

### **Genesis 33:1-17 Forgiveness and reconciliation between Jacob and Esau**

By Anita Verhoeven

In the Netherlands we have a television programme called The Family Dinner. In your country you may have one like it. In the programme the host invites members of any family who are in conflict with each other and are eager to settle it to join him for a meal. At the dinner table, under the spotlight and in view of the camera, the two parties have the opportunity to become reconciled. As a result, an old conflict may be cleared up, but sometimes the attempt to settle the conflict fails. One of the disputing parties does not want to meet the other or the conflict has hardened and embittered their hearts.

In Genesis 33 we also learn about the settling of an old quarrel. It had been a long-standing one between the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau. Esau had even made up his mind to kill his brother (Genesis 27:41). Jacob fled to escape from him. Since that time, the struggle between them had continued unresolved for 20 years.

Where there are quarrels between brothers or disputes within a family, strong tension arise. In a conflict between two partners in business, the quarrel can sometimes be resolved. If this does not happen, the business relationship may be dissolved, in which case both partners go their own ways. They do not meet anymore. But a family conflict is different. The two parties always remain relatives. In that case the conflict may go on forever. It can turn into a feud where there is great bitterness or fierce fighting. Especially in the case of people who are very close relatives, a conflict can take on huge proportions. Such was the case with Jacob and Esau.

They got into conflict over Esau's birthright. First, Jacob bought Esau's birthright for a plate of soup from his elder brother. Then Jacob stole Esau's birthright blessing. When their father Isaac was dying, Jacob disguised himself as his brother Esau. He put on Esau's clothes with the smell of Esau on them. In this way Jacob deceived his blind father. Isaac gave the largest blessing, intended for Esau, his first-born, to Jacob, disguised as Esau. When Esau returned home, Jacob's deception was discovered and Esau became so angry that he wanted to kill his brother. That was the reason why Jacob fled the country. For 20 years the brothers had no contact. And when Jacob returned after those 20 years, he was still afraid of Esau. Genesis 33 tells us about the reconciliation between the two brothers, Esau and Jacob. In this chapter we learn a great deal about how the Bible views reconciliation.

First of all: **reconciliation is possible**. Even after 20 years of conflict, even when you think things will never be right again. The Bible speaks about people and families in a very realistic way, including those who are believers. You will find many situations of conflict in the stories of the Bible: in the family of Cain and Abel, in Abraham's family between Sara and Hagar, in Jacob's family with the quarrels between his older sons and their younger brother, Joseph. The Bible is clear and honest. In the best families you find quarrels and conflicts. But the Bible does not resign itself to the situation of disrupted family relationships, as if what is broken could never be healed again. The Bible does not speak about people in either an idealistic or a fatalistic way. Relationships are not doomed to stay broken. Sometimes they may not be healed, but then often the reason is not the problem itself, but the parties involved. They behave like victims, they feel self-pity, or they cease to believe in the possibility of

finding a solution or achieving reconciliation. Then they stop looking for peace and a settlement. Reconciliation only works when both parties are willing for it.

The story of Jacob and Esau shows us: reconciliation is possible. It is possible even when the conflict is long-standing. In the case of Jacob and Esau the conflict had lasted for 20 years. It is possible even when it seems insuperable. Esau had wanted to murder Jacob.

Reconciliation is possible; don't give up too easily. Be willing to set things right. The story of Jacob and Esau shows that reconciliation is possible.

Secondly, this Bible passage shows us that **reconciliation requires sacrifice**.

How did Jacob approach his brother? He prepared a large gift to present to his brother Esau when they met. When he fled from his home country he had nothing. But during these 20 years God had blessed him abundantly. He had become a rich man. The previous chapter (Genesis 32:14, 15) describes how Jacob selected the gift for his brother. It consisted of 220 goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 female camels, 40 cows and 10 bulls, and 30 donkeys. In total this was almost 600 head of cattle. This large gift would convince Esau that Jacob really meant it, that he was willing to go to great lengths to be reconciled with his brother. He knew that reconciliation is not cheap because it requires effort and sacrifice. Reconciliation is more than merely making an approach; reconciliation has a price.

In our time it seems that settling a conflict is cheap, for we live in a culture of excuses.

To apologise seems to be enough for resolving a conflict. Many people think you can bring peace and reconciliation without making a sacrifice. You apologise, the other person has to accept it and then the problem should be cleared. This is also the case in *The Family Dinner*. The contending parties just say sorry to each other and then the conflict has to be over.

Nowadays the thought that reconciliation requires effort is scarcely to be found among us anymore. But Jacob knew better and by making an enormous gift he showed how much he valued a good relationship with Esau. And not only by his gift did he show how he valued his relationship with his brother, for if that were all, Esau could have thought it was a bribe. No, Jacob also adopted a deferential and humble attitude. He bowed down to the ground seven times before Esau. To bow once was the usual greeting, but to bow seven times was a sign of great respect for the other person. He also chose to address his brother in a way that revealed a very humble attitude by calling him 'my lord' and himself 'your servant'. He did not want to justify himself nor to force Esau to accept his gift. He showed himself to be inferior to him. In fact, it was this very aspect that had caused the conflict! The blessing he obtained from Isaac by deceit included the fact that he was the first, superior to Esau, and that Esau was to be his servant. When their mother, Rebecca, was pregnant with the twins, the Lord told her: 'The elder will serve the younger' (Genesis 25:23). Now, Jacob wanted to be the least. He was lord but he became a servant. Jacob gave Esau a large gift and surrendered his own position. This is what reconciliation with Esau cost him. Jacob says in Genesis 33:10 'Accept this gift from me'. In Hebrew it means: 'Accept my blessing from me'. Jacob was ready to share the blessing which he had set his heart on when he was young. A large gift and the renunciation of his position was the high price he was willing to pay in order to be reconciled to his brother.

In his attitude, Jacob resembled Jesus Christ. Christ paid a great price for the reconciliation of humankind with God. He gave his own life. Sin is not forgiven simply because one makes an excuse or an apology. God does not wave sin away.

He is holy and righteous. If he forgives sin he lays it on the shoulders of Christ. It is Christ who has paid the cost of our reconciliation with God. He paid it with his life and gave up his exalted position in heaven (Philippians 2:6-8). The Lord Jesus chose to become a servant in order to bring us peace by the only way possible.

Thirdly, in this Bible story we see that **reconciliation also includes forgetting**, or if that is not possible, drawing a veil over the affair.

How did the brothers meet? Verse 4 says: Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms round his neck and kissed him. And they wept. They didn't talk anymore about the past. They did not quarrel any longer about who was to be blamed for the problem. Jacob does not want to justify himself. He could have said: I bought the birthright from you honestly for a plate of soup. And Esau could have said: You deceived me and our father Isaac. No, they turned over a new leaf and let bygones be bygones. They did not open old wounds.

Reconciliation also means forgetting, giving up your own right. In the television programme The Family Dinner the relatives immediately recapture the past. The quarrel is kept alive as if it had started yesterday. But Jacob and Esau kept silent. They embraced and kissed each other. Reconciliation is leaving what is past in the past. It is not denying the past. No, they even wept because of what had happened in the past, but then they were reconciled and did not call each other to account for their past conduct. They embraced and peace came. Reconciliation with God also means that God forgives our sins if we confess them. Not only does he forgive our sins but he is also able to forget them (Psalm 103:12). God will not confront us again with our sins. Reconciliation is forgetting who was wrong and leaving behind what was wrong.

When Jesus told the parable of the lost son he used exactly the same words as in this story of Jacob and Esau. Esau ran to meet Jacob, just as the father ran to meet his son. The father also embraced his son and kissed him. The lost son said: Make me like one of your hired men (Luke 15:19), just as Jacob said: I am your servant. The father did not blame the son for his behaviour nor did he recall it. Esau said: You are my brother again. The father said: My son was lost and is found. Reconciliation is forgetting the past or drawing a veil over it.

Reconciliation is possible, reconciliation requires sacrifice and reconciliation is forgetting, but then there is still one more point. **It is not finished yet.**

After Jacob and Esau had been reconciled, they each went their own way. Esau would have preferred Jacob to become his neighbour for then they could make up for lost time. But Jacob refused. Although their relationship had been healed it was still vulnerable and fragile. Later on we hear that they met only once more, namely when their father Isaac died. That was the only time. When you have become reconciled with somebody, it does not mean that you will meet each other for coffee every week. Neither does it mean that you will go on holiday together. It might be more sensible to keep some distance between you. When you separate peacefully, it doesn't mean you need to meet each other immediately the next day. Reconciliation is very beautiful, but still it is not the whole thing. It is not finished completely. The same is true for the reconciliation between God and man. In faith we have been reconciled, but we are not yet fully released. We are still waiting for the final and total deliverance. Now God is in heaven and we are on earth. But one day he will dwell again on this earth, and then he will never leave us. Then we shall live with God forever, free from worries, diseases, mourning and sorrow. Reconciliation with God creates in us both a longing and an expectation as we wait for the moment when our deliverance will be accomplished completely. Then we shall be with him in his glory for all eternity.