

“For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, . . .”

Martin Luther’s asks in the Small Catechism’s section on Holy Communion, “What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?” He answers:

It is pointed out in these words: “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”
Through these words the forgiveness of sin, life and salvation are given to us in the Sacrament, for where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.”

Luther is surely correct regarding our Lord’s forgiveness of our sins. We do receive life and salvation as he forgives us. I believe we also receive those blessings when we forgive each other. One of the most powerful stories in the Bible that illustrates this is the reconciliation of Esau and Jacob in Genesis 33. Jacob returned home to the promised land, Canaan, many years after he had fled to Haran, where his grandfather, Abraham, was living when God called him to go to Canaan. Jacob fled to his uncle, Laban, because Esau, his brother, said, “The days of mourning for my father [Isaac] are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” (Gen. 27:41b) Esau was angry because Jacob had cheated him of his birthright and blessing as Isaac’s firstborn son.

Esau and Jacob were fraternal twins. Their mother, Rebekah, delivered Esau first, as Jacob was grasping at Esau’s heel in the delivery. Hence Isaac and Rebekah named their second son Jacob, meaning, “he will trip by the heel.” In other words, Jacob’s name means “one who cheats.” Unfortunately for Esau, his brother lived up (or should we say, “down”) to his name.

Payback for Jacob occurred when Laban cheated him by tricking him to marry his older daughter, Leah, when Jacob loved the younger daughter, Rachel. Laban also tried to cheat Jacob of his share of their herds. Jacob, Leah and Rachel realized they could not stay with Laban, so after 20 years in Haran Jacob snuck away with his family and flocks to return to Canaan.

Jacob assumed that Esau was still angry with him 20 years later, so he devised an elaborate plan to appease Esau, and protect himself and his family. As they neared Canaan he sent messengers ahead to tell Esau that Jacob is coming with presents for him. The servants run back to Jacob saying:

“We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.” Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.” (Gen. 32:6-8)

Jacob then prayed to God to be delivered from his brother Esau. He also decided to give a huge present to Esau - 200 female goats and 20 male goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 milking camels and their calves, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys. He divided the animals into three groups, and sent them to his brother one day before he would meet Esau. He put a good bit of distance between each group, instructing his men to tell Esau that each group was a present from Jacob. He thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me.” (Gen. 32:20b)

Here is what happened the next day:

And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. (Genesis 33:1-3)

Notice the order in which he had his family approach Esau – the least important in the front and the most important at the back (Rachel was his favorite wife and Joseph his favorite son).

God answered Jacob's prayer:

But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor in the sight of my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." Jacob said, "No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me. Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough." Thus he urged him, and he took it. (Gen. 33:4-11)

Jacob, always the manipulator, thought he could appease Esau, earn his brother's forgiveness and save his family and himself. Instead Esau responded as graciously as God responds to us when seek forgiveness. Jacob knew exactly what happened, and knew God was at work in Esau, so much so that he exclaims, "For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me."

God saved Jacob through Esau's forgiveness. Jacob could do nothing to deserve forgiveness. Likewise, we cannot appease God, manipulate him or earn his forgiveness. Instead he freely and graciously forgives us. In receiving his forgiveness, we are set free to forgive each other, sharing and rejoicing in the life and salvation that comes only from our Heavenly Father's forgiveness.