Jacob Meets Esau

Do you fear death? Do you fear dying? While they might at first appear to be the same, death and dying are 2 different things. Death is a noun meaning the state of being dead while dying is a verb meaning the act of dying. I think most Christians would agree that death is not something to fear, after all to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2nd Cor. 5:6-8). Paul wrote about his internal conflict, desiring to depart from his earthly life but also wanting to continue spreading the Gospel (Philippians 1:21-24). While our life on earth is but a vapor (James 4:14), our life in Heaven is for eternity. Paul and Peter wrote about Christians being aliens or strangers on earth while having citizenship in Heaven (1st Pet. 2:11, Philippians 3:20). For the nonbeliever, death would seem to be frightening. Is death the end or is there something unknown that lies beyond? They probably experience uncertainty mixed with a fear that Hell is a real place reserved for those who will not accept Jesus as their personal savior. Dying, however provokes similar thoughts for the Christian and non Christian alike. While we would prefer a painless death, that is a rare occurrence. For most death is a long, drawn out process of physical deterioration accompanied by pain and suffering. There is also a loss of personal dignity for the patient and a sense of helplessness for family members. Sometimes death happens suddenly as a result of an accident or violence when pain may be brief, but intense. No rational person looks forward to dying. Our study of Genesis chapter 33 reveals that Jacob was very fearful of his impending meeting with Esau. In the previous chapter he prayed earnestly for God’s protection. Whether his fear was limited to the pain associated with dying or if he also feared death itself is unknown. He certainly had reason to fear for his life since Esau had previously sworn to kill him after Isaac died. Hearing that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men would have increased his fears.

He divided his family into 3 groups and it is clear that he favored Rachel since she and Joseph were behind all the others. Jacob himself went out it front to meet Esau only to find that his fears were not warranted. Esau’s attitude towards him had been softened by 20 years of separation from his twin bother and he met Jacob with joy rather than rage. Jacob had spent the 20 years building up in his mind a disturbing picture of a dangerous reunion with Esau. Often the things we dread the most turn out to be of little consequence. Calvin Coolidge said that if you see 10 troubles coming down the road, you can be sure that 9 will run into the ditch before they reach you. Esau seemed to have forgiven Jacob for the wrongs done to him in the past and wanted to renew their relationship inviting Jacob to accompany him to Seir which was a mountainous region between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba (now Southern Israel). Jacob used the excuse of needing to rest his livestock to delay his journey, deceiving his brother again by going instead to Succoth which was located on the eastern side of the Jordan River. He later crossed the Jordan and entered Canaan settling in Shechem which was located between Jerusalem and Nazareth.

Despite Esau’s attempt to welcome him, Jacob may have continued to be afraid of Esau and wanted to settle for away from him. He also may have been embarrassed by his prior treatment of his brother. Ray Pritchard wrote that while Esau was willing to forgive him, Jacob appeared to be unable to accept his forgiveness. Often when we wrong someone who later forgives us, our guilt over a past incident can stand in the way of reconciliation. When we do that, we are actually extending the harm done to the other person by depriving them of a restored relationship. A friend in a retail business once told me that customers who wrote bad checks rarely returned to his store even after the checks were made good. Whether fear of embarrassment was his motive, Jacob ceded the moral high ground to the unbelieving Esau just as Abraham and Isaac had done previously in their encounters with Abimelech.

God had spoken to Jacob promising him the land in Canaan and prolific descendants (28:13) as well as protection (28:15, 31:3). Jacob had the benefit of God’s spoken message to him yet he still had doubts that God would deliver. Fear can be a powerful force which can hinder our efforts to become the people that God wants us to be.