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## EMBRACE OF BROTHERS

*SERIES: WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE*

By Scott Grant

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### Kiss of death

In the movie *The Godfather Part II*, an attempt is made on the life of Michael Corleone, the head of a Mafia family. He suspects someone close to him of complicity. Later he discovers that his brother Fredo has betrayed him. At a New Year's Eve celebration in Havana, where partygoers are embracing and kissing their dance partners, Michael moves across the floor, embraces Fredo, takes his head in his hands and forcefully kisses him. With tear-filled eyes and a pain-filled face, he tells his brother, "I know it was you, Fredo! You broke my heart! You broke my heart!"

For Fredo, it was the kiss of death. Michael would later give the order for Fredo to be killed. (1)

The story of sibling rivalry and estrangement is an old one, of course. It goes back even as far as the first brothers, Cain and Abel, and tragically, it's true to life in any generation. Last week I read a story in a golf journal about a widely known architect who refused to answer any questions about his "famously icy relationship" with his brother. (2) One can't even escape the story of sibling rivalry in a quarterly golf journal!

The story of two brothers, Jacob and Esau, in the book of Genesis is as relevant as it is compelling. Jacob betrayed Esau by stealing his blessing. Esau wanted to kill him, but Jacob fled. In Genesis 33, Jacob is back after 20 years and he must face his brother. Esau, like Michael Corleone, will move toward his brother, embrace him and even kiss him. But will it be the kiss of death?

In Genesis 32, a "man" who turned out to be God himself wrestled with Jacob, wounded him, gave him the name Israel and blessed him. Jacob's encounter with God has served to prepare him for his meeting with Esau. The grace we receive in our relationship with God motivates our movement toward reconciliation with those we have injured.

### Jacob and Esau meet

**Then Jacob lifted 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 maids. He put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.** (Genesis 33:1-4)

The term "lifted his eyes" is often used in Genesis as a prelude to the perception of something

remarkable (Genesis 22:4, 13; 24:64; 31:10). The narrator wants us to perceive something here as well, for he tells us to “behold.” What Jacob sees, and what we are to behold, is that Esau is coming with 400 men, which was sometimes the number that constituted a militia (1 Samuel 22:2, 25:13, 30:10). The day before, when Jacob received the news that Esau was coming to meet him in this manner, he responded in fear, dividing his entourage into two companies so that half of his family and animals would survive an attack by Esau (Genesis 22:6-7).

How will the *new* Jacob respond this time, when he sees with his own eyes Esau and his men coming toward him? God told him that he had prevailed over men, but will he prevail this time? If so, how will he prevail: through strength of will or strength of faith? For the first two verses of Genesis 33, it looks like the same old Jacob. Once again, he divides his camp. And he apparently orders the appearance of his people before Esau according to favoritism. Jacob evidently is bringing up the rear. Has Jacob made these arrangements so that he and the favorite members of his family would be able to escape if Esau attacks the less favored ones?

The answer, though the narrator has left us hanging for a moment, is no. Jacob passes on ahead of his family. His tendency has always been to move to the front of the line in order to get what he wanted. If he felt that his life was threatened, however, he was more likely to lurk in the background. Yesterday, when he heard that Esau was coming to meet him, he told his servants, “Pass on before me . . .” (Genesis 32:16). He arranged for a gift in order to appease Esau—literally, to “cover his face” (Genesis 32:20). His gift was intended to impress Esau and, in a sense, to obscure his vision of Jacob and the theft of the blessing.

Remember, as Jacob moves to the front of the line, he is limping, exposing the injury he suffered in his encounter with the visitor the night before. Not only that, he bows down seven times as he approaches Esau. Jacob doesn’t know whether Esau is carrying a knife so he makes himself a sitting—and lame—duck for Esau. He also faces his greatest fear of meeting Esau again head-on.

In bowing down seven times, Jacob is treating Esau as royalty. His deference is striking in light of the blessing that he stole from Esau. Isaac, supposing that he was blessing Esau, told Jacob:

“May peoples serve you;

And nations bow down to you;

Be master of your brothers,

And may your mother’s sons bow down to you.” (Genesis 27:29)

Esau was destined from birth to serve Jacob (Genesis 25:23). Isaac, when finally blessing Esau, told him, “And your brother you shall serve” (Genesis 27:40). Now Jacob, the possessor of the blessing, is bowing down to Esau and acting like his brother’s servant, as if there’s been a reversal of sorts—as if the blessing that he stole belongs to Esau.

After his wrestling match with God the night before, Jacob confessed, for the first time, that he was “Jacob,” the heel grabber, the deceiver, the manipulator. Before, when he “came close” to Isaac to receive the blessing, he announced that he was Esau (Genesis 27:18-22). Now he comes close to Esau, who appears intent on killing him, not blessing him, and he does so in open vulnerability. Indeed, this is a new Jacob.

The narrator left us hanging as to Jacob's motivation. He does the same thing in his depiction of Esau. Esau runs to meet Jacob, embraces him and falls on his neck. Each of these actions could be an expression of hostility. Isaac said that Esau would break the yoke of Jacob from his neck (Genesis 27:40). Is Esau not only breaking the yoke of Jacob from his neck but also, literally, breaking Jacob's neck? The narrator leaves us wondering right up until Esau kisses Jacob.

If Esau "fell on his neck," he probably kissed Jacob there also. Jacob wore animal skins on his neck to deceive his father into thinking he was Esau, and Jacob kissed his father just before Isaac blessed him (Genesis 27:16, 27). In a sense, Esau is re-enacting the wrong done to him—not for the sake of taking revenge but in the interest of reconciliation. The kiss of death this is not.

After Jacob stole his blessing, Esau "lifted his voice and wept" (Genesis 27:38). When Jacob arrived in Haran and met Rachel, his future wife, "he lifted his voice and wept" (Genesis 29:11). Nary a tear is reported for either brother since then. Twenty years' worth of fear, resentment and hope are released in this embrace of brothers. Both of them weep. The embrace Jacob wanted from his father but never got comes instead from the brother he betrayed. Don't be surprised, therefore, if the embrace you want from one person comes from someone else.

## **Making ourselves vulnerable**

How will we prevail in life—and in the relationships that concern us, broken or otherwise? Will it be through strength of will, as the old Jacob, or through strength of faith, as the new Jacob? Our failures may weaken our wills but at the same time strengthen our faith. Our weakness, then, often creates the opportunity for greater faith in God.

And faith is what we need to face our fears. Faith is not the absence of fear but the courage to face it with trust in God. With faith we "pass on ahead" of that which we have placed between the Esaus in our lives and ourselves. We seek not to placate or appease or impress others but to bless them. And we bless them by being ourselves, not by being someone we think they'll like better. We show up with our true selves, not our false selves. We come close to them, not to take, as the old Jacob, but to give, as the new Jacob.

If we have lived like the old Jacob, there will be occasions when what we need to give is an apology to the Esaus whom we have manipulated and betrayed. To truly apologize is to limp and bow down—to make yourself vulnerable and to humble yourself before your former antagonist. You open yourself up to someone who may be bent on revenge. He or she may reject you, attack you or somehow use what you say against you.

Our wrestling matches with God often lead us into this new vulnerability and humility. When we humble ourselves before God, confess to him and receive from him the blessing we crave, he begins to liberate us from fear of others. We no longer care so much what others say of us, because we've already acknowledged our crooked ways to the only judge who really matters. We no longer need them so much to approve of us, because we've received our Father's approval.

## **Jacob seeks Esau's favor**

**He lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said, "Who are these with you?" So he said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." Then the maids came near with their children, and they bowed down. Leah likewise came near with her children, and they bowed down; and afterward Joseph came near with Rachel, and they bowed down. And he said,**

**“What do you mean by all this company which I have met?” And he said, “To find favor in the sight of my lord.” But Esau said, “I have plenty, my brother; let what you have be your own.” Jacob said, “No, please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have plenty.” Thus he urged him and he took it. (Genesis 33:5-11)**

At the outset of the scene, Jacob lifted his eyes. Now Esau lifts his eyes. Jacob saw Esau and wondered what it meant. Esau sees Jacob’s company and wonders who they are and what they mean. Jacob acknowledges God’s grace, which is important to him as he seeks to find favor, or “grace,” with Esau. Jacob says that God has “given” him children. Earlier in his life, Jacob took the birthright and the blessing, which God had planned to give him. Jacob seems more able to wait on the Lord and receive from him. He also calls himself Esau’s servant.

Jacob’s purpose in lining up his family now becomes clear. He didn’t do it to protect himself from Esau but to honor him. His family follows his lead in bowing down to Esau, in an even fuller reversal of the blessing Isaac gave Jacob.

Jacob’s two companies have become one again. Esau, whose intentions were unclear, was coming to meet Jacob. Esau now has “met” Jacob’s company. Esau’s company appeared to be an army. The word translated “company” in verse 8 (*mahaneh*) sounds like word translated “gift” in verse 10 (*minha*). Is Jacob’s company an army or a gift? Jacob instructed his servants to inform Esau that it was a gift, but perhaps Esau retains some suspicion. Moreover, the interaction between the two brothers in verses 5 through 15, particularly Jacob’s part, indicates a certain caution.

A significant portion of the livestock, which made up part of the “company,” was Jacob’s gift to Esau. With this, Jacob hoped to find favor, or grace, in the sight of Esau, who he now calls his “lord.” Jacob has already acted as if the blessing belongs to Esau. He now offers Esau a generous gift. What is Jacob doing? He comes out in the open: He’s asking for forgiveness.

Esau at first resists because he already has an abundance. Even though Jacob had wrenched both the birthright and the blessing from him, Esau still ended up with “plenty.” In the end, Jacob’s treachery didn’t set Esau back. It seems as if that realization—plus 20 years—has softened Esau’s heart toward his brother. Jacob’s prayer that God would deliver him from Esau also played a part (Genesis 32:9-12). Although Jacob identified himself as Esau’s servant, Esau calls Jacob his “brother.” Jacob, however, is insistent, just as he was when seeking a blessing from the man who wounded him last night. Jacob now is seeking for the right things in the right way.

For Jacob, Esau’s acceptance of the present would be a guarantee of the forgiveness he seeks. The word translated “present” was used of the animal sacrifices connected with God’s forgiveness (Leviticus 1:4, 7:18, 19:7). Jacob equates this meeting of brothers with his encounter with God the night before. He sees Esau’s face as “one sees the face of God.” Jacob saw God “face to face” and was spared (Genesis 32:30). Indeed, God received him favorably. Now Jacob has had a face-to-face encounter with Esau, who has received him favorably.

Finally, Jacob asks Esau to accept his “gift,” which is a different word than the one translated “present” (32:13, 18, 20; 33:10). It is the same word that is translated “blessing” in Genesis 27. Jacob has already acted as if the blessing he stole from Esau belonged to Esau. Now, without revisiting that painful episode again in gut-wrenching detail, he implies that the gift he offers Esau represents the blessing.

Jacob can offer this gift to Esau because he sees that God has dealt graciously with him. God blessed him with family and an abundance of possessions. In the end, Jacob didn't need to steal and connive to get ahead. God, by means of a dream, arranged for Jacob to acquire more livestock than he needed (Genesis 31:11-12). God demonstrated his grace in a supreme way when he wrestled with Jacob, wounded him, gave him a new name and blessed him. Jacob therefore changes his approach to life.

Esau has plenty. Jacob has plenty. Everyone has plenty. There's no need to squabble over who has what, or who took what from whom. But there is this matter of forgiveness, which Jacob wants to be sure of. Finally, Esau gets the message. He relents and receives Jacob's gift.

The grace of God has prepared Jacob to meet Esau in a new way. He makes himself vulnerable, takes responsibility for his sin, makes restitution and seeks forgiveness.

## **Making restitution**

When we approach someone and ask them for forgiveness, we must realize that it may not come readily, if at all. Never underestimate, though, what God can do in the heart of the offended party. By the time God shows you the error of your ways, he may have already compensated the other person for the damage you inflicted on them. That person may, in a sense, conclude that they have "plenty." The passage of time, then, is often an ally. By the time God reveals your sin to you and you come around to ask for forgiveness, the person you're approaching may have already forgiven you.

The Jacob-Esau story teaches us that reconciliation is the work of God. The greatest ally, then, is prayer. Before Jacob met Esau, he prayed for deliverance. In Genesis 33, God answered his prayer.

In asking for forgiveness, we don't need to revisit the offense in gut-wrenching detail, which could re-awaken old wounds. Subtlety, gestures and tone of voice are often not only more appropriate but also more effective.

In offering to return the blessing to Esau, Jacob shows us the importance of making reparations. If we have stolen from someone or damaged something, we must seek a way to make things right. To ask for forgiveness without offering to make restitution for the wrong we did smacks of insincerity.

The grace of God prepares us to meet the Esaus of our world in a new way. We see God in the face of Christ, and he sees our face, and all our sin. In this face-to-face encounter, God spares us, saves us and even blesses us. Those who have been touched by the grace of God extend it to others. Nothing changes a person like the grace of God.

It changed a man by the name of Zaccheus, who was considered a traitor by fellow Jews for collecting taxes for the Romans and defrauding his countrymen in the process. Jesus, the famous teacher, was coming to his town. Zaccheus, a small man, could not see Jesus because of the crowds, so he climbed a tree.

Jesus spotted him and said, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." No one wanted to go to Zaccheus' house, lest he get shaken down and be accused of associating with a traitor. Rejoicing, Zaccheus received Jesus into his home. Sure enough, the crowd began to grumble about Jesus, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

Zaccheus told Jesus, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much" (Luke 19:1-10). Like Jacob,

Zaccheus was touched by grace and therefore sought to make things right.

## Jacob and Esau part ways

**Then Esau said, “Let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you.” But he said to him, “My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. Please let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir.” “Please 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.” So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named Succoth. (Genesis 33:12-17)**

Esau suggests that the brothers travel together. Whereas Esau resisted Jacob’s gift, Jacob resists Esau’s offer. Jacob’s company differs from Esau’s. Jacob is a family man and a shepherd. Esau’s company is more like an army. Jacob would slow Esau down, or Esau would pressure Jacob. So Jacob suggests that the two men separate and travel at their own paces, with Esau going ahead of him. Jacob, who had catapulted himself ahead of Esau beginning in the womb, is now offering the lead position to Esau. Jacob, who for all those years strove to get ahead, now stays behind so that he can care for his family and flock. Weakened by his encounter with God, Jacob cares for the weak—the children and the nursing animals. He has embraced his vocation as a shepherd of his flock and, more importantly, his family, which is the family of God.

The shepherd was the model for the leader of God’s people, as seen in Moses, David and, especially, Jesus. Isaiah, speaking of the Lord in a way that would be fulfilled by Jesus, said this:

“Like a shepherd he will tend his flock,

In his arm he will gather the lambs,

And carry them in his bosom;

He will gently lead the nursing ewes.” (Isaiah 40:11)

Jacob tells Esau that he will meet him at Seir, which is Esau’s land, outside the Promised Land. The narrator never reports such a meeting, so we’re left to wonder whether it actually took place, or whether Jacob ever intended to meet Esau there. Jacob knows his future is in the Promised Land. He also exercises a certain caution where Esau is concerned. He sees reconciliation with Esau—not proximity to Esau—as necessary, and his words in verses 13 and 14 constitute a polite and artful refusal.

Esau responds by making another offer: to provide Jacob with a military escort as a means of protection. Jacob again refuses. The Lord has promised to protect Jacob and bring him back to the Promised Land (Genesis 28:15). Jacob probably fears that Esau’s men may resist him or even turn on him and he doesn’t want this kind of connection with Esau. Jacob tells Esau, “Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.” He’s telling his brother: “The grace you’ve already given me is more than enough.” Once again, Esau yields to Jacob. The brothers part ways, though on much better terms than when Jacob ran away from an angry Esau (Genesis 27:41-43).

Jacob proceeds to Succoth, which is Hebrew for “shelters,” where he builds a house and makes booths.

## Reconciliation doesn't equal restoration

This story tells us that though we should seek to reconcile with those we have injured, complete restoration of a relationship other than marriage may not be possible or even desirable. Reconciliation does not necessarily equal restoration. If we have met with God to the point where we see our sin, we may have a better sense of his calling on our lives. Such a calling may be incompatible with the person with whom we are seeking reconciliation.

We may not be able to journey together as we once did, because we are now heading in different directions at different paces. The apostle Paul warns us, in fact, not to be "unequally yoked" with unbelievers. We're like oxen that are plowing different fields (2 Corinthians 6:14). Even Paul and Barnabas, who had a sharp disagreement, separated because they had different callings (Acts 15:39-40). Still, in seeking reconciliation, we can at least hope to part on good terms in the manner of Jacob and Esau.

I have a friend who stole from me and deceived me. After working through my anger, with God's help I was able to forgive him. I still call him a friend. We aren't friends like we used to be, though. Nor do we have to be. Today we walk on different paths.

And what is your calling? Are you strong and driven, as Jacob was? But have you stopped to meet with God? Has he wounded you and slowed you down? Have you confessed your sin to him? Has he shown you his grace? If so, perhaps he's giving you a heart for some of the people you've left in the dust. God, in his grace, would turn us all into one or another sort of shepherd who cares for people.

## Jacob moves to Shechem

**Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city. And he bought the piece of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected there an altar, and called it El-Elohe-Israel.** (Genesis 33:18-20)

Verses 18 through 20 serve as a hinge between Genesis 33 and 34, bringing the story of Jacob and Esau to a conclusion and setting the stage for the ugly episode involving Dinah, the Hivites and Jacob's sons.

Jacob moves from Succoth, a temporary stopover, to Shechem. He comes, literally, "in peace" to Shechem. Jacob's vow to make the Lord his God was connected with his returning to his father's house, literally, "in peace" (Genesis 28:21). He hasn't quite made it to his father's house, nor has he pressed on to Bethel, where he vowed to worship the Lord (Genesis 28:22). Jacob, the man of conflict, finally finds peace; however, it won't last for long.

Shechem is described as being in the land of Canaan, which is a signal for readers familiar with the wickedness of the Canaanites. Jacob sets up camp before the city, much as Lot brought himself into the sphere of Sodom (Genesis 13:12). He bought property in the Promised Land. Purchasing property in the Promised Land was seen as an expression of faith in God's promises (Genesis 23:16).

The narrator introduces the sellers of the land, the sons of Hamor, who will play a key role in the next passage.

Jacob again follows in the footsteps of his grandfather. Having purchased land, as Abraham did, he now erects and altar in Shechem, also as Abraham did (Genesis 12:6-7). Again, this is an act of faith. He calls

the altar “El-Elohe-Israel,” which means “God, the God of Israel.” The Lord has brought Jacob back to the land, as promised, and Jacob has reconciled with Esau. Jacob, who up to this point has identified the Lord as the God of his father, now—finally—calls the Lord *his* God.

For all the closure that Genesis 33 brings, two legs of the journey remain. Jacob is still not in Bethel, nor has he returned to his father’s house. His decision to make Shechem something more than a stopover will prove to be disastrous.

Perhaps at this point in our study of the Jacob narrative, we sense a new peace with God, we’re ready to take new steps of faith and we want to call the Lord our God.

## Agents of reconciliation

If the grace we receive in our relationship with God motivates our movement toward reconciliation with those we have injured, then such movement will feature both vulnerability and restitution. It need not, however, feature complete restoration of relationship.

The Jacob-Esau story has a better ending than the Cain-Abel story and *The Godfather* story, both of which end in murder. Nevertheless, it is less than satisfying. The schisms between the Jacobs and Esaus of the world are ultimately mended by the blood of Christ.

The prophet Amos looked forward to a time when Israel would “possess the remnant of Edom,” which was the land of Esau’s descendants (Amos 9:11-12). But when James refers to that prophecy, he sees it fulfilled in the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Acts 15:16-18).

The Jacob-Esau story therefore points forward to an even greater story, which features God’s initiative to “reconcile all things to himself” through the blood of Christ (Colossians 1:20). There is no greater illustration of that story than the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus even uses Esau’s actions, as reported in Genesis 33:4, as a basis for his description of the God-like love of the father for his returning son: “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him [fell on his neck] and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, and the story of God’s love for the world that it illustrates, inspires hope that the final chapters of our stories of estrangement have yet to be written. Until then, we tell the story of Christ and embody it as agents of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

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## NOTES:

(1) *The Godfather Part II*, © 1974 by Paramount Pictures.

(2) Adam Brady, *Rees Jones*, NCGA Golf Magazine, Winter 2005. P. 56.

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Catalog No. 4877  
Genesis 33



13th Message  
Scott Grant  
January 23, 2005



series: [The Jacob Narrative](#)  
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