

Genesis Chapter 33

Verses 1-2

“Esau came”:

Jacob hastily divided his family into 3 groups (see 31:7), and then went ahead of them to meet his brother.

The division and relative location of his family in relationship to the perceived danger gives tremendous insight into whom Jacob favored.

Genesis 33:1 "And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids."

"And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked":

After he had passed over the brook, and was come to his wives and children; which were done either accidentally or on purpose, to see if he could see his brother coming.

Some think this denotes his cheerfulness and courage, and that he was now not distressed and dejected, as he had been before.

"And, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men":

See Gen. 32:6.

"And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids":

Some think he made four divisions of them; Leah and her children, Rachel and her son, Bilhah and hers, and Zilpah and hers: but others are of opinion there were but three.

The two handmaids and their children in one division, Leah and her children in another, and Rachel and her son in the third; which seems to be confirmed (in Genesis 33:2).

Genesis 33:2 "And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph hindermost."

"And he put the handmaids and their children foremost":

In the first division, as being less honorable and less beloved by him.

"And Leah and her children after; still according to the degree of honor and affection due unto them": Leah being a wife that was imposed and forced upon him by Laban.

"And Rachel and Joseph hindermost":

Being most beloved by him, and therefore most careful of them; Rachel being his principal and lawful wife, and who had the greatest share in his affection, and Joseph his only child by her.

You can quickly see who Jacob loved the most.

The handmaids and their children were put in the greatest jeopardy, then Leah and her children, but Jacob kept Rachel and Joseph most protected at the very back.

Jacob was assuming the worst.

Verses 3-4

Fearfully and deferentially, Jacob approached his brother as an inferior would a highly-honored patron, while gladly and eagerly, Esau ran out to greet his brother without restraint of emotion.

"They wept" because, after 20 years of troubling separation, old memories were wiped away and murderous threats belonged to the distant past.

Hearts had been changed and brothers reconciled (see verse 10).

Genesis 33:3 "And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother."

"And he passed over before them":

At the head of them, as the master of the family, exposing himself to the greatest danger for them, and in order to protect and defend them in the best manner he could, or to endeavor to soften the mind of his brother by an address, should there be any occasion for it.

Jacob took no chances when he saw Esau as he "bowed himself to the ground seven times," an action reserved as a sign of homage.

Usually before kings, as the Amarna Tablets relate: "At the two feet of my lord, the king, seven times and seven times I fall."

Jacob bowed himself to the ground seven times; in a civil way, as was the manner in the eastern countries towards great personages.

This he did to Esau as being his elder brother, and as superior to him in grandeur and wealth, being lord of a considerable country.

And at the same time religious adoration might be made to God.

Jacob wanted to make sure that Esau knew he was humble before him.

Of course, "seven" means spiritually complete.

Genesis 33:4 "And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept."

"And Esau ran to meet him":

If he rode on any creature, which is likely, he alighted from it on sight of his brother Jacob.

And to express his joy on that occasion, and affection for him, made all the haste he could to meet him, as did the father of the prodigal (Luke 15:20).

"And embraced him":

In his arms, with the greatest respect and tenderness.

"And fell on his neck":

Laid his head on his neck, where it remained for a while, not being able to lift it up, and speak unto him.

The word is in the dual number, and signifies, as Ben Melech thinks, the two sides of the neck, the right and the left.

And he might lay his head first on one side, and then on the other, to show the greatness of his affection.

"And kissed him":

To Jacob's humble submission to him, obedience to divine protective care as a means.

And thus as he before had power with God in prayer on this same account, the effect of which he now perceived, so he had power with men, with his brother, as it was intimated to him he should.

"And they wept":

They "both" wept, as the Septuagint version adds, both Jacob and Esau, for joy at the sight of each other, and both seriously.

Especially there can be no doubt of Jacob, who must be glad of this reconciliation, if it was only outward, since hereby his life, and the lives of his wives and children, would be spared.

You must remember, it had been twenty years since they had seen each other.

Esau, probably, did not even know whether Jacob was alive during this time.

You can imagine the joy, as these two brothers were reunited.

These were tears of Joy, and in Jacob's case, relief.

Our worst fears, seldom ever happen.

Jacob had worried for nothing.

Esau was not going to harm him, or his family.

Genesis 33:5 "And he lifted up his eyes, and saw the women and the children; and said, Who [are] those with thee? And he said, The children which God hath graciously given thy servant."

"And he lift up his eyes, and saw the women and children":

After the salutation had passed between him and his brother Jacob, he looked, and saw behind him women and children, Jacob's two wives and his two handmaids, and twelve children (Benjamin was still to come), he had by them.

"And said, who are those with thee?"

Who do those women and children belong to that follow thee?

For Jacob had made no mention of his wives and children, when he sent his messengers to him, (see Gen. 32:5).

And therefore Esau might very well ask this question, which Jacob replied to.

"And he said, the children which God hath graciously given thy servant":

He speaks of his children as gifts of God, and as instances and pledges of his favor and good will to him, which he thankfully acknowledges.

And at the same time speaks very respectfully to his brother, and in great condescension and humility owns himself his servant, but says nothing of his wives.

Not that he was ashamed, as Abarbanel suggests, that he should have four wives, when his brother, who had less regard for religion, had but three; but he mentions his children as being near kin to Esau.

And by whom he might conclude who the women were, and of whom also he might give a particular account, though the Scripture is silent about it.

Since Leah and Rachel were his own first cousins (Genesis 29:10); and who they were no doubt he told him, as they came to pay their respects to him, as follows in the next verse.

Remember, Esau knew nothing of Jacob's marriages, or his family.

These two brothers would have a lot to tell each other.

So much had happened to both in the last twenty years.

Notice how Jacob gave God thanks for everything.

Genesis 33:6 "Then the handmaidens came near, they and their children, and they bowed themselves."

"Then the handmaids came near, they and their children":

Being foremost, and next to, Jacob, as Bilhah and her two sons, Dan and Naphtali, and Zilpah and her two sons, Gad and Asher.

"And they bowed themselves":

In token of respect to Esau, as Jacob had done before them, and set them an example, and no doubt instructed them to do it.

Genesis 33:7 "And Leah also with her children came near, and bowed themselves: and after came Joseph near and Rachel, and they bowed themselves."

"And Leah also with her children came near, and bowed themselves":

Who were in the next division or company; their children were seven, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah, six sons and one daughter.

"And after came Joseph near and Rachel, and they bowed themselves":

It is observed that Joseph is mentioned before his mother; it may be, because they might put him before her in the procession, for greater safety.

Or she might present him to Esau, being a child of little more than six years of age, and teach him how to make his obeisance to him, which she also did herself.

These were four women and eleven sons, quite a large family.

Genesis 33:8 "And he said, What [meanest] thou by all this drove which I met? And he said, [These are] to find grace in the sight of my lord."

"And he said, what meanest thou by all this drove which I met?"

Not as being ignorant of the design of it; for no doubt the several drovers, according to their instructions from Jacob, had acquainted him with it.

But he chose not to take the present on what they said, but was willing to have it from Jacob's own mouth, and that he might have the opportunity of refusing it.

"And he said, these are to find grace in the sight of my lord":

To gain his favor and good will; and which, as it was a token of Jacob's good will to him, so, by his acceptance of it, he would know that he bore the same to him also.

It was usual in the eastern countries to carry presents to friends, and especially to great men, whenever visits were paid, as all travelers in general testify to be still the usage in those parts, to this day.

Genesis 33:9 "And Esau said, I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself."

"And Esau said, I have enough, my brother":

Or "I have much", and stand in no need of this present, or have much more than thou hast.

"Keep that thou hast unto thyself":

For the use of himself and family, which is large; in this Esau showed himself not only not a covetous man, but that he was truly reconciled to his brother, and needed not anything from him, to make up the difference between them.

Esau could not believe the vastness of the gifts Jacob had sent him.

He asked Jacob why he sent them.

Jacob told him, so he would not be angry with him.

Esau had been blessed of God the same as Jacob, and he told Jacob to keep the gifts, that he had plenty already.

Genesis 33:10 "And Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand: for therefore I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me."

"And Jacob said, nay, I pray thee":

Do not say so, as the Targum of Jonathan supplies it, or do not refuse my present.

"If now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand":

Signifying, that the acceptance of his present would be a sign to him, and give him full satisfaction that he bore a good will to him, and did not retain anger and resentment against him.

"Thy face ... the face of God":

Jacob acknowledged how God had so obviously changed Esau, as indicated by his facial expression which was not one of sullen hate but of brotherly love divinely shaped and restored.

He observed the love and favor of God to him, in working upon the heart of Esau, and causing him to carry it so lovingly to him; wherefore for this reason receive it, because I have had such an agreeable sight of thee.

"And thou wast pleased with me":

Accepted of me, and kindly received me.

Jacob was so pleased that Esau was not angry with him.

He told him to keep the gifts.

Jacob felt that God had forgiven him, and made things right with Esau.

These two brothers could find no fault with each other, now.

Genesis 33:11 "Take, I pray thee, my blessing that is brought to thee; because God hath dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough. And he urged him, and he took [it]."

"Take, I pray thee, my blessing that is brought to thee":

The present he had sent him, now being carried home to his house, was a part of what God had blessed Jacob with; which he from a benevolent generous spirit gave his brother, wishing the blessing of God to go along with it; it was an insinuation, so he would have it taken, that he wished him all happiness and prosperity.

"Because God hath dealt graciously with me":

In giving him so much substance and now in giving him so much favor in the sight of Esau, whom he had dreaded.

"And because I have enough":

A sufficiency of all good things, being thoroughly contented with his state and circumstance; or "I have all things", all kind of good things, everything that was necessary for him; the expression is stronger than Esau's; and indeed Jacob had besides a large share of temporal mercies, all spiritual ones.

God was his covenant God and Father, Christ was his Redeemer, the Spirit his sanctifier; he had all grace bestowed on him, and was an heir of glory.

“And he urged him, and he took it”:

Being pressing on him, or persistent with him, he accepted his present.

Jacob, again, tells Esau that God has blessed him abundantly.

He pled with Esau to allow him to give him the gifts, and Esau finally accepted.

Genesis 33:12 "And he said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go before thee."

"And he said, let us take our journey, and let us go":

To Seir, where Esau lived, and whither he invited Jacob to stop a while, and refresh himself and his family.

"And I will go before thee":

To show him the way to his palace, and to protect him on the road from all dangers; or "besides thee", alongside of him, keeping equal pace with him, thereby showing great honor and respect, as well as in order to converse with him as they travelled.

Genesis 33:13 "And he said unto him, My lord knoweth that the children [are] tender, and the flocks and herds with young [are] with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die."

"And he said unto him, my lord knoweth the children are tender":

The eldest being but thirteen years of age, and the youngest about six; and Esau might easily perceive by their stature that they were young and tender, and not able to bear either riding or walking very fast.

"And the flocks and herds with young are with me":

Or "upon me"; the charge of them was upon him, it was incumbent on him to take care of them, and especially in the circumstances in which they were, being big with young, both sheep and kine; or "suckling", giving milk to their young.

As the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan, and so having lambs and calves, some of them perhaps just giving birth, they required more attendance and greater care in driving them, not being able to travel far in a day.

"And if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die":

If he, and the servants under him, should push them on too fast, beyond their strength, even but one day, all in the above circumstances would be in danger of being lost through overmuch fatigue and weariness.

Esau wanted Jacob to follow him back to his home, but Jacob told him if he drove the animals hard, they would die.

There was peace between the brothers, and Jacob had to take his time with this great company.

We will see Jacob requesting this very thing from Esau in the next verse.

Genesis 33:14 "Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir."

"Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant":

He desired in a very respectable manner that he would not keep his pace, keeping up to him.

But proceed on in his journey, and go on with his men, while he with his family and flocks would follow after as fast as he could, and their circumstances would allow.

"And I will lead on softly":

Slowly, gently, easily, step by step.

"According as the cattle that goeth before me, and the children be able to endure":

Or "according to the foot" of them; of the cattle, whom he calls the "work", because his business lay in the care of them, and these were the chief of his substance.

And of the children, as the feet of each of them were able to travel; or because of them, for the sake of them, as Aben Ezra, consulting their strength, he proposed to move on gently, like both a wise, careful, and tender father of his family, and shepherd of his flock.

"Until I come unto my lord unto Seir":

Whither, no doubt, he intended to come when he parted with Esau; but for reasons which after appeared to him he didn't.

For that he should tell a lie is not likely, nor does he seem to be under any temptation to it.

And besides, it would have been dangerous to have disobliged his brother when on his borders, who could easily have come upon him again with four hundred men, and picked a quarrel with him for breach of promise, and destroyed him and his at once.

Jacob wanted to take his time and move as the cattle grazed and not make the trip too hard on the little ones.

He told Esau to just go on ahead.

Genesis 33:15 "And Esau said, Let me now leave with thee [some] of the folk that [are] with me. And he said, What needeth it? let me find grace in the sight of my lord."

"And Esau said, let me now leave with thee some of the folk that are with me":

To show him the way, and guard him on the road, and he appear the more honorable when he entered into Seir.

"And he said, what needeth it?"

Jacob saw not the necessity of it; for he knew the direct way very probably; he thought himself in no danger, since he was at peace with Esau.

“Let me find grace in the sight of my lord”:

Having his favor and good will, that was enough for him; and among the rest of the favors he received from him, he begged this might be added, that he might be excused leaving any of his escort with him.

Jacob did not want to have Esau’s people loaned to him for fear something might happen to again fracture their relationship.

Verses 16-17

“Unto Seir ... to Succoth”:

With Esau’s planned escort courteously dismissed, they parted company.

Jacob’s expressed intention to meet again in Seir (see note on 32:3), for whatever reason, did not materialize.

Instead, Jacob halted his journey first at Succoth, then at Shechem (verse 18).

Succoth is east of the Jordan River, 10 miles east of Shechem, which is 65 miles north of Jerusalem, located between Mounts Ebal and Gerizim.

Genesis 33:16 "So Esau returned that day on his way unto Seir."

"So Esau returned that day on his way unto Seir":

Took his leave of Jacob the same day he met him, and proceeded on in his journey towards Seir.

Whether he arrived there the same day is not certain, probably it was more than a day's journey.

Esau went to "Seir" (i.e. Edom; compare Obadiah), and Jacob to "Succoth" ("Booths"), located east of the Jordan and just north of the Jabbok (32:22).

Esau offered to leave some of his men to help Jacob with the trip, but Jacob said that there was no need.

Jacob told Esau, one more time, that he was pleased that Esau had forgiven him.

Genesis 33:17 "And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built him a house, and made booths for his cattle: therefore the name of the place is called Succoth."

"And Jacob journeyed to Succoth":

Perhaps after he had been at Seir, and stayed there some little time.

Succoth was on the other side of Jordan, which was so called by anticipation, for it had its name from what follows.

As yet there was no city built here, or at least of this name; afterwards there was, it lay in a valley, and belonged to Sihon king of Heshbon, and was given to the tribe of Gad (Josh. 13:27).

It is mentioned along with Penuel, and was not far from it (Judges 8:8).

It is said to be but two miles distant from it, but one would think it should be more.

"And built him a house, and made booths for his cattle":

A house for himself and family, and booths or tents for his servants or shepherds.

And for the cattle they had the care of, some for one, and some for the other.

This he did with an intention to stay some time here, as it should seem.

And the Targum of Jonathan says he continued here a whole year, and Jarchi eighteen months, a winter and two summers; but this is all uncertain.

"Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth":

From the booths or tents built here, which this word signifies.

"Succoth" means booth.

These booths are like our barns.

Genesis 33:18 "And Jacob came to Shalem, a city of Shechem, which [is] in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan-aram; and pitched his tent before the city."

And then he came to "Shalem," which some take adverbially in the sense of "and then Jacob came safely to "Shechem."

Approximately 10 years may have elapsed in Succoth before Jacob went to Shechem.

Recognizing that he had returned to fulfill the covenant promise (28:15), he erected an altar as Abraham had on his arrival (12:7).

1908 B.C.

A reference to the fulfillment of Jacob's vow made at Beth-el when, upon departure from Canaan, he looked to God for a safe return.

Upon arrival in Canaan, he would tithe of his possessions (28:20-22).

Presumably Jacob fulfilled his pledge at Shechem or later at Beth-el (35:1).

The plot of ground he bought at Shechem was the second "foothold" of Abraham's family in the Promised Land.

Just before he died in Egypt 50 years later, Jacob gave this land to Joseph (48:22), whose bones were buried there four hundred years later (Joshua 24:32).

Here also Jacob dug a well that became the scene of an important episode in the ministry of Jesus 1,900 years later (John 4:5-6).

"Shechem" has been identified as Tell Balata situated at the eastern end of the pass between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim.

The town was strategically located to control all the roads through the hill country in those ancient times.

The site has been excavated most extensively by G.E. Wright (1956-62).

These excavations revealed small permanent settlements prior to 1800 B.C., when the Hyksos built a large fortress there.

This would readily explain why Hamor, also a seminomad, was so anxious to form an alliance with Jacob.

In later times a Canaanite fortress-temple of Baal-berith was built there (Judges 9:4), and was eventually destroyed by Gideon's son Abimelech (Judges 9:46-49).

"Shalem":

This means peaceful, or secure.

In many of the translations we see that Shalem is not capitalized, meaning that he came in peace to Shechem.

I believe that this paragraph precedes (verse 17), and both these were descriptions were of the same thing.

When Jacob first came from Padan-aram, he pitched his tent, bought land, built barns, and even built a home.

Buying land and building a home usually means settling down.

Genesis 33:19 "And he bought a parcel of a field, where he had spread his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of money."

"Bought a parcel of a field":

This purchase became only the second piece of real estate legally belonging to Abraham's line in the Promised Land (23:17-18; 25:9-10).

However, the land was not Abraham's and his descendants simply because they bought it, but rather because God owned it all (Lev. 25:23), and gave it to them for their exclusive domain (see notes on 12:1-3).

Genesis 33:20 "And he erected there an altar, and called it El-elohe-Israel."

"And he erected there an altar":

In the place where Abraham had first built an altar (12:6-7), Jacob similarly marked the spot with a new name, incorporating his own new name (32:28), "God, the God of Israel," declaring that he worshiped the "Mighty One".

"Israel":

Perhaps foreshadowed its use for the nation with which it rapidly became associated, even when it consisted of not much more than Jacob's extended household (34:7).

The name "El-elohe-Israel":

This indicates that Jacob was confessing, using his new name Israel, that El was his God, “a Mighty God is the God of Israel,” in preserving his life as he confronted Esau.

Jacob in raising the altar was recognizing this Mighty God that protected him and blessed him throughout this chapter.

Genesis Chapter 33 Questions

1. When Jacob lifted his eyes, what did he see?
2. What did he immediately do?
3. In what order did he put them?
4. Why?
5. How many times did he bow to Esau?
6. What did Esau do?
7. How long had the separation been?
8. What did Esau see that amazed him?
9. Where did Jacob say they came from?
10. What did the handmaids, Leah, Rachel, and the children do to show their respect to Esau?
11. When Esau asked Jacob why he sent all the animals, what was his reply?
12. What was Esau's reply to that?
13. What did Jacob compare Esau's forgiving spirit with?
14. What two reasons did Jacob give that caused Esau to finally accept the gifts?
15. Why could Jacob not go back with his brother, Esau?
16. What did Esau offer to do to help Jacob?
17. What two things did Jacob build at Succoth?
18. "Shalem" means what?
19. Where was Shechem located?
20. What does build a home indicate?

21. Who did Jacob buy the land from?
22. How much did he pay?
23. The altar that Jacob built and named, recognized what?
24. We have called Jacob by that name throughout this lesson, but what is his name really?