

## Messages from Genesis “Revenge, or Reconciliation”

In this series of messages from the book of Genesis we are following the lives of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob. After living with his father-in-law Laban for 20 years, Jacob decides to go back home, when friction between Laban and Jacob escalates. During this time Jacob has become a changed man. He wrestled with God at the brook Jabbok, and that divine encounter changed him. But he still has to face his brother Esau, whom he had wronged many years before. Now he learns that his brother is coming to meet him – with 400 men!

Fearful of what might happen, he splits his family up for safety: "Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids" (Genesis 33:1). He goes on ahead: "He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother" (Genesis 33:3).

What is Esau going to do? How will he react to Jacob, who had cheated him out of his dying father's blessing years before? Take a look! "But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept" (verse 4). Isn't that awesome! He doesn't curse him out. He doesn't punch him. He doesn't tell a few of his men to tie him up. He hugs him. They embrace and cry.

Then Esau sees Jacob's large family and the great number of animals Jacob has brought with him and says, "What are these?" Jacob replies, "They're a gift for you, brother, that I may find favor in your sight". Esau responds: "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself..." (Genesis 33:9).

Isn't this a great story! Two alienated brothers – brought back together again! Esau especially is the bright light here. Remember Esau, the older twin brother of Jacob. The "hairy guy", the outdoorsy type, the Cabella's shopper. Kind of a brute. Impulsive. But his willingness to embrace his brother and mend the relationship shows a softer side of this man's character.

This is chapter 33 in Genesis. However, the next chapter provides a sharp contrast from the heartwarming reconciliation between Jacob and Esau. I will spare you some of the details of chapter 34, because they are very unpleasant. Jacob's sole daughter Dinah is raped by a man who has fallen in love with her. When Jacob's sons learn what's happened to their sister, they are rightly outraged. Their way of dealing with it is to look for a chance to get revenge. Not only do they kill the man who did this to her, they massacre all of the men in this man's village, take the women and children hostage, and plunder all their goods.

Jacob is horrified by his sons' extreme retaliation: "Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi (two of Jacob's sons), 'You have brought trouble on me by making me obnoxious to the Canaanites and Perrizites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed'" (Genesis 34:30). As a result, they decide to leave that place and move on to another location.

These two stories show two contrasting ways of dealing with human relationships that go bad.

One is *reconciliation*.....the other is *revenge*.

Life is full of times when people do things to us that are unfair, and hurtful. The question is: Do we respond with *hate...resentment...retaliation* (as Jacob's sons), or do we *forgive, and try to be reconciled* (as Esau)?

*The world's way of dealing with wrongs done to us is very often revenge.* A lady's husband died, and when she contacted a lawyer about her husband's will, she was shocked to learn that he had secretly made out a new will that left everything to his secretary and nothing to her. Obviously she was livid. She drove to the place where they had a few years before preordered their tombstone so she could have it changed. The proprietor said he was sorry, but it was too late – they had already chiseled in what she had wanted next to his name – the words, “Rest in Peace”. “I can't change it now,” he said. “You'd have to buy another stone.” She thought a moment and then said, “Well, okay, but right after the words, ‘Rest in Peace’, you just add these words, ‘Until We Meet Again’”

It's normal for us to want to *get even with people* when they do something bad to us. Take children, for example. One child grabs a toy from another, and what might the other child do? Hit, or spit, or bite, or push the other child down. Unfortunately, we don't necessarily outgrow this as we get older. Adults have been known to react to something someone says or does by punching, or shoving, or swearing at the person – or in worse case scenarios by using a knife or gun on the person!

Most of the time, however, we're more *civil* about getting even! We won't talk to the person. Or we'll badmouth that individual to others. Or we'll find some subtle way to get even.

This spirit of retaliation or revenge comes into play in larger society, as groups and nations deal with each other. During one of my trips to Kenya, Kenyan troops had invaded Somalia. The last day we were there, when we were in Nairobi, I noticed security was extra tight in the city. We later heard that there had been a bombing there in retaliation for the invasion. This is the customary way nations respond to aggression.

But sometimes you have to wonder: What does retaliation solve? So many times, all it seems to do is escalate hostilities. You get into this vicious spiral where the hate and animosity gets worse and worse. We see this in the story of Dinah – where Jacob's sons were not content just to retaliate against the man who violated their sister. They murdered *all the males* in this man's family and village.

The way of the world, very often, is revenge, retaliation, getting even. But this is not the way of God. *God's way is not revenge, but reconciliation.* The word “reconcile” means to bring back together, to make friends again.

2 Corinthians 5:17-20 is a powerful passage of Scripture that talks about reconciliation. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things

have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God." These are profound words, that get to the heart of the Christian message!

We human beings have rebelled against God, broken God's laws, gone our own way. The Bible calls this "sin" – and says our "sin" has separated us from God and made us *enemies* of God. In response to this, God sent His Son Jesus into the world to reconcile us to Himself, and put us back on friendly terms with our Creator. We wronged God. We are the guilty ones. But God didn't count our trespasses against us (vs. 19). He was willing to wipe the slate clean so we could be brought back to God and be at peace with God once again.

Not only that, 2 Corinthians 5 says that those who have been reconciled to God have been given the ministry of reconciliation (verse 18). We are to share with the world the message that we can be brought back into a peaceful, healthy relationship with God through Christ. Also, Christians, followers of Jesus, are to be *agents of reconciliation*, to put this into practice in our own relationships with others.

In the way we relate to people, we should strive for reconciliation, not revenge. If I'm a follower of Jesus, when someone wrongs me, hurts me, hates me, rather than hating back and seeking to get even, I'm to forgive, and seek to be at peace with that person - *just like Esau!*

Some words in Romans, chapter 12, are pertinent here. These words are part of a list of instructions on how to live as a follower of Jesus. They are found in Romans 12:17-21. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' says the Lord. Instead, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Verse 17 says, don't repay evil for evil. Strive for a more noble response. Verse 18 says to make every effort to live at peace with everyone. We can't control what the other person does, but we can determine how we will respond. The next verse quotes from Deuteronomy 32:35, where God says, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." *The Message* paraphrase of this verse is colorful: "Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. 'I'll do the judging,' says God. 'I'll take care of it.'" Verse 20 is a quote from Proverbs, chapter 25. The idea here is that by not retaliating, and showing kindness instead, we will make that person feel ashamed. Do we get the point of this Scripture? *Don't try to get revenge against someone! Let God take care of that!*

We may ask, what about the larger society? Don't we at times need to retaliate, and strike back against an enemy? When terrorists skyjacked 4 planes on 9/11 and killed innocent people, were

we as a nation not to strike back? What about robbers and murderers? Should we not punish them. Do we just do nothing, and wait for God avenge them?

I think we all agree that in order to have order and justice in society, criminals need to be punished. And most believe that if our nation is attacked, we have to exercise military action to stop enemy aggressors. I'm reading a book now, titled *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, written by H. R. McMaster. McMaster is a retired Lieutenant General of the Army, who served as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. He suggests the wisest ways to deal with specific nations that threaten world peace and order. The book has reminded me, for instance, that just being nice to Putin, and just believing that the Chinese will give up their goal of dominating the world if we just work cooperatively with them, are pipe dreams. Imagine, thinking Hitler would have stopped and changed his gameplan if other nations had been simply passive and forgiving!

The Kingdom of God hasn't come yet, and sometimes the best we can do in the public arena is to try to see that *justice is served* for the common good. But even saying this, we still desperately need leaders who will work for peace and reconciliation in the nation and the world community.

Certainly, in our personal relationships, if we're followers of Jesus, we should strive for reconciliation, not revenge. I remember a time when our children were younger and still at home. One night at supper time Nancy and I had a disagreement, and we started to argue. Nancy got upset and left the table. Our daughter Karin, the youngest, seemed especially upset. Soon after, Nancy and I talked, in the kitchen. We made up and hugged. As we were there embracing, Karin walked in (as usual, one of the kids, or the dog usually showed up at times like that!). Karin looked at us hugging and in a joyful tone of voice said, "Oh, you're back together again! Great!" *That's reconciliation!*

During World War II, 18-year-old Private Robert Johnstone had a premonition and wrote his parents asking that his government life insurance be used to establish a scholarship for a Japanese student in the United States at the war's end (remember, Japan was our enemy). Shortly thereafter Private Johnstone was killed at Luzon. Three years later a national magazine (*Life*) featured a picture story of Robert Nishiyama, a former suicide pilot in the Japanese service, and now a Christian, depicting his life as a freshman at Lafayette College in Easton, PA. His roommate was an ex-Marine, studying for the Christian ministry. His best friend was another freshman by the name of Bruce Johnstone, *younger brother of the soldier who had died*. Nishiyama was in college, thanks to the scholarship left by Private Robert Johnstone.

Robert Nishiyama graduated from Lafayette with an excellent scholarship record. He was active in the college church and was an outstanding Christian leader. Guess where he spent Christmas during his college years. With the Johnstone family, who through the power of Christ were able to forgive the Japanese people who had taken the life of their son.

We all have a choice how we will respond to the people who hurt us. Revenge - get even. Or reconciliation - doing our best to mend the fences and heal the wounds. We all have that choice.

