



The Sermon

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Genesis 32:1-21

July 17, 2022

"Facing Your Past"

TRANSCRIPT

If you can open your Bibles, please, to Genesis chapter 32. I also want to say a special word of thanks to those who met early this morning to pray. I think it's wonderful to have people praying in the church; that's so vital for the health of the church, but it's also so encouraging for the people for whom you pray. And I know this morning there were a group of you who gathered together and were praying for our family. My sister-in-law's very sick at the moment. It's obviously a lot of concern for my wife and for myself, and it's just been good to hear that the people of God were praying for many things, but also personally, and I just want to note my thanks to the group for doing that.

We come this morning to Genesis chapter 32. You know, God saves individuals. He saves and He transforms lives in wonderful ways. In Scripture, He takes the immoral Samaritan woman, and through her encounter with Jesus her life is transformed. She goes into her town and she proclaims to everybody else about the need to come and to meet the Jesus who knew all about her. We read in Acts about this man Saul who, on the Damascus Road, goes through a dramatic transformation. This man who wanted to kill and to crush the church, he becomes, through the work and the intervention of Jesus, he becomes one who becomes a great missionary for the church.

We see it in church history a man like Augustine who is saved from a life of immorality, and he becomes a great preacher of morals. We have Martin Luther, a man who is broken and distraught in the monastery, feeling crushed and trapped, and yet becomes through the grace of God a preacher

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of Christian freedom, and the fullness and the happiness that comes and understanding the beauty of grace alone. A man like John Bunyan, whose old life is marked by a cussing tongue, who becomes one of the most eloquent Christian writers through, again, the grace of God.

If you are a Christian this morning, you have a testimony, and it's a story about how God changed your life, how God stepped in, how God made a difference. And Jacob, the man who you've been getting to know so well over the last number of months here in Genesis, he's a man with a very similar type of story. He was once a deceiver and a trickster. He was once one who was very exclusively out to better Jacob, out for himself. He was one who always took advantage of others, especially his twin brother. In fact, Genesis 27:41 tells us, "Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'" The way that Jacob had engaged with him had left so much hurt, so much bitterness in its work.

In chapter 28 Jacob has had the flea. His life at that moment is under threat, and God steps in. Now Jacob, he's changed. He has a revelation of the God who will be with him given to him, but he's a mess. He's like most of us, he's a bit of a fixer-upper. There's a work, an ongoing work to be done in Jacob. But God is the one who's committed to that work, and He's going to bring His promises to bear on Jacob's life, and He's going to bring transformation to Jacob through that whole process.

And now after many years living abroad, this changed man is called by God to go home. And though at first that brought a chasing from his father-in-law and having to face the mess of that broken relationship, now he continues to march home, continues to march back to the Promised Land and to march back to face Esau and all of the mess and pain that Jacob had caused in the past.

When he'd left the Promised Land he had left with nothing. Back in chapter 28, he didn't even have a pillow, so he pulled a rock to lay his head upon. But now this man is coming back, and we'll see in a moment he's coming back with enough goods, enough supplies, enough kids for two camps. God has undertaken for him in a glorious way.

But, this man whose life has been changed by God is coming back, and the mess that his sin caused in the past is still staring at him, intimidating him, causing him fear. And as we approach this text, that's what's going on. There's a tension in the air. Changed Jacob has to go back and face the brokenness of his past mistakes. Let's bear that in mind as we enter into Genesis chapter 32. Let me read from verse 1.

"Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them he said, 'This is God's camp!' So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

"And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, 'Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'"

"And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, 'We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.' Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, thinking, 'If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.'

"And Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, "Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good," I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of Your steadfast love and all the faithfulness that You have shown to Your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother and from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But You said, "I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

"So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and

said to his servants, 'Pass on ahead of me and put a space between drove and drove.' He instructed the first, 'When Esau my brother meets you and asks, "To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?" then you shall say, "They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us."'

"He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, 'You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him, and you shall say, "Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us."' For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me.' So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp." Let's pray for a moment.

[Prayer] Our heavenly Father, we are thankful for all the examples of Your people that we see in Scripture. But we thank You especially this morning for the example of Jacob, one who so often reminds us of ourselves; for though he has these glimpses and moments of great faith, he has these moments of great faltering. Lord, we pray that You would help us to hear Your voice this morning. We asked, Lord, that You would remind us even in these moments that it is before our holy, holy, holy God that we come. We are so thankful already we have been able to sing praises to You, we have been able to intercede and to come before the throne of the King of kings and the Lord of lords and to bring our humble requests.

Lord, You know us, and You know how quickly we get distracted. You know how quickly our mind fills with all of the issues of our day-to-day life, all of the concerns that we have. And we pray, Lord, for the work of the Helper. We ask that in these moments You would allow our minds to focus on Your Word, to hear Your voice, and that that Word would find a place within our hearts and cause us to think anew, to become pure and blameless, to begin to produce that fruit of righteousness until the day of Christ. And we ask that in these moments, Lord, that You would allow us to, in a spiritual sense, see Your face, and be transformed through the experience. So help us, we pray, and minister amongst us; for we need it. For we ask it all in the name that is above every name, the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. [End]

The last time Jacob was in the Promised Land he was running away, he was trying to leave, and he was trying to leave because of the damage that he had brought to the relationships around him; in particular, multiple times, not

once, but multiple times he'd use deceit, lies, disguises, in order to gain the one-up on his brother, in order to gain an advantage. And he had caused so much damage with no apology that Esau was determined to break him. And now after a long time – he's been away over twenty years at this point – after a long time, he's heading home.

Now sometimes time has a way of healing wounds, doesn't it; but other times, it exacerbates them. And where a seed of bitterness has sat, over time it can be watered, and it can grow into something even more ugly, and a spirit of exasperation can take over. And so there is a true sense in this story that danger is in the air. We know what happens next, and sometimes we read the story and we think, "Well, Esau's always smiling, he's always so nice," and we minimize the tension.

But Jacob hasn't yet met Esau and doesn't know that God has blessed Esau in his own way, and Esau is quite happy in his life. Rather, Jacob is going back and he doesn't know what he's going to face. All he has is his memories, and those memories make very clear to him that this is dangerous, this could go horribly wrong. And so the first thing I want us to note this morning is a very practical point about transformed lives, and it's this: "The effects of your past sin still face you after you begin to follow God. The effects of past sin still face us after we've made that choice to follow God."

Time has passed in this story, and Jacob certainly has grown. He has more growing to do, but he has grown an awful lot. The fact that when God says, "Go home," he does head back. It's proof of that, he's not the same man he was; and yet the past hangs in the air, and it sets the mood for the whole chapter. You can see that in some of the details going on here, you get a sense of ongoing tension.

Look at verse 3. It says, "And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, 'Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob.'" What does he call Esau? What does it call him? Look at the text: "My lord." And how does he refer to himself? "Your servant."

Now why is that interesting? Well, the last time the two boys had lived in the same country Jacob had done everything he could to be the guy at the top. In fact, he had stolen the birthright and the blessing, and both of those

were all about him being, well, lord, master, the guy on the top, and making Esau second by putting him low, making him the servant of his brother.

Even in the wording that's used here there's this subtle recognition of exactly what wrong he had done. Look as well at verse 5: "I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight." He calls him "my lord" again, but he also appeals for favor, or we could translate that "mercy." He's asking for mercy.

That's the same word used in Genesis 6:8. Remember, "Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." Or if you look back to Genesis chapter 19, Genesis chapter 19, this horrible story about Sodom and Gomorrah, and Lot is in the middle of that story. And Lot is a nasty character at one level, he's made a lot of mistakes. And yet we read verse 19 Lot say, "Behold, Your servant has found favor in Your sight. You've shown me great kindness in saving my life," as Lot speaks to the angels that deliver him from that punishment.

In other words Noah and Lot were subjects that received favor, that received mercy, and it nothing to do with their moral righteousness. It was not because of who they were. Rather, they were subjects of mercy; they didn't get it based on their merit. And here Jacob employs that same language. He's not saying, "Esau, I'm your brother you've got to treat me like a brother." No, he's saying, "Esau, I've done wrong, and all I can do is appeal to your mercy. All I can do is look and hope that you have a merciful disposition that I never showed to you."

Look on it verse 6: "And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, 'We came to your brother Esau, and he's coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.'" He says, "I've done wrong, my lord, your servant. Please show me mercy." And news comes back four hundred people are marching out towards you. And what does that sound like, a party, maybe in Dallas? That sounds like an army. And in fact, do you remember whenever Abraham went to war against the five kings, I mean we were told how many people were in his army, three hundred and eighteen, and he won. This is bigger. This is a big group. These guys aren't out for some sort of Sunday stroll by the river, they are marching. It sounds so threatening. It all sounds so ominous.

And so we read in verse 7, "Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed." Of course he was. That's just a normal response to this type of news. He's full of intense fear because he believed a real threat is coming towards him.

And verse 8, you hear about him dividing everything up, trying to come up with a plan, because, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the count that is left will escape." He's thinking massacre, he's thinking destruction, and he's thinking it because he remembers what Esau was like – this impetuous, fierce man, this dangerous man who did things his own way. And he wasn't wrong.

Sometimes we can imagine problems, don't we? I don't think Jacob's imagination is getting carried away here. He's looking at all the evidences, he's looking at the mistakes he's made in the past, and he's reading this situation wisely. This is a dangerous situation. He's coming back. Jacob is coming back to what is a very dangerous mess. But who caused the mess? Well, Jacob did. He's coming back to a threatening mess that has resulted because of his past mistakes, because of the sin he did last time he was in town.

Now he is, in this moment, a changed person; but the hurt's still there. The problems he created in the past, they haven't just gone away; the hurt remains. I think that's not a positive lesson, but it's an important lesson for us. When you become a Christian, God doesn't just whitewash the consequences of your past sin. Sin hurts. Sin leaves its spots, it causes damage. Sometimes when folk become Christians, their initial high in finding Christ dissipates as they come to terms and realize the fact that their past mistakes, the consequences of that still remain. Those hurts, those issues, they need to be dealt with, they need to be worked through. Apologies need to be given, things need to be made right.

Jacob reminds us that even trouble from twenty years ago can still hang in the air and needs to get dealt with. And yet as believers, though that is true, and the consequences of sin may still remain and cause trouble moving forward in our life, it is different. This is our second point, because, "You do not battle those things, those consequences alone." We're not alone; and that changes everything.

Look at verse 1: "Jacob went on his way, and the angels" – plural – "of God met him." The word "angel" just means "messenger." And this phrase

"the angels of God," it reminds us of that vision or dream that he had back in chapter 28, where he dreamt of a ladder between him and God, and ascending and descending on that ladder were messengers, angels, going between him and God, and from God to him, maintaining the connection, maintaining the communication, maintaining the awareness. And the point of that vision was to remind Jacob that even as he left, God would be with him, that connection would continue. He was joined, he was linked to God, that God was going to be involved in his life.

In fact, that particular phrase, "angels" – plural – "of God," it only appears in two places: here in chapter 32, verse 1; and back in chapter 28, verse 12. We're meant to see a connection. Jacob had gone, and God had blessed, and God had undertaken; and now as he goes back and he's terrified about the mess, God gives him this reminder: "Jacob the connection. Remember the connection. Remember the link. Remember, you're not alone. Remember, I am the God who is with you."

Look at verse 2: "And when Jacob saw them he said, 'This is God's camp!' So he called the name of that place Mahanaim." "Mahanaim," the word simply means "two camps, two camps." And the idea is very simply, "God is here." You've got camp Jacob and you've got camp God, and they're together. That's the point: two camps, not one. The idea is Jacob realizes here he's not alone. He says that so clearly, "This is God's camp! This is God's camp!" What a realization.

He's going back. You can imagine his hands shaking, worried every step he takes closer to home, and God gives him this glorious revelation, "You're not alone. The connection has never gone, but right now you need to be reminded that connection exists; you're not alone." It's a reminder that God and His engagement in your life changes everything. We are not alone, Christian, we are not alone. Even as we have to deal with the consequences of our past and the hurt that we caused, even there, we are not alone. The effects of your past sin still face you when you come to follow God, but we don't battle those things alone.

The third thing then that we need to note from the text is, "God hears your prayer. God hears your prayer." And this is probably the most important follow-through of realizing that this is God's camp, that our connection to Him has not disappeared, that we, in our anxiety, our worry, the hurts that we don't know how to deal with and work through, that we have caused ourselves, we have a glorious resource, and that resource is prayer. The God

who is with us is one whose ear is inclined to us. Jacob here has this heavy sense of the danger that is in front of him, that his past has created, and he has this clear sense that, "Yes, God is with me, this is God's camp," and so he prays, he prays. We have an Almighty who hears our cries. What an incredible resource the Christian has.

Look at the prayer itself. Notice its structure. In verse 9, let me read verse 9: "And Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O' – capital L-O-R-D – 'O LORD who said to me, "Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good.'"" He begins his prayer in verse 9 with a focus on who God is. He dwells on the nature of God, the God who is with him. He recalls, first of all, that this God has a track record; He's left a legacy of faithfulness, a testimony of His greatness. "You're the God of my father Abraham, the God of Isaac," in in other words, "the God who did so much for Abraham, the God who kept every promise He made to Isaac; that's the one to whom I pray to."

And then he mentions that special name, "O LORD," – capital L-O-R-D – that special name Yahweh, that name that reminds us of the covenant relationship, the promise-making, promise-keeping God. He's not just Lord over all, rather He's a God who has made a personal commitment to some: to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. "O LORD, my covenant-making, covenant-keeping God." It's a recognition. "God, You've made promises to me, and I know that You're a God who is faithful to do everything that You have said." Jacob here reminds himself that "God has a history of doing the things He said, and He has made that personal commitment to me."

And then in verse 9 he goes even further, and he reminds himself that God has given a very specific command, and it's that command that he's seeking to obey. Look at the end of verse 9. It says, "O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good.'" In other words, "God, I'm not trying to better Jacob, I'm not out on a whim. God, I'm simply doing what You said. I'm trying to obey. I'm trying to follow Your word."

So the prayer starts, verse 9, with the nature of God: "You're a God who has given a legacy. You you're a God who is a promise-making, promise-keeping God, and you're a God who's given us direction; You you've told me in Your word. A God who has given orders; and that is what I seek to obey." So he starts with a focus on who God is.

And then verse 10, he acknowledges who he is. Look at verse 10: "I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that You have shown to Your servant, for with only my staff I cross this Jordan, and now I have become two camps." In particular, as he thinks about himself, he notes how undeserving he is. Yes, he's obeying God, but he deserves nothing from God he says.

It says there in the text, "I am not worthy," but literally it means, "I am little. I'm so small. I'm insignificant. I'm unworthy of Your attention, God." He's acknowledging he doesn't have a right here. It's not a, "God, You promised, so You'd better deliver." He's hoping in the promises of God, but he knows he deserves nothing from God's hand. He himself is little. He himself is insignificant. He has no claim in and of Jacob, but he throws himself upon the lovingkindness, the faithfulness of God Himself.

And notice in verse 10: "I am not worthy of the least of Your deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that You have shown." He throws himself on the steadfast love of God, the *cheched* of God, this profound covenant love that God has towards His people. The fact that our God is a God who loves the undeserving, and He maintains that commitment to them because it's His steadfast love that He has set upon His servant. He acknowledges here that "I am insignificant, but God, You are a God steadfast love." He hopes not in himself, but in the character of God.

In fact, the word there is actually strange in the original language. That word *cheched*, that steadfast love, that's a word that appears many, many times in the Old Testament. It's the word that speaks of the loving nature of God. But here it appears in an odd way; it appears in a plural form, which isn't so normal. I think the idea is, "You are the God of steadfast loves, loves, loves, loves, loves, loves, loves. There's a multiplicity of ways, God, that I can look at my undeserving life and see You've done it all. You've been so good to me. You've shown me not just lovingkindness, you've shown me lovingkindnesses-es-es-es-es." He can't even use language right – just like this guy. But the idea is clear: "God, if I was to count every way that You had blessed, I would talk for eternity." Jacob recognizes he doesn't deserve anything here, but he's lived it.

I was talking to someone from the church earlier, and they were sharing just over the course of our studies how they've experienced this. You hear certainly often in church. But sometimes we live it in life. Well, Jacob has lived it in life. He left this land, we said earlier, and slept on a rock; he had

nothing. And now he comes back with it all, as he says here, "with two camps worth of goods," because God is big in His undeserved covenant love. He's shown lots, a multiplicity of loving kindness. And Jacob has this experiential testimony now to how good his God has been.

So his prayer: he acknowledges who God is, he acknowledges who he is – undeserving – and then he makes an honest request in verse 11: "Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me." It's a very simple request, isn't it: "Rescue me from Esau."

It's not big, it's not unclear, it's not fuzzy. He says what's in his heart: "God, You're amazing, You're wonderful, You're faithful, You keep your promises. I don't deserve anything. But Lord, I'm terrified about Esau. Keep us safe." He just speaks about what he needs, and he talks to God as one who wants to hear.

And then in verse 12 he says, "because You have promised, because You have promised. Look at verse 12: "But You said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'" He, in a sense, echoes God's promises back to God. It's a great check to make sure our prayers are healthy. Bring our honest request to God, and then bring Scripture to bear upon that. That's what Jacob does: "God, You are wonderful; I don't deserve. God, help; God, because You have promised."

I think that's such a helpful model for prayer. I think as we think about our own prayers, we can have some instruction here. When difficulty comes in life, how do you pray to God? Well, start by acknowledging who God is. He's bigger than that difficulty. He's in full control of this circumstance. He is able, and He knows already what is best.

Acknowledge your undeserving nature: "God, I don't deserve. But I know who You are, and upon that I appeal." Make an honest request. Tell God what is on your heart, and yet echo back His promises: "God, You promised never to leave nor forsake. God, You have promised that we can ask and You hear." When it comes to your past sin, maybe like Jacob, you've left a mess behind you, and you're unsure how to approach that and how to deal with that, well, the same thing: begin with a focus on who God is: "God

You are just, You hate sin, Your ways are perfect. But Lord, You care, and You are a helper, and You promise to look after Your children."

Acknowledge yourself that you don't deserve: "Lord, I am the one who has sinned. It is my wrong that has caused so much damage and so much hurt, so much pain. It's because I rebelled against You." And yet make that request: "Lord, I have made a terrible mistake. I've caused so much harm, so much damage. But Lord, please bring restitution. Lord, please allow reconciliation. Lord, please renew this situation." And echo our promises back to Him: "You've promised, Lord, that You will work all things together for the good of those who are called according to Your purposes. I have made a mistake, Lord, but I know Your hand is able."

When it comes to God, we have a God who hears us, a God who remains connected to us, and a God who loves to hear the prayers of His children. The effects of your past sin will face you, still face you after you come to follow God. Yet you do not battle them alone; God hears your prayer. And the last thing I want us to see this morning is, "It is the face of God that we should fear. It is a face of God that we should fear."

Originally, when I was prepping and getting ready to come, I was planning to finish at verse 12, because it's such a good place to finish, isn't it? Jacob prays big, such a healthy model. Like you have this guy who's got a terrible situation in front of him. God makes clear, "I'm with you," and he prays a beautiful prayer. There's a lot to learn there. And then it gets depressing; and that's where we're going next, and I'm going to leave you wallowing in that, and then Dr. Lawson will come in next week and clean up, so that'll be good.

What happens next is true to life, isn't it? In verses 13 to 21, Jacob gets off his knees and he goes back to his busy-bodying. He goes back to trying to get everything happening, trying to manipulate the situation, trying to sort it all out in his own strength. He says, "Amen," in verse 12, after an earnest heartfelt prayer. And then like most of us, he goes right back to his panic and right back to living as if nobody is in control of this situation.

It's a reminder, isn't it, that so often we have a huge gulf between our worship and our practical life. You know, we come to church on Sunday, and we talk, don't we, about "this God who is faithful, this God who is able, this God who hears our prayers," and we all say, "Amen." And then we go

out, have our lunch with a smile on our face, and then start panicking about all the things that are going to come up this next week.

Or, a lot of us, very earnest, we make a point in the morning of praying. We think through all the needs of the day, concerns for our family, our own personal desire to honor the Lord in all we do, and with true sincerity we say, "Amen." And then we walk out, close the door of the bedroom, and, "Oh," life just starts. Oh well, we're so good in the morning, and a mess by the afternoon.

I think Jacob is so helpful, because this is us, isn't it? Jacob is a man who has met with God and been affected by God, but he is not the finished article. God's going to have to get him to limp first – and we'll see that next week. There's still work to be done in him, as there is in most of us. And all I want you to see as we come to the close today is that there is something that Jacob at this point is missing. He's going to get it later in the chapter; but at this point, he is missing.

His attention is all consumed with atheists. It's not the face of God, it's the face of his twin Esau. The text works hard to stress this, and sometimes we can miss some of the details. The Hebrew keeps using the word "face" in lots of different ways here that they don't always clearly translate in our English. But it's there and it's meant to be repeated, repeated, repeated, repeated, repeated, to help us to see that there's something that's consuming his attention. It's the face of Esau that he fears most.

That word "face" is used five times in verses 20 and 21 alone; choose all the way through the chapter. But even just those two verses, five times it appears. If you look at verse 20, verse 20 it says, "and you shall say, 'Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.'" He's talking to his servants. He's trying to work this whole thing out, and he says, "For he thought, 'I may appease him, appease him.'"

Now I don't know about your Bible, but mine has a little marker beside it. It's a little "one" in my Bible; and when I go down to the footnote at the bottom it says, "Hebrew, appease his face, appease his face." In other words, literally what it says here is "that I may cover his face" – it's a Hebrew idiom – "that I may propitiate, I may appease I may make right here, that it's Esau's fears that he's concerned about.

Verse 20 continues. He talks about "the presence that goes ahead of me." Literally in Hebrew it's "the presence that goes before my face, before my face," another idiom. Hebrew is just full of these little pictures. So, "before." Instead of saying, "go in front of," or, "to go before," they say, "before my face." That means "to go in front of me." My back would be behind me; before, my face is in front of me.

Then in verse 20, he says, "I shall see his face. I shall see his face." That one's obvious. Then in verse 20, he says, "Perhaps he will accept me." Literally, "Perhaps he will raise my face." You think of when you've done wrong and you're sulking; the idea is that Esau would lift up your head: "It's OK, you can look at me now." But the repetition is there.

And then in verse 21, he says, "The present passed ahead of him." Again the present went ahead of his face," is what literally it says. Now none of that is missing in your English version there, you're getting all the ideas. That's what good translation does, it gets the idea of those word pictures. But do you hear how in the Hebrew there's a drum beating. What's consuming all of Jacob's attention? A face, a face, a face, a face, a face; and it was one face that is running through his head, and it's a big, hairy, red one. It's Esau, the brother he'd hurt and upset, and who he thought wanted to kill him.

All he feared was Esau. And he works in these verses so hard to try and soften that face; he just wants to make it break into a smile. And so every donkey, especially those female donkeys and the camels, especially the female camels and their ewes and their cows and all of that, he's just trying to pay him off: "If I give him a big enough present, surely he'll smile." The idea in the text is Jacob is only thinking of one face, and it terrified him, and it consumed every thought that he had. He'd rather die at this moment than see the face of Esau.

Do you know at the end of the chapter he's going to go to Peniel? Do you know what it means? The face of God. There was something he was missing that was much more serious. There was another face that he should have understood he was in front of. He missed the face that he should have feared most, and he missed the emptiness of his account before him. He got it earlier when he was praying, but he'd already forgotten it here. He'd forgotten the face of God; and yet that face was one who he, and all, must have dealings with.

God would deal with Jacob, even if Jacob forgot about God. In fact, God would wrestle with Jacob all night to wake this panicking man up to his real need, and to make him limp out of that moment knowing that he was dependent upon God, and all that mattered in this world ultimately is God alone. There is a face that Jacob should have feared to stand before much more than Esau's, and this morning that face of God is one that all of us will stand before: that face with eyes that see all, that know every part of your life, everything that you do, that knows the deepest thoughts of the mind, that face that is all-powerful, that face that knows all, that face that is perfect in His justice and His standard. That face of God is one that no man can see and live apart from the work of Jesus Christ.

How often we find ourselves just like Jacob. We know God. You know the Lord, you pray to the Lord, and you live as if there is no Lord. We don't deny Him, we don't reject Him; but from nine to five, we live as if He's absent, as if He's sleeping. But it's that face of the Lord that we should fear above all else. We get so caught up in the small things. Jacob, it was a hairy, red-haired man. We, it's the health check, it's the threat of losing our job, it's a conflict in the family we don't know how we're going to overcome, it's the insurance renewal quote that's coming in. Maybe like Jacob, there's even people who want to kill us. Even that is so small.

I don't mean to minimize the trouble or the worry, but it's so small compared to the fact that we will stand before the face of God and give a full, no a partial, a full account. These little worries can so quickly consume all of our focus. But behind them stands the mighty face of God; and He will behold us, and He will see all. He is the Almighty who holds our life in His hand and who determines our eternity.

Sometimes we get that sense, don't we? We have these little wake-up moments, whether it be a sermon or whatever, and we kind of go into panic mode, a little bit like Jacob with Esau; and we don't necessarily line up our donkeys and our camels and our sheep, but we do try and think about our good works, and our church attendance, our generous offering, our service in the community, and we kind of work out these things, thinking, "Oh, maybe it'll make Him smile, maybe it'll soften that gaze, maybe it will change His disposition." Friends, that does nothing. There is only one, there is only one way by which the face of God changes from a scowl to a smile, and it's through the perfect work of Jesus Christ.

You remember in the New Testament, that pure, perfect Lamb of God, His blood was shed, the price that was needed. As He hung upon the cross, there were one on either side, two thieves, who were getting exactly what their deeds in this world deserved: death. One of those men looked at Jesus with scorn and heaped insult upon Him, and a few hours later he stood face-to-face with the Almighty God; while the other, he'd also made a mess of his life, but a few hours later, he beheld the face, not of a judge, but of a Father, a Father who loved him, a Father who had secured a place for him for eternity. Why? Because that man in his dying moments fixed his gaze upon the crucified Lord, and cried out, "Remember me." That alone can change.

God's face is one that no man can avoid. We can get so distracted, just like Jacob, consumed with everything else; but that face ultimately is one that no man can avoid. We will stand before Him. But if we have first looked to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we do not see the Judge that we deserve, but the Father, who assures us He loves us, who is welcoming us home, who remains committed to us throughout eternity. It's Jesus Christ who makes that difference.

Friends, every single person in this room, you will stand before the face of God; and the only thing that determines whether that face is scowling or smiling is your commitment to Jesus Christ. Come to Him while He may be found. Put your trust in Him today. Wake up from all of the small worries of this life and to realize that, ultimately, all that matters is being ready to stand before the face of God, knowing that your hope is in Jesus Christ, who you have asked to remember you. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Heavenly Father, we are so thankful for the dramatic difference Jesus makes. Lord, You are perfect, You are right in all Your ways. Your judgments are perfect. Your judgments are appropriate. There is nothing in You that is unbalanced, Lord. Individuals get what their sins deserve, except that there is hope in Jesus Christ. We thank You that there upon the cross He was punished in our place. We are so thankful that on the cross He paid that debt that was not His so that we could go free. And we pray, Lord, that You would give us all a keen sense that our trust and dependence is in Jesus Christ, that You would cause us to acknowledge that we deserve nothing, and yet to throw ourselves upon that steadfast love of Yourself. You so loved the world, that You sent Your Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

And Lord, we pray for all of us, these works and progress. May You help us today as we leave this place, not simply to go right back to our worries and our attention all consumed with the things of here and now; but may we live in light of the fact that we will stand before Your face. So help us, we pray, to embrace Your message and to live accordingly, for the glory of Jesus Christ, whom we love, and in whose name we pray. Amen.