

Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau

32: 3-23

DIG: Did Jacob's actions display a lack of faith or wisdom? Why?

REFLECT: When you have wronged someone and want to be forgiven, how do you show you are sincerely sorry? How can Jacob's story help you more effectively ask for forgiveness for your sins?

Parashah 8: Vayishlach (He sent) 32:3-36:43

(see my commentary on Deuteronomy Af - Parashah)

Jacob (Hebrew: Ya'akov) learned that his brother had settled south of the Dead Sea, so he sent messengers ahead of him to Esau in the land of Seir (say-ear), the country of Edom (32:3). **The rabbis teach that the messengers were angels.** Seir was a mountain range, running north to south, where Esav had settled and started the nation of Edom. This was due south from Galeed.

Ya'akov instructed his servants exactly how to address Esau, saying: **This is what you are to say to my master Esau, "Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there until now" (32:4).** Jacob humbles himself before his brother, even calling himself a servant. He knew that the LORD had said: **the older will serve the younger (25:23),** but Ya'akov does not insist on the fulfillment of the blessing that he had obtained from his father; he was very submissive. In addition, he wanted Esau to know that he had no desire for any of his possessions; he said: **I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, menservants and maidservants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes (32:5).** But evidently Esav had heard that Jacob was migrating back to Canaan.

Though his anger against Jacob had long since cooled, he himself did not know what Jacob's intentions might be. For all Esau knew, Ya'akov might be coming with a large body of fighting men to claim his promised boundaries and possessions and to subjugate him. When he learned of Jacob's approach toward Canaan, he then assembled an army of his own and marched forward to meet Ya'akov, preparing for whatever may come. **Jacob's messengers met Esav much sooner than they expected.⁵⁰² When they returned to Jacob, they had terrifying news. We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you and four hundred men are with him (32:6).** This frightens Ya'akov because four hundred men were far too many for a mere escort. He naturally jumped to the conclusion that Esau still intended to kill him.

In great fear and distress, Jacob devises a survival plan and divided the people who were with him into two groups, the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought: If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape (32:7-8). But along with human wisdom, Jacob also prayed. This showed where his confidence lay.

In his prayer, he acknowledged Elohim, *the God of power and justice who had protected Abraham, Isaac and himself*, and ADONAI, *the LORD who had kept His covenant promises, the merciful redeemer*. He prayed: *O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, "Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper" (32:9)*. If Esau were to kill him or his family, this promise could never be fulfilled. So Jacob's prayer is based upon God's promises to him (28:13-15), and not on his own merit. This is true of any believer who has received blessing from the LORD.

The goal of prayer is to get our will in line with ADONAI's will, and to that end Ya'akov continued to pray. He poured out his heart and said: *I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only a staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said: I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted (32:10-12)*. He spent the night there. All this should have given Jacob great confidence, but he was controlled by fear at this point.⁵⁰³ As he lay down to go to sleep, he thought of his vast holdings and decided to send a gift to his brother Esau, showing his good will (32:13).

The next day he selected thirty female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys (32:14-15). This selection process took the whole next day. He selected a total of 580 animals, which shows how much God had blessed him because he gave only a portion of what he had. The giving of presents is far more common in the East, and has more significance, then with us. Hardly any transaction of importance can take place without a gift.⁵⁰⁴

The gifts Jacob sent ahead of him were not a bribe, but rather an expression of conciliation. He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself and said to his servants: *Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds (32:16)*. There were five groups of animals. There was a group of 220 goats, a group of 220 rams and ewes, 60 camels, 50 cattle, and 30 donkeys, with spacing between each group. The goal was for Esau to receive five gifts, one at a time.

He instructed the one in the first group: **When my brother Esau meets you and asks, "To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?" then you are to say: They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us (32:17-18).** He also instructed the second, the third, and the fourth and fifth groups who followed the first: **You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him (32:19).**

Then he added, "Be sure to say: **Your servant Ya'akov is coming behind us**". For he thought to himself, **"I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; and later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me"** (32:20). The word pacify here, is the Hebrew word *kaphar*. It is the same Hebrew root as the word *atonement*. What that means is that **Jacob** was seeking **Esau's** forgiveness.

After sending off his **gifts**, **Ya'akov** remained behind with his family and the rest of the servants to spend the **night** at his camp near the **Jabbok** River. At first they were north of the river as **Esau** approached from the south. But apparently unable to sleep, **Jacob** rose and embarked on a dangerous night-crossing. He decided to move the animals, his family and **all his possessions** across the river to the south (32:22-23). The **Jabbok** was fordable there, and he wanted to get the remaining animals across the stream before encountering **Esau** the eventful next day.

*On April 16, 2007 Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people and wounded many more before committing suicide at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia. It was the deadliest shooting in modern American history, and I am sure that when the shooting started that day, there were plenty of prayers being sent up to **God** as students were cornered and executed. But that didn't mean there wasn't some planning going on, planning how to slip out a back door, planning where to hide, or planning to jump out a window (which several students did to save their lives). Many of those killed were believers and **God** had a plan for their lives. Did their planning to escape from that assassin show a lack of trust in **God**? Would standing at their desks and singing "Amazing Grace" have been more spiritual? Sometimes, in the face of death, the natural instinct for survival takes over and people try to survive. Their planning should not be taken as lack of faith, and neither should **Jacob's**.*

So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, and he had returned to the northern bank of the **Jabbok** River to spend a second **night** there alone in the **camp** (32:21). Having done everything he could humanly do, he decided to spend the rest of the night in prayer. While waiting **seven years to get Rachel**, it **seemed like only a few days to Ya'akov (29:20)**, but while waiting only **a few days to meet Esau**, it **seemed like seven years**. He still felt vulnerable from an attack by **Esau**, but that was exactly where **God** wanted him, having no one else to turn to. Now the real struggle would begin.