can meet with Esau. He meets with Esau face to face in a way that contrasts with the indirect and this disguised

way that he has interacted with him to that point, where he has been the supplant to the one who has tricked Esau out of his birthright, where he has been the one that disguised himself as Esau. Now, he is going to meet Esau face to face and deal with him directly.

This is a different sort of encounter, and it marks a change and a transition in Jacob's life. The start of this narrative is provided by the wrestling with the angel at the Ford of the Jabbok. When we read that story, we'll see a number of parallels that relate to the broader Esau-Jacob story.

We've already seen that there are comparisons that can be drawn between Esau and Jacob in the womb, wrestling with each other in the womb, and this leg wound, as it were, this grabbing of the heel and this grabbing, this touching of the hip. In both of these stories, we have two characters equally matched wrestling with each other, and then finally one prevailing and coming out into the light. It's a story that focuses upon the themes of name and blessing.

These are things that are associated with the Esau-Jacob cycle. As we read those stories, we'll see that Esau and Jacob are struggling over their names, and they're struggling over the blessing. Jacob has been named Jacob, heel, supplanter.

It's a negative name in many senses, and now he is given a new name, a new identity, as he passes out of this old, this second womb, as it were, and becomes a new person. So there's a transition, and then he receives a blessing as well, a blessing not this time from his father Isaac, but from God himself. The story in Isaac's tent is another experience of the two brothers in this dark place, the darkened realm of their father's blindness, and one receiving a blessing, coming out first before the other, and then weeping at the other end.

And Rebecca's reference to miscarriage at that point, which seems strange, but it makes sense when we see it as a birth-type event. And Esau making reference back to Jacob's name that he received when he was born, and saying that he has tricked me these two times, out of the birthright and now out of the blessing. What we're seeing then is a replay of the birth, and this replay continues into the chapter that follows.

In chapter 33, then, Jacob meets with Esau. He has arranged his people so that they're divided into different groups. He sees Esau coming with 400 men, fighting men, and he divides his children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maidservants.

Now at the beginning of the study of the story of Jacob's time in Paddan-Moram, I noted that there are three flocks that he encounters, and he talks about my brethren when he asks about who these flocks belong to, and if they know who Laban is. In that point, Rachel and her flock come along just at that time, and so she's the fourth flock. Here, I think, we have an explanation of that, that there are four flocks that Jacob has now.

The flocks that formerly belonged to Laban are now his own, and those four flocks that he has are the flocks of the maidservants, of Bilhah and Zilpah, the flocks of Leah, the flock of Leah, and the flock of Rachel. And the flock of Rachel is the one that comes last. There's an order in which he sends them out.

And once again, we have themes of favoritism that play out in very negative ways within the story of Genesis. The father who favors certain children over others. Now, this is understandable in this case, but it's still not a positive thing, and we'll see this as something that causes all sorts of trouble in the family in the chapters that follow.

He put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children behind, and Rachel and Joseph last. So Benjamin's not yet been born. He crossed over before them, and then he bows to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother.

And Esau's response is not what he would expect, perhaps. Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

Once again, embraced, playing on the term for wrestle as well. They are embracing, but it's no longer a wrestling. It's coming to terms with each other as brothers, embracing.

Fall on his neck, his neck, the place where he had once covered up, the smooth of his neck to disguise himself as his brother. And now his brother falls upon his neck and kisses him, and they weep. And that kiss, the kiss that he had received from his father, now he receives from his brother as well.

The weeping, there had been two lifting up of cases of lifting up the voice and weeping. There had been the case of Esau, that distraught, desolate weeping that he had after he had been robbed of his birthright and his blessing. And there was the weeping of Jacob when he met Rachel.

And in that weeping when he met Rachel, I suggested that there was a negative sense to that, that there was this ominous, this sense that that relationship with Rachel is not going to be a positive, it's not going to be a happy one. It's going to be marred by being kept from Rachel by Laban first, by the relationship with Leah and by Rachel's barren womb. Then by the event concerning the terror of him, by Esau more generally, the way that Esau meant that he had to leave the house without all the riches that he could have gone to Paddan-Moran and paid a bride price and come back straight away with Rachel.

That was not possible because of what had happened with Esau. And in all of these cases what we're seeing is what has gone wrong, that there's been a breaking down of that, what could have been between Jacob and Rachel. And it's a tragic relationship as a result of what happened in the house of his father and mother.

Now when they meet, they cry together. There's a meeting together of these two brothers crying together. And again, what happens when children come from the womb?

They cry together.

And these two twins crying together is a positive sign. The first occasion you had Jacob leaving and Esau crying alone and Rebecca talking about being miscarried of both in one day. There's something that has gone wrong.

The birth event, this rebirth, this event that was supposed to set the right order in motion did not work out. It was like a miscarried event. And now we see it happening again but in a positive way.

And so there's been this wrestling in the darkness of the womb, this coming out, this receiving of a blessing, this receiving of a new name. And now as Jacob comes blinking into the sunlight, he's a new man and he meets with his brother, his twin, in a way that's no longer characterized by wrestling and opposition and by rivalry, but by love and reconciliation. And why would Esau react in this way? He's been given the gifts, those propitiate him to some extent.

They're sent before Jacob's face to make some sort of peace between him and Esau. So there's that. But could there be something else? Is Jacob just doing something practical and pragmatic to make peace with his brother, trying to buy him off by giving him some nice gifts? Or is there something more going on here? Listen to the words of the blessing that we have in the previous chapter, in chapter 27, the chapter concerning Isaac giving the blessing to Jacob over Esau.

That was the blessing that had been received by Jacob, the blessing that was due to Esau. What does Jacob do when he meets with Esau? We read, Again, we see the maidservants and Leah and all these other people and gifts coming before, treating him as my lord. Jacob addresses Esau as my lord.

In what we're seeing here, Jacob is, as it were, giving the blessing that he had taken to Esau. He's enacting that blessing to his brother. This nation that God has begun to form in Padamaram is now bowing before Esau.

And so what Jacob had once taken, he gives. We saw a similar thing to this in chapter 30, with the relationship between Rachel and Leah, formally characterized by rivalry because Laban had switched them around on the wedding night. What we see is that Jacob, or Rachel, gives the bed of Jacob to Leah.

What had once been taken from her is given. In the same way, Jacob, what he had once taken from his brother, he returns. Listen to the way he talks about this.

Esau said, And he took it. Earlier on, we saw Esau distraught, saying that Jacob had taken his blessing. Now we have Jacob coming before Esau saying, take my blessing.

What he's doing is, in many respects, giving back to Esau what was taken from him. He's

giving back to Esau also this great amount of riches. He's giving him flocks and herds and camels and all these things as a gift, a token of his tribute, of his recognition of his brother as master.

And throughout, he says, he treats his brother as lord. Esau refers to him as brother, but Jacob refers to him as lord. But Jacob said to him, my lord knows that the children are weak, etc.

Please let my lord go ahead, etc. Please let me find favour in the sight of my lord. He's treating his brother as his master.

He's playing out the details of the blessing in a positive way to Esau. No longer trying to take that from Esau, but giving it freely. What might have changed? He has received a new name.

He has received a new blessing from God himself. He has wrestled with God. This wrestling with God is something I think that is the key transition that explains a lot of what's going on here.

The way he refers to Esau, he says, please take my blessing that is brought to you because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have everything. He has everything that he needs. God has given him this full blessing.

He's not dependent upon his father recognising him ultimately. He's been blessed by God himself. And Esau's earlier question or earlier statement, I have enough my brother.

Again, enough contrasted with everything. There's a difference there. Jacob or Israel now has everything.

He's been named not just by his father in a negative name, Jacob, heel, supplanter. Now he's been given the name Israel, wrestler with God or prince with God. This term that is a positive, powerful term of his status.

Notice also the reference back to the previous chapter, the wrestling with God. What does he say at the end of that encounter? And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel. For I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved.

Less than 10 verses later, about 10 verses later, he says to Esau and Jacob said, No, please, if I have found favour in your sight, then receive my present from my hand in as much as I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God and you were pleased with me. He talked about in the previous chapter, seeing the face of God and that he had been preserved. Now he talks about seeing the face of Esau like the face of God and Esau being pleased with him.

These two events are connected. That wrestling with the angel is connected with the

wrestling with his brother, with the wrestling with Laban, with the wrestling with his father. In all of these events, God was wrestling with Jacob.

God was teaching Jacob, preparing Jacob. This is a new way of viewing the situation. No longer seeing Esau primarily as his rival, the one that Esau is the one that's trying to destroy him, etc.

And he's got this rivalry with Esau and this vengeance against Esau and this need to achieve his supremacy over Esau and give Esau his comeuppance. No, he recognizes that God is the one who's been wrestling with him all the way along. We see a similar recognition in the story of Joseph later on when he can say that his brothers had bad intentions towards him.

But whatever they intended for him, they intended evil for him. God meant it for good. In this story, Esau had all these bad intentions for Jacob, but God meant it for good.

God was wrestling with Jacob and Jacob persevering in that wrestling would ultimately be blessed, ultimately receive a new name, ultimately be formed into a new person. And so as he meets with Esau at this point, it's the resolution of all these themes that have been playing out since the beginning. Since in the womb, they've been wrestling together.

Now they have this different relationship. And Jacob is no longer trying to take things from Esau. He recognizes that he has everything.

Notice what is said here. Esau said, let us take our journey. Let us go out together and I will go before you.

Where might this remind you of? It reminds you of the womb. They go out together, one clutching the heel of the other and Esau goes out ahead. And so Esau is calling, let's replay this.

Let's replay it no longer as a rivalry, but let's do it together. Now you're meeting face to face with your brother. That rivalry has been diffused.

And now go out with me and we can, as we go out together from this place, we'll go out as brothers, no longer as rivals, no longer as one trying to subvert or supplant the other. But now we're going out in peace. Jacob does not take that offer, but he does not seek to overturn it either.

He lets Esau go out ahead. My Lord knows that the children are weak and the flocks and herds which are nursing are with me. And if the men should drive them hard one day, all the flock will die.

Please let my Lord go on ahead before his servant. I will lead on slowly at a pace which the livestock that go before me and the children are able to endure until I come to my

Lord and see it. And Esau said, now let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.

But he said, what need is that? Let me find favor in the sight of my Lord. So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. We see here a change in that dynamic.

Jacob is no longer trying to pursue or supplant his brother. And he's prepared to let his brother go on ahead. His brother goes to Seir.

Ultimately, he will be settling in the land. Seir is off towards the south. And he lets his brother go there.

He'll visit his brother in Seir, presumably in the future. But he's going to settle in the land. And he's not going to be a rival to his brother.

He's not going to ultimately be under the mastery of his brother. He's going to honor his brother as a lord and things like that. It seems that Esau by this point has risen to a status of some sort of kingly status within the land.

He seems to have maybe conquered people within that region and is now ruling there. And Jacob recognizes him as a kingly type figure, gives him tribute, calls him lord, and then does not come under his rulership but stays in his own place. At this point, we read a strange verse.

And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore, the name of the place is called Succoth. Why mention that detail? I mean this is just one stop on the way.

It would seem a strange detail to mention. But yet, it seems to make sense in the light of the story that we see of the Exodus. Where is the first place that Israel goes after they leave Ramses? When they leave Ramses, they go to Succoth.

That's the first place that they go to. And at that place, God is there with them in the pillar of cloud and fire. God is with them in the cloud, which is also associated with the word for Succoth, and they build booths.

This is a change in the way that they live. Formerly, they had lived in houses. Now, they live in booths.

If you read the story of the institution of the Passover, you'll see throughout it reference time and time again to the house, the house that they live in, the doors of the house, etc., etc. The next night, the very next night in Succoth, they'll be staying in booths. This is a change in the way that they live, and that will be their state of living for the next 40 years.

When he leaves at this point, when he goes his own way, he doesn't follow with Esau and

go to the land of Seir. He lives in booths. Maybe there's some connection here.

Maybe we're supposed to recognize that there is some symmetry between what is happening here to Jacob and what later on happens to his descendants. As they leave the security of life in bondage and in servitude in the land of Egypt, where they lived in houses in the city of Ramses, and now they have to live in the wilderness in booths, waiting for the promised land to be delivered into their hand. Jacob is living in a new sort of way.

But he builds a house here, but there are booths for his cattle, and the name of that place, I think, suggests that there is something different about, there's something that connects this to the story of the Exodus, where there's something different in the living conditions after they leave Egypt, and something that's commemorated in the annual feast of booths. Then Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, and maybe a reference to Salem here, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddam Aram and he pitched his tent before the city, and he bought the parcel of land where he had pitched his tent from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for 100 pieces of money, and he erected an altar there. And in that context, we'll see the events that befall Dinah in the following chapter.

Shechem is an important place within the story of the family of Israel. It's the place where Abraham first went when he built an altar there, and this was the place where he was promised that his family would be great, that his people would be great. And it's the place where there is a threat to the family on a number of occasions.

There's the threat here in the story of Dinah that follows. There's the threat in the story of Joseph being sold into slavery as he goes, sent to Shechem, and then goes on to Dothan, but it's Shechem that he's sent to. And in Shechem, ultimately, that's the threat to the family.

And then also the division of the kingdom occurs at Shechem. This division of the family, and it's where Abraham first visits. There might be something there.

Again, pay attention to the details. These details often hide interesting tidbits, interesting Easter eggs, we might call them, things that help us to understand biblical connections more deeply and give us insight into what might be going on. So within this chapter, we see the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau.

We see the resolution of the rivalry that had once befallen them. We see the way in which Jacob is no longer trying to supplant his brother because he has been given everything by God. He has played out that birth event once more, and now it leads to the reconciliation between the two twins, where Esau is allowed to go on ahead.

He's allowed to take all these advantages. He's given the blessing. Jacob gives the

blessing that he had once taken, and he insists that his brother take it.

And in light of that, we see that he's now relying upon God to supply him everything that he needs, and he no longer depends upon supplanting his brother. And he doesn't depend upon resting upon his brother's protection either. He gives his brother a number of things.

He shows him homage. He shows him he's... Esau accepts all these different things. He accepts Jacob.

He accepts his wives and children. He accepts his property and all these sorts of things, and he honors all of these things as Jacob's. And Jacob insists that he takes tribute, and then they can separate, go their own ways, without that rivalry that poisons their relationship.

Later on, we'll see there's some hint of that rivalry that remains, particularly in the grandson Amalek. Amalek, who has this rivalry with the House of Jacob, and that does not get resolved in the same way. It's some lingering animosity that exists, but the main animosity has been removed.

There's been a resolution and a reconciliation between these two brothers. Tomorrow, Lord willing, I'll get into a study of the story of Dinah and the events that befall her. Thank you very much for listening.

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Thank you very much for listening. God bless.