

Transformed By Grace

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. Let me add my welcome to that of Graham's. My name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here, and it's my joy to be opening God's Word for us this morning.

We're going to be in Genesis chapter 33. In a few minutes' time, Simona is going to come and read that for us, but it's worth having it open in front of you, so do get it open now, page 36 in the Pew Bibles, Genesis 33. But before Simona reads, and I guess by way of introduction, to get us to what I think is the heart of this passage, I want to just begin with this story. You might have heard it before. I wonder if you've heard of Florence Chadwick. Sixty years ago, Florence set out to swim to Catalina Island. It's an island 26 miles off the California coast. 26 miles is a very long way to run. It's a ridiculously long way to swim. And the waters off the coast of California, they're shark-infested waters.

The weather is temperamental. This journey that she had embarked on is monumental. As she sets off, you can maybe picture her, she's surrounded by a fleet of small boats for support. Imagine how you'd begin to feel. For me, it would probably be less than a mile in. But imagine you're swimming 10, 12, 15 miles, exhausted. You're repetitively pulling yourself through the increasingly choppy water. Your legs are kicking like mad. And you're terrified because every unusual wave looks like the inevitable shark's fin. For Florence, it was 15 hours into her swim, and this thick fog descended all around her. Apparently, she said in that moment to her mum, her mum was on one of the support boats. Apparently, she said as the fog came down, she said she just didn't think she was going to make it. With a little bit of encouragement, she swam for another hour. But then 16 hours in, with the fog still bearing down on her, she couldn't hack it anymore, and she quit. 16 hours in, she gave up on this epic journey. She was pulled into her support boat. She lay there on the deck. And then the heartbreaking news, because just one mile later, they arrived at Catalina Island. Just a mile from finishing. Heartbreaking. If only she'd known how close she was. If only she had been able to fix her mind on that destination. Maybe life can feel a bit like that for you. Like you're battling through shark-infested waters. Exhausted. Anxious. On this terrible journey through life. No idea where you're going or how long it's going to take to get there.

And listen, if you're a Christian in the room, you know, you need to know the wonderful promise of an eternal destination. You know that, don't you? But it can be ridiculously hard to see it.

And when the fog descends and the sharks are scary and the swim is exhausting, you have got to remember that promise. And if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, this is what is on offer.

[3 : 1 6] This is the promise of the gospel. Though the journey through life is hard yet, has moments of pleasure and of breakthrough, of course it does. But it is, isn't it? Life is hard, marked by trials and suffering and challenges and setbacks. And in the midst of all of that, this is what Christianity has to offer you this morning. Because of what Jesus has done, there is an eternal destination, a life beyond this life. An island, if you like, where the shark-infested waters are behind you, where the frantic swim of life is over and the fog has lifted.

See, for the first readers of this text that we're coming to together this morning, God has just rescued them out of slavery in Egypt and they're on this journey in the wilderness to the promised land, to Canaan. And for them, they needed to know that despite all of the challenges that they had faced and that they were facing in the wilderness, they needed to know that God's promise to bring them into that promised land, God's promise to bring them home was sure.

If you've got chapter 33 in front of you, I know we've not read it yet, but just have a look at verse 18 with me before we do, because I think this will help us understand it when we come to read it. Verse 18, key verse.

After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. We'll come back to it, but for the ancient Israelite, like I say, on their way into the promised land, that verse, because despite all the challenges that Jacob had faced, if you've been here over the last few weeks and months, despite 20 years of what was essentially slavery in Paddan Aram, the Lord has brought him safely to Canaan, Canaan the promised land.

Jacob hasn't done what Florence did. He hasn't quit and the Lord has brought him through. That is a wonderful encouragement to the first readers of this book. And in the shark infested waters of our own exhausting journeys. I hope that this will be a wonderful encouragement to us too.

[5 : 30] That's where we're going. I think that's the big move of this passage this morning. But just quickly, where have we been? To set the scene for our passage, I think it's worth thinking about just the last couple of weeks. We've been in chapter 32. In the first half of chapter 32, within two weeks ago, we saw that Jacob is preparing to meet Esau. If you remember right back at the start of this Jacob story, Jacob stole Esau's birthright, the blessing that was due to Esau as the firstborn son.

And then Esau is murderously angry. And so Jacob flees to Paddan Aram, where he'd spent 20 years working for his relative Laban. He's acquired two wives and 11 children and lots and lots of animals.

And then he begins this journey. And he's preparing to meet his brother Esau. He's terrified. In chapter 32, he prays, save me from the hand of my brother Esau. And then we saw last week with Graham that as he prepares to meet his brother, Jacob encounters God. He wrestles with God. And God gives him this new name, Israel, the overcomer. There's obviously lots more in chapter 32. You can catch up with all of that on our website, but just notice what has happened. Jacob has encountered God. He has been transformed by grace. That's what this given name shows us. He has been transformed by grace. And so we've got to be asking, what is that going to do? What is the proof of that transformation? And I think that begins to be worked out in our chapter this morning. So let's read it together. Simona, if you want to come up and read for us.

And thanks so much, Simona. Guys, do, as ever, keep your Bibles open and you'll find it helpful as we go through the text to have that open in front of you. And forgive me, I want to tell another story. And I read this story. I can't remember where I read it. I have a feeling it was in C.S. Lewis, but I can't seem to find it. It might have been somewhere else. I might have made it up. If you've heard it before, please come and tell me where you found it, because I've no idea where it's from.

I'm bound to get some of the details wrong, but it goes something like this. It's kind of Downton Abbey era, if you can imagine. You know, you've got like, either you live in the big house or you work for the big house. And you've got the daughter of the Lord and the lady who own the house. She looks every bit the kind of upstanding moral character. She goes to church every Sunday. She never smokes, never drinks, never swears. And then you have the staff of the house, and they're a bit more rough around the edges, more likely to smoke and drink and gamble and swear. And one of those members of staff, he's the driver, and he's the worst of all of them. You can picture him not only a smoker and a drinker and a gambler and every second word a swear, but he's also a liar and a cheat and a thief.

[8 : 21] And then one day, the driver, he's in town. He's just dropped off the youngest daughter of the house at the milliner's shop, the hat shop. And while he waits, knowing that she's going to be a while, he pops off to the Goat and Tricycle for a pint. While there, a strange man sits next to him at the bar, and they get chatting. And long story short, the strange man tells our driver about Jesus, just very simply shares the gospel with him. The driver is convinced that he has a problem, that he desperately needs to be reconciled to the God who created him, and that Jesus is the answer.

And so he, this smoking, drinking, gambling, swearing, lying, cheating thief, this driver gradually just very slowly begins to change. On this journey of life, he starts to see the effects of grace. And I want to ask the Christian in the room this morning, do you see the effects of grace in your life? On your way to that destination that we started with, maybe you were never a smoking, drinking, gambling, swearing, cheating, lying thief. I don't know, maybe you were, and maybe some of that you still are. But is the grace of God at work in your life? Are you growing? Because we'll see in our passage today that this is the mark of God's people as they journey towards that wonderful eternal destination. We encounter God, we experience that wonderful forgiveness, and he transforms our hearts.

But transformed hearts, by grace, produce lives that are being transformed. And so as we approach this text together this morning, just be prepared to ask yourself that question. Do I see the effects of grace in my life? Am I being transformed and shaped by him into someone who looks more like him? Am I growing as a Christian? Because we'll see that for Jacob, as we walk through this chapter together, we'll see that the transformed heart that we read about in chapter 32 is leading to a life that is starting to be transformed. Five proofs. I think we'll see five proofs that Jacob is growing in that sort of direction on his journey. Before we get to that first proof, just notice with me in verse one. Notice the name that Moses, the author, uses here.

Just before this in chapter 32, he's been renamed Israel. That's a sign of his transformation. And then here in verse one, it's Jacob again. I think Moses is trying to say that this man, see, he isn't immediately fingers clicked encounter with God, and then immediately made a perfect man. He's not yet Israel. He's still Jacob. This man transformed by grace has a life that needs to continue being transformed. It's a journey of growth. And we get that growth all the way through this passage. He's growing. And here's the first proof as he grows in courage. Still in verse one, I think Moses is building tension for us in the text. Esau is coming with 400 men. That doesn't sound like that many, but that's a terrifying military force compared to the women and children and animals with Jacob. And then in verse two, it looks like Jacob is sending his people out in front of him again, just like he'd done in chapter 32, like lambs to the slaughter. And there's obvious favoritism. Remember, this is Jacob, not Israel. And if you remember, he loved Rachel most, and she goes at the back. She's most protected.

And we expect him to be with her. But then in verse three, we begin to see how he's growing in courage. For this time, he doesn't just send them out ahead of him. No, look at verse three. He himself went on ahead. And the tension, it continues to build in the narrative as we read that. How's this meeting going to go? What are the 400 men going to do to Jacob, even as he grows in courage? Skip down to verse 10 with me. I think verse 10 helps Moses make his point. The second half of verse 10, Jacob says to Esau, for to see your face is to see the face of God. That is quite a puzzling thing to say. I think at least I found that puzzling. But I think what it's doing is it's a reference to what Jacob was expecting to encounter with Esau. What happens when someone sees the face of God? In the story of the Old Testament, unholy people meeting a holy God is a death sentence. And in chapter 32, we've just seen

[13 : 08] Jacob wrestles with God. He overcomes. He faces God and doesn't die. And I think that gives him the courage to face Esau in the same way. He expected it to be a death sentence. And he's growing in courage. Just think about the first readers of this text again. As they think about returning to Canaan in the promised land, they know that to get there, they're going to have to face their enemies.

They know that their enemies are much, much stronger than them. And they're going to need to be courageous as they face probable death in the face. As we navigate this life on our way to that promised eternity. As our lives are being transformed by grace. I want to ask, are we growing in courage in this way? Now, we probably don't have enemies that are on their way to kill us. But we can still ask ourselves, are we growing in courage in the face of death? In the face of that cancer diagnosis?

That illness? That family member? Are we growing as Christians in the face of death? If you were here for our series in Philippians earlier this year, Paul writes there, chapter 1, verse 15, to live is Christ, to die is gain. That's courage in the face of death, to know that where you're going, your eternal destination really is gain. And it's also courage in life.

For Paul says, to live is Christ. That is growing in the courage to obey God when it is much easier not to. Growing in the courage to swim against the cultural tide, knowing where we're swimming, knowing what our eternal destination is. Jacob is transformed by grace. And the first proof is that he is growing in courage. I've just seen the biggest spider I have ever seen walk across.

We're all going to need lots of courage to face that. The second proof comes right after it in verse 3. It's humility. See, in verse 3, Jacob bows down before Esau. He's growing in humility.

[15 : 21] Seven times in verse 3. He lays himself flat on the ground. Can you imagine bowing to the ground, prostrating yourself to the ground and back up again? Seven times. It's like seven burpees.

It's enough to humble any man. This is not a proud man anymore. And in the following verses, he calls himself Esau's servant five times. He calls Esau his lord four times. I've never called my brother, my lord, nor have I ever called myself his servant. Jacob had spent the early years of his life deceiving his brother, taking advantage of his brother. And now he comes to him humbly. Why?

Because God has shown him, he has shown Jacob that he needs grace. And that is the most humbling experience that a human being can face, I think. For Jacob, this is the second proof, growing humility.

And before we think about humility for ourselves, and as the narrative continues to build that tension for us, picture Jacob at the front of his household, Esau and these 400 men ready to meet him in battle, Jacob bows down and we're asking, how is Esau going to respond? And what are we expecting?

I think verse 4 is supposed to be a massive surprise. See what Esau does in verse 4. He ran to meet Jacob and embraced him. He threw his arms around his neck and kissed him.

[16 : 53] We surely expect Esau to run at him and attack him, but he embraces him. We surely expect him to throw his arms around his neck and throttle him, but he kisses him. Something remarkable, supernatural, has clearly happened in Esau's heart, even as God's grace has clearly been at work in Jacob. And so for both of them, and this is our third mark of a transformed heart, is growing forgiveness. As the murderous brother has become the merciful brother, and as the deceitful brother has become the deferential brother, and there is a wonderful reconciliation.

Maybe verse 4 is a familiar image to you. The wronged party running to embrace the estranged relative. It's Jesus's prodigal son, isn't it, if you know the story. The son takes his inheritance early. He disappears into a foreign land. He squanders it on fast living, and then he returns, worried about how his father will respond. And this is what Jesus says, While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. It's a wonderful picture of reconciliation. And Jesus uses that story, drawing on this Jacob story, as a picture of the reconciliation between God and man.

Because as Graham has just read for us in 2 Corinthians, reconciliation is right at the heart of the gospel. It's the same here with Jacob and Esau, because every horizontal reconciliation like that, where God's grace has been at work, every horizontal reconciliation is a picture of the vertical reconciliation between God and man. It is a proof of a heart transformed by grace, growing forgiveness.

And do you see how that is inseparable from humility, the second proof? Because as we go on this journey and we realize just how deeply flawed we are, knowing that we have not lived according to his ways, how thoroughly we need Jesus, that's humility. And yet as we enjoy the wonders of his mercy and forgiveness to us, we experience that vertical reconciliation, it's rooted in that humility.

But that ought to then be expressed and enjoyed and proven by horizontal reconciliation, forgiveness amongst us. Paul would say in Philippians chapter 2, Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

[19 : 40] Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ. Christ, who is very nature God, humbled himself to the position of a servant, humbled himself even to a humiliating death on a cross.

If you see the lengths that Christ went to so that you might be forgiven, reconciled vertically to your maker, and so giving us all that we need to forgive, reconciled to one another horizontally.

Let me acknowledge that this is really hard. If you've ever faced real relational breakdown, maybe with your family or your friends, that is incredibly painful. And taking steps towards reconciliation can feel impossible.

But with a heart transformed by grace, you can trust God, and you can seek reconciliation. For your part, you can grow in forgiveness.

Would you pray in that direction? Because this is right at the heart of the gospel. For Jacob, the third proof of a transforming grace is a growing forgiveness.

[20 : 53] Forgiveness. The fourth proof, a growing witness. Oh, that's a lovely picture of forgiveness. I should have put that on earlier, sorry. Growing witness.

See in verse 5, Esau asks where all these people with Jacob have come from in verse 5. Who do they belong to, he says. And Jacob's answer, These are the children that God has graciously given me.

See what he's doing there? He's witnessing to God's goodness. Again, in verse 8, this time Esau asks a question, this time about the animals that Jacob had sent ahead as a gift.

Jacob's trying to persuade Esau to accept this gift. And what does he say in verse 11? Same thing, God has been gracious to me. And it's a growing witness.

He's not afraid to speak of how God has blessed him. And not only to speak of it, but to share it. The generosity as Jacob actually wants to give God's gracious gifts to him, to Esau.

[21 : 54] That is a witness to what God has done for him. And from Moses, I think that is a reminder for the wilderness generation, remember them. That they are called to be a light to the nations.

And so let me ask, are we growing in our witness? With hearts transformed by grace, are we increasingly able and willing to speak of what God has done for us?

I was listening, sorry, to the Speak Life podcast earlier this week, a podcast with Glenn Scrivener. Highly recommend it. It's a great listen. But in it, Glenn Scrivener said something really helpful and really encouraging.

He said this, just constantly be thinking, what do I love about Jesus? I couldn't have got through X without Jesus. He said, you don't have to have great philosophical arguments.

This is how the church has grown over millennia. It's always just been ordinary Christians talking about Jesus. I find that really helpful.

[22 : 57] The reminder that growing in my witness isn't primarily about having clever arguments. No, it's primarily about loving Jesus and sharing the ways that he's blessed me with those around me.

There's our fourth proof, growing witness. And the fifth and final proof of a transformed heart by grace is growing worship. I see in verse 12, in verse 12, Esau wants Jacob to come back to see it with him.

A bit of geography. There is a map at the front of the church Bible, which might help a little bit here. Seir is sort of on the front cover. Seir is sort of down in the southeast and then southeast of the Fords of Jabbok, which aren't on that map, which is annoying.

But that's where the action is taking place. Seir is sort of southeast of there. That's where Esau lives. And he wants Jacob to come with him. But Jacob knows that the land that he's been promised is west of there.

A land for all his descendants. Genesis 28, if you remember it, if you were here last month. This was the promise given in the land of Canaan. We'll come back to that map if it's helpful. But this was the promise in the land of Canaan.

[24 : 16] I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. And I will bring you back to this land. That is back to Canaan. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

But when Jacob says no to Esau in verse 13 of chapter 33, I think he's returning to his deceptive ways.

He's still Jacob. He's not yet truly Israel. Because he uses the weariness of his family and his flock as an excuse in verse 14. He knows where he's going.

He knows that he's never following Esau to Seir. That he wants to go to the promised land in the west. He refuses the offer of men from Esau. I guess that was probably a military protection kind of offer.

He refuses that in verse 15 because he knows that he's never going to follow Esau to Seir. He knows where he's going. They part ways. Esau goes to Seir. And Jacob rests at Succoth.

[25 : 13] Succoth is actually on those maps at the front if you want to find it, I think. But that's just a temporary stopping place on his way. Not back to Seir, as I said, but to verse 19.

The great summary and key verse. The city of Shechem. Where? In Canaan. And Shechem definitely is on that map. You can see it in the west. And what does Jacob do when he gets there?

This is the final proof of a transformed heart. It's growing worship. He buys a plot of land. And what does he do in verse 20? He sets up an altar there and he called it El Elo Israel.

You maybe have a footnote there. It means God. The mighty God of Israel. Now Jacob has worshipped God before. He's prayed to God before.

But the name that he gives this altar is the key, I think. For this mighty, powerful God here, he is the God of Israel. Not the nation. The nation of Israel doesn't exist yet.

[26 : 12] But this man, Jacob, now named Israel, this is his God. His personal God. And that is transformative worship.

It's true today. We're not called to worship some distant unknown God. But instead to enter a deeply personal relationship with the triune God of the universe.

To know Jesus as our brother and our Lord. To know his perfect father as our father. To experience the power and presence of his Holy Spirit with us.

This is our God. To worship him is to know him. And to know him is to worship him. A heart transformed by grace is a life growing in worship of him.

Because a transformed heart leads to a life being transformed. And that is obviously, after everything that I've just said, going to be so different for each one of us.

[27 : 17] Let me remind you of that driver and the daughter of the Lord and Lady. As their story continues, they end up falling in love. That was a huge controversy. Of course, he's nowhere near good enough for her.

Everyone thinks that she's the good Christian. But the truth is, despite her moral looking life, she has no faith. She doesn't love Jesus and she isn't growing in any of these areas.

In Christian courage or humility or witness or forgiveness or worship. When the door is closed, she does not live that Christian life. On Wednesday evening, we had a meeting.

Our embassy leaders, those who volunteer here with the teenagers at church. And this friend of mine, Dougie, came down from Aberdeen. He's a youth pastor in Aberdeen. He came down to share some of his experience of what it's like working with young people.

And he was just talking about his time at university. And there was this guy that he played football with at uni. I think he was the captain of his team. And he'd grown up in a Christian home. And he was able to recite loads of Bible verses.

[28 : 19] But as Dougie put it, this guy just clearly had no living faith at all. And the proof was that his heart had not been transformed.

The proof was that his life was not being transformed. The driver in our story, he encountered God's grace when he had the humility to realize that he had a problem and Jesus was the solution.

In that moment, his heart was transformed. But he didn't immediately become a perfect man. In fact, the lady that he fell in love with continued to look more Christian in the eyes of the world than he did.

The difference? He was growing on his journey towards that promised eternal destination. And so ask yourself, maybe use this as an opportunity, a sort of spiritual MOT.

Am I growing on this journey? And as you do that, just the most common and biggest mistake I think you could make, I just want you to forget about the person on your left.

[29 : 23] Forget about the person on your right. And the journeys that they are going on and have been on. Because God's grace takes hold of all of us in different ways. And we will grow in different areas at different rates and at different times.

God will take you and he will hold you in whatever way he needs to for his glory on your journey. Trust him for that. Cling to him for that. You might look more like the driver.

They might look more like the lady. Don't compare yourself to one another, but grow on whatever journey you're on. And just as we finish, to tie the whole thing together, let me return to Florence Chadwick.

Remember the swimmer? As she swam to Catalina Island, the fog descended. She gave up. Well, two months later, two months later, Florence gave her another crack. And again, about 15 hours into the swim, a thick fog descended.

The waters were still shark infested. That familiar tiredness set in. But this time she didn't give up. And when asked why, what had the difference been?

[30 : 31] Why didn't she give up? Well, it's because she held a picture of the island in her head the entire time. She says it's as though the fog wasn't even there.

Because through the journey, she'd kept her mind focused on that destination. Jacob, in our passage this morning, we've seen him grow on this journey. But one thing is key.

And if you remember anything from what I've said, remember this. He was journeying towards a destination, a promised land to Canaan. And as we journey through life, even as we face shark infested water, even as the fog descends, even as we ask ourselves if we're growing through that and look for proofs of a transformed heart and a life being transformed, even through all of that, on this journey, would we remember where it is that we're going?

Again, in conversation with Dougie on Wednesday, his father-in-law died this summer. And when he was told that it was coming, when the doctor told him he was going to die, he said, apparently, in a very matter-of-fact way, he said to his family, Now, you're not to be sad, for my father's house has many rooms, and Jesus has gone to prepare a place for me there.

Even when we can't see it, and it can be so difficult to see it, will we have our hearts and our minds fixed on that promise of God, made available to us in Jesus if we trust him, knowing that he has promised us that we will be where he is, in an eternal land prepared for us.

[32 : 08] That's where we're growing towards on this journey. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for Jesus.

And Lord, we come before you humbly now, knowing that we could never reach that destination on our own, and knowing that he's done everything necessary that we might reach it anyway.

Father, I pray that you would be at work in each of our hearts by your Holy Spirit, continuing to transform us and grow us to be more like your Son.

Lord, would you help us to take the opportunity this morning to assess our own lives, to think about how you've been at work in them.

And as we do that, Lord, I pray that you would help us to fix our eyes on where we're going. Help us to trust you for that eternal destination.

[33 : 14] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.