

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001

FORWARD, HALT!

Genesis 33:1-20

by

Steven J. Cole

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Genesis Lesson 60

FORWARD, HALT!
Genesis 33:1-20

My drill instructor in Coast Guard boot camp believed in the value of marching. We marched a lot. When you're marching as a company, it's not easy to be the one giving the orders. To do that, you've got to think on your feet and look ahead to know what you're going to say. It's easy to get flustered.

On one occasion, our recruit company commander was marching us along under the scrutiny of our drill instructor. He yelled out an order that was not correct. When you do that, the way to rescind the order is to say, "As you were." But being already flustered by yelling the wrong command and seeing us begin to respond, this recruit forgot "as you were," and yelled instead, "Cancel that order!" From the back, the deep voice of our drill instructor broke us all into laughter when he bellowed, "Cancel that order? What do you think this is, some blankety-blank MacDonald's?"

If Jacob had been calling out marching orders to his family as they returned to Canaan, in Genesis 33 his orders would have been, "Forward, halt!" Jacob gets a bit flustered as he finally meets Esau and his 400 men. He has just spent the night wrestling with the Lord, where God broke Jacob of his self-dependence. He's walking with a limp as he approaches the dreaded meeting with his estranged brother. Under the pressure of the moment, he resorts to his old scheming ways and takes matters into his own hands, but it's mixed up with some positive aspects of his newly discovered trust in the Lord. So the result is a mixture of living by the flesh and of living by faith.

It's not surprising, therefore, that commentators and preachers have some different views of Jacob's actions in this chapter. Some extol him as a godly man who models how we ought to be reconciled to our enemies and live by faith. Others chide Jacob as a

sorry example of the life of faith, using chapter 34, which shows the results of his actions in chapter 33, as their proof. Who is right?

I take the middle ground. I think there are some positive changes in Jacob, but they aren't complete. He's still the same old schemer in many ways, but God is working on him. He's changed as a result of Peniel, but he's still unchanged in many ways. The flesh still dominates much of him, but he's beginning to live by faith.

In this regard the Bible is realistic, because that's how it is with most of us. I don't know anyone who has been totally sanctified as the result of one dramatic spiritual experience. I know many who claim to be totally different, but you don't have to be around them very long before you realize that they've got the same basic problems. A spiritual experience is fine, but, we need to recognize that Christianity is a lifelong walk with God, not a flash in the pan. As A. W. Pink writes (*Gleanings in Genesis* [Moody Press], p. 295), "It is one thing to be privileged with a special visitation from or manifestation of God to us, but it is quite another to live in the power of it." So Jacob's experience in Genesis 33 teaches us that ...

Having begun to live by faith,
we must be careful to continue.

Satan usually doesn't get us off track in one fell swoop, but by degrees. As with John Bunyan's pilgrim, we wander slightly off into By-path Meadow, thinking that it's a pleasant route that will take us parallel with the road to the Celestial City. But it takes us farther and farther away, until we're caught by the Giant Despair and wonder how we ended up in his dungeon.

If you look ahead, Jacob's situation at the end of chapter 34 is terrible. His daughter has been raped by the prince of Shechem. In retaliation, Jacob's sons have treacherously promised the men of Shechem a peace treaty, only to murder them all after they complied with the terms of the treaty. And Jacob is afraid that the other people of the land will destroy him and everything he has.

How did he get into that mess? It began in chapter 33, with little instances of disobedience. The events in chapter 33 probably add up to eight to ten years. Over these years, the little instances of unbelief and disobedience are gradually taking Jacob off the path. These events led to the catastrophe of chapter 34. To explain the text, I want to trace Jacob's mixture of faith and the flesh in Genesis 33; then I'll conclude with some applications.

1. Jacob lived both by the flesh and by faith in his reconciliation with Esau (33:1-16).

As the sun rises on Peniel, Jacob comes limping from his wrestling match with the Lord. He looks up and sees Esau and his 400 men coming toward him in the distance. I wish that Jacob would have said, "Lord, You've crippled me so I'm helpless unless You intervene. You've promised to bless me. I'm trusting You to work." But instead, the old Jacob takes over: He divides his children and wives, putting the least favorite in the front so that the more favored can possibly escape the massacre he still fears. Jacob is still relying on his own wits to get him out of another tight situation. If his trust had been completely in the Lord, he wouldn't have had to resort to his escape plan.

Several commentators point out that after God changed Abraham's name from Abram, the new name is used consistently. But after God gave Jacob his new name, Israel, the Holy Spirit, who superintended Moses's writing of Genesis, saw fit after this to use the name Jacob 45 times, while the name Israel is used of him only 23 times, and it even has to be reaffirmed in chapter 35. While we probably shouldn't put too much emphasis on this, it may hint that Jacob was not living up to his new position and privilege as a man who had prevailed with God.

Jacob's scheming and lack of trust in the Lord is further seen in his groveling approach to his brother. Some commentators commend Jacob for his humble courtesy, but I think that he

goes beyond proper respect. His obsequious “my lord, your servant” language is manipulative, at best (33:5, 8, 13, 14 [twice], 15). He meets Esau by bowing seven times, a greeting normally reserved for kings. All the wives and children bow down. There is a place for proper respect, but Jacob is going overboard. Esau didn’t expect that kind of stuff. He calls Jacob, “my brother” (33:9). He’s real; Jacob is the phony.

Jacob’s lack of trust in the Lord is seen also in his insistence that Esau accept his elaborate gift. It was a matter of custom that you didn’t accept a gift from an enemy, so Jacob wanted to make sure that Esau was not still at odds with him. But he was really trusting the gift to appease Esau (33:8). Some commentators say that this is a model of reconciliation, that sometimes it is not wise to bring up old hurts or talk about the problems of the past. I don’t agree. I think this was a superficial reconciliation at best, because Jacob never verbally confessed the wrongs he had committed against Esau, nor did he ask for forgiveness.

It’s like when a husband wrongs his wife. To make peace, he brings home some flowers and a gift. That may be a way of waving a white flag, opening the door for peace talks. But if the gift is all that’s done, there hasn’t been adequate reconciliation. The husband needs to specify how he wronged his wife and ask forgiveness. They need to talk about what happened so that they understand each other. Otherwise, she’s going to say to herself, “He thinks he can just run roughshod over me and then bring me a gift to make everything right. But he’s not willing to deal with the real problem.”

Jacob utters a truth beyond his understanding when he tells Esau, “I see your face as one sees the face of God” (33:10). What Jacob meant is that in Esau’s favorable reception, Jacob saw God’s favor. But beyond that, Jacob’s words point out the truth that when you’re at odds with your brother, he represents God to you. If you’re not right with him, it’s a

pointed reminder that you're not right with God. As John puts it (1 John 4:20), "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

Jacob's flesh also rears its head in his response to Esau's offer to travel together (33:12-16). It would not have been right for Jacob to go with Esau, since God clearly had told Jacob to go to Canaan, not to Seir. So Jacob was right to refuse, but he was wrong in the way he refused. He makes up an excuse about his children and flocks being too weak to travel at Esau's pace. He pushed them hard to escape from Laban, but now he uses their weakness as an excuse to avoid going with Esau. He lies by telling Esau that he will follow him to Seir (33:14).

Some commentators come to Jacob's defense, saying that he intended to go to Seir, and maybe he did, since the text is not comprehensive. I find that an overly optimistic view of Jacob, because as soon as Esau is out of sight, Jacob turns around, goes back over the Jabbok, and heads a few miles north to Succoth, where he settles for a few years. We've all been in similar situations, where we were asked to join an activity which would compromise our faith. In an effort not to offend the person asking, it's easy to fall into deception. But the right thing to do is to be straightforward in a kind manner. Jacob could have said, "I appreciate your kind offer for me to go with you to Seir, but God has commanded me to go to Canaan."

With so much of Jacob that's of the flesh, you may be wondering if he did anything by faith. I see several things. First, Jacob goes out in front of his family to meet Esau (33:3). This represents a change from the night before, when he put his family across the Jabbok (toward Esau's approach), while he returned to the more safe side. But after wrestling with the Lord and being crippled, he hobbles out in front of

his family, which reveals his faith, mingled as it was with his faithless schemes.

Also, Jacob's faith is seen in his witness to God's grace in his life. When Esau asks about the children, Jacob is careful to acknowledge the Lord when he says that they are "the children whom God has graciously given your servant" (33:5). In reference to his gift, Jacob says, "Please take my gift ... because God has dealt graciously with me" (33:11).

Jacob's faith is probably also seen in his refusal to accompany Esau, even though his method of refusal was wrong. I say "probably" because it may be argued that Jacob didn't trust his brother and was afraid that Esau would play along with the reconciliation for a while and then kill Jacob. But perhaps Jacob saw that since his brother was a secular man who had no concern for God's purpose concerning Canaan, there could be no true fellowship between them. So he refused to go with him.

So Jacob's reconciliation with Esau is a mixture of living by the flesh and of living by faith. In many ways, Esau is outwardly the better man. It's sad that often non-Christians, who have no interest in the things of God, are much nicer people than those who claim to be following God. Esau probably brought along the 400 men to meet Jacob just in case his brother was up to his old tricks. But when he sees that Jacob isn't meeting him with an army, he leaps off his camel, runs to Jacob, hugs and kisses him and weeps. He doesn't hold a grudge in spite of Jacob's past treachery. And Esau isn't greedy. Although he finally accepts Jacob's gift, he says, "I have plenty, my brother. Let what you have be your own." The trouble is, Esau was not at all concerned for the things of God. Spurgeon pointedly observes, "It is an awful contentment when a man can be satisfied without God" (*Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia* [Baker], 5:354).

2. Jacob lived both by the flesh and by faith in his decision to dwell at Succoth and Shechem (33:17-20).

As I said, the “by faith” part of Jacob’s turning back to Succoth was in not accompanying Esau. But that’s about as far as his faith went. For the most part, it was the old Jacob, living by the flesh. As Derek Kidner observes, “Succoth was a backward step, spiritually as well as geographically” (*Genesis* [IVP], pp. 171- 172). It lies to the east of the Jordan River, thus outside the boundary of Canaan. Thus, Succoth represents incomplete obedience on Jacob’s part.

In 31:3, the Lord had told Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.” In 31:13, in repeating the command, the Lord said, “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me.” It would seem that Jacob should have returned to that place of his vision and vow. In 35:1, after the disastrous events of chapter 34, the Lord specifically commands Jacob to go to Bethel. So it seems that at the least, God had wanted Jacob to return to Canaan but, more likely, to go to Bethel. But instead, Jacob settled at Succoth, and then bought land at Shechem.

The text doesn’t give us a motive for Jacob’s incomplete obedience, but it may hint at one. Verse 18 states, “Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem.” (The King James Version takes the adverb “safely” as a proper noun, “Shalem.”) Jacob may have felt safe there, but feared returning to the southern part of Canaan, where his father was, because of continuing fears of Esau, who frequented that region. In spite of Esau’s warm greeting, Jacob probably didn’t trust him. Those who are treacherous, like Jacob, often think others will be treacherous.

But while Jacob was afraid of Esau, he wasn’t afraid of staying in Succoth, outside the land, or of buying property in Shechem, where his family would be morally polluted. He was

afraid of the wrong things! God had promised to protect Jacob if he obeyed; but Jacob felt he was more safe in a place of partial obedience than to risk trusting the Lord by obeying completely.

What about the altar Jacob erected in Shechem? Again, commentators are on both extremes. Some say it is a marvelous example of Jacob's faith, while others condemn him for being hypocritical, living in disobedience while he puts on an outward show of religion by claiming that God is his God.

My observation of Christians (including myself) tells me that Jacob was doing what we all do. He was making an attempt to follow the Lord, but at the same time he was not obeying the Lord completely. By calling the altar "God, the God of Israel," he was acknowledging his gratitude to God for bringing him safely back to the land. But by not going all the way to Bethel, he was catering to his fleshly fear of Esau. He was the new man, Israel; but he was still the old man, Jacob. We do the same thing. We begin by faith in the Lord, but then live by the flesh.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with four applications:

1. Be on guard to your own bent toward the flesh. We all have our unique areas of weakness. Jacob's bent was his scheming. Abraham and Isaac were prone toward lying under pressure. Moses tended to take strong action, but in his own strength, as seen in his killing the Egyptian and later in striking the rock. David had a weakness for women. You and I have our own bent. It's like the default mode on my computer--it's the mode you fall into automatically. You've got to be on guard, and cling to the Lord especially in that area. Be in the Word--it will reveal to you the thoughts and intentions of your heart (Heb. 4:12) so that you can be on guard.

Also, know your strengths. Usually our areas of greatest strength

are related to our areas of greatest weakness. The Apostle Paul was strong as a man of purpose and conviction, but he tended to run over weak people, like John Mark. He had to learn to accept Mark, in spite of his desertion on the first missionary journey. Your strengths will show you your weaknesses, so that you can be on guard.

2. Even though you enjoy God's protection, you must constantly seek His direction. Jacob came safely to Succoth and Shechem, under God's protection. But he failed to seek God's direction, and wrongly settled where he shouldn't. Granted, Shechem was in the land of Canaan, but Jacob never asked the Lord if this was where He wanted him to live. He falsely mistook God's protection for His approval.

Sometimes I'm amazed at how Christians make major decisions, like where to live, on the most trivial basis, without consulting the Lord. Often, the last thing they think about is the spiritual well-being of their family. I've heard of Christians deciding to move to some isolated location because they want to get away from people. But is there a good church in this small town? Did they bother to find out if God was directing them to get away from people? As I recall, Christ died for lost people, not for deer and bear and forests. He may want some of His children to abandon the crowds, but I have a hunch that most Christians who head for the wilderness haven't bothered to check with the Lord.

I once sold a car to a guy who was living in a tiny motel room next to Mother's Bar in Sunset Beach, California. Since he was from the midwest, I asked him how he happened to settle there. He told me that he came west after a divorce and was driving down Pacific Coast Highway when he saw Mother's Bar. He stopped in for a drink, liked the place, and decided to stay. What a way to pick a place to live! As believers, the Lord's purpose and direction should be the major factor in determining where we live.

3. Be alert to spiritual danger, especially as it affects your children. Shechem was probably a trading center, a place where caravans stopped and

exchanged goods. Jacob looked around and thought, "It's as good as any other place." So he settled there, but he didn't think about how it would affect his children. The ten years or so he was there were the years his children grew up. Apparently he hadn't warned Dinah of the dangers of mingling with the local young people. As a result, she got raped and her brothers took brutal revenge.

Think through the implications of your behavior on your children. You may do things which don't damage you too much, at least outwardly, but it can wipe out your kids. Jacob's settling in Shechem resulted in the tragedy of chapter 34. His showing favoritism to Joseph built resentment in his other sons, resulting in their selling him into slavery a few years later. We have to be examples of godliness to our kids both in word and deed, and warn them of spiritual dangers.

Your nonverbal actions send loud signals to your kids. If you act selfishly, your kids get the message and learn to be selfish. Even in little ways, you need to show your children that you care for them and want them to grow spiritually. Pray often with your kids. Turn off the tube and read good books to them. Give them your time and attention. Put down your newspaper and listen when they tell you about something that's important to them. You can and should say "I love you," but if you don't show it by giving them your attention, they won't feel it. If you model godly love, there's a better chance your kids will hear your verbal teaching about spiritual matters.

4. Be careful of justifying partial obedience. Your little compromise becomes their flagrant disobedience. You can talk about God all day long, but if you don't live consistently, your kids aren't going to buy your advice. You can set up your altar in Shechem, even out of the right motives, but if God wants you in Bethel, it doesn't ring true. And kids are experts at spotting phoniness! You don't have to be perfect, but you do have to live in reality with Jesus Christ, which means obedience, even when it's not easy. When you sin against your kids, confess it to them and seek their forgiveness. Be real in your growing walk with God!

Everything I'm saying is summed up by Paul in Colossians 2:6, 7: "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude." You began with Him by faith in obedience to the gospel. Keep it up! Instead of "Forward, halt!" make it, "Forward, march!"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can a person know if he's living by faith or by the flesh? What signposts can he look for?
2. Is spirituality an all-or-none matter or a progressive matter?
3. In restoring a broken relationship, should we always talk through past wrongs, or is it okay just to "forget about the past"?
4. In declining an unacceptable social offer from a non-Christian, must we be totally honest or are excuses sometimes okay?

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