

The Book of Genesis, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 19: Jacob and Esau Reconciled; Trouble at Shechem

Genesis 33:1–34:31

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

These two chapters set a sharp contrast before us. Chapter thirty-three is one of Scripture's most beautiful pictures of reconciliation, as the dreaded meeting with Esau becomes an embrace, and Jacob sees the grace of God in his brother's face. Chapter thirty-four is one of its darkest, as a grievous wrong is met with deceit and slaughter. Doctrinally, the lesson teaches God's power to change hearts and heal relationships, the humility and initiative reconciliation requires, the proper response of worship to God's deliverance, the danger of settling too close to the world, and the destructive spread of sin, especially the difference between God's way of leaving vengeance to Him and the world's way of revenge.

Handle the Dinah narrative with restraint appropriate to a mixed audience. State plainly that a real and serious evil was done to Dinah, and that the brothers' deceitful, violent revenge was also evil, a fact confirmed when Jacob later condemns their cruelty (Genesis 49:5–7). Draw the lessons, the destructive spread of sin, the bitter fruit of compromise, and the contrast between vengeance and God's way, without dwelling on the disturbing details. Keep the focus on the two paths of responding to being wronged.

Formationally, this passage calls students to pursue reconciliation with humility and initiative, to recognize and resist comfortable compromise with the world, and to respond to genuine wrongs God's way, refusing revenge and leaving justice to Him. Lead them to see reconciliation as a reflection of the grace of God, and to choose the path of the embrace over the path of vengeance.

Question 1

Student Question:

The reunion Jacob dreaded turned into an embrace, as Esau ran to meet him, fell on his neck, and wept (33:1–4). What does this surprising reconciliation reveal about God's power to change hearts, even the heart of someone who once was an enemy (compare Proverbs 21:1)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The reunion of Jacob and Esau overturns every expectation. Jacob has every reason to fear; he wronged Esau deeply, and Esau once vowed to kill him, and now approaches with four hundred men. But 'Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept' (33:4). Twenty years of bitterness melt into an embrace.

Ask what made this possible. Humanly, much had changed: time had passed, Esau had prospered, Jacob came in humility with gifts. But the deeper answer is God. The same God who softened the situation had been at work; 'the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will' (Proverbs 21:1). God can change even an enemy's heart.

Draw out the hope this offers. No relationship is automatically beyond repair, because God is able to work in the other person's heart as well as our own. Reconciliation is not merely a matter of our effort; it is something God can bring about, often in ways we did not expect.

Help students hold this with realism. Not every reconciliation will go as Esau's did; we cannot control the other person's response. But we can trust that God is able, pray for the softening of hard hearts, and do our part in humility, leaving the outcome to Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's power to change hearts and heal broken relationships (Proverbs 21:1).
- Reconciliation as God's work, not merely our effort.
- No relationship automatically beyond God's reach.
- Trusting God with the outcome while doing our part.

Discussion Prompts

- What do you think made the reconciliation with Esau possible?
- How does Proverbs 21:1 explain the change in Esau?
- What hope does this give for relationships that seem beyond repair?

Question 2

Student Question:

Is there a relationship in your life that feels beyond repair? How does Esau's unexpected grace, and God's hand behind it, give you hope and a nudge to pursue reconciliation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the reconciliation to the student's broken relationships. Most people carry at least one relationship that feels beyond repair: an estrangement, a falling-out, a wound that has hardened into distance. Esau's grace, and God's hand behind it, speaks hope into such situations.

Help students resist the lie that nothing can change. We often write relationships off as permanently broken, but God specializes in the impossible, including the softening of hearts and the healing of old wounds. The Esau we dread may yet become the Esau who runs to embrace us.

Encourage prayer and a step. Reconciliation often begins with praying for the other person and for our own heart, and then taking a humble step, a word, a gesture, an apology, an outreach. We cannot guarantee the response, but we can move, in faith, toward peace.

Invite a concrete reflection: a broken relationship God may be nudging the student to pursue, what holds them back (pride, fear, hurt), and one small step toward reconciliation they could take, trusting God to work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hope for relationships that feel beyond repair.
- Resisting the lie that nothing can change.
- Praying for the other person and our own heart.
- Taking a humble step toward peace, trusting God with the response.

Discussion Prompts

- What relationship in your life feels beyond repair?
- How does Esau's grace give you hope for it?
- What small step toward reconciliation could you take?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jacob humbled himself before Esau, bowing and bringing gifts, and saw in his brother's acceptance "the face of God" (33:3, 10). What does this teach us about the humility and initiative that reconciliation requires, and about how forgiveness reflects God's own grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice the posture Jacob takes toward Esau. He goes ahead of his family and 'bowed himself to the ground seven times' (33:3); he sends generous gifts; he speaks humbly, calling Esau 'my lord' and himself 'your servant.' The man who once grasped and schemed now humbles himself before the brother he wronged. Reconciliation required humility and initiative.

Draw out the principle. Mending a broken relationship almost always requires someone to humble themselves and take the first step, to lay down pride and the insistence on being right, to absorb some cost, to make the first move. Jacob does not wait for Esau to come to him; he goes, bowing, with gifts.

Note Jacob's striking words: 'To see your face is like seeing the face of God, for you have accepted me' (33:10). In his brother's gracious acceptance, Jacob sees a reflection of God's own grace. Forgiveness and reconciliation are deeply God-like; when we forgive and are reconciled, we mirror the grace God has shown us in Christ.

Help students connect human reconciliation to the gospel. We forgive because we have been forgiven; we take the humble first step because Christ took the first step toward us 'while we were still sinners' (Romans 5:8). Reconciliation among people is meant to reflect the great reconciliation God accomplished in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Humility and initiative as the path to reconciliation (Genesis 33:3).
- Laying down pride and the insistence on being right.
- Reconciliation reflecting the grace of God (33:10).
- Forgiving because we have been forgiven, mirroring Christ (Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

Discussion Prompts

- What posture did Jacob take toward Esau, and why does it matter?
- How does Jacob see 'the face of God' in his brother's grace?
- How does our forgiveness reflect God's grace to us?

Question 4

Student Question:

Reconciliation usually requires someone to humble themselves and take the first step. Where might God be calling you to lay down your pride, your sense of being right, or your hurt, in order to mend a relationship?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the cost of reconciliation into the student's life. Reconciliation is rarely free; it usually requires us to lay down something, our pride, our sense of being wronged, our right to the last word, our grievance. Like Jacob bowing before Esau, we must often humble ourselves to make peace.

Help students identify what they are clinging to that blocks reconciliation. Sometimes it is pride ('I won't be the one to reach out'); sometimes a sense of justice ('I was wronged; they should apologize first'); sometimes fear of rejection or of being hurt again. Naming the obstacle is the first step past it.

Encourage them to count it worth the cost. Whatever we lay down to be reconciled is small compared to what God laid down to be reconciled to us. And the fruit of peace, restored relationship, a clear conscience, the blessing on peacemakers, is worth the humbling.

Invite a concrete step: a relationship where reconciliation requires the student to humble themselves, what specifically they must lay down, and one move toward peace they could make, following Jacob's example of humble initiative.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cost of reconciliation: laying down pride, grievance, the last word.
- Identifying what blocks us from making peace.
- Counting the cost worth it in light of God's grace to us.
- Taking humble initiative toward peace.

Discussion Prompts

- What would you have to lay down to mend a broken relationship?
- What most blocks you: pride, hurt, fear, or a sense of justice?
- What humble step could you take toward peace?

Question 5

Student Question:

After the reunion, Jacob built an altar and called it "God, the God of Israel" (33:18-20), worshiping the God who had brought him through, yet he also settled near the city of Shechem, close to its people and ways. What does this teach us about worship after deliverance, and about the danger of settling too comfortably near the world?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the reconciliation, Jacob does two things that sit in tension. First, he worships: he buys land and builds an altar, calling it 'El-Elohe-Israel,' 'God, the God of Israel' (33:20). This is right and good, marking God's deliverance with worship and claiming the God who met him at Peniel as his own.

But second, he settles near the city of Shechem, drawing close to the Canaanites and their ways. The text notes he 'came safely to the city of Shechem' and 'camped before the city' (33:18). Years earlier God had called him to Bethel; here he stops short, settling in a compromising proximity to the world. Chapter thirty-four will show the bitter fruit of that closeness.

Draw out both lessons. Worship is the right response to God's deliverance; we should mark His mercies with praise and build our 'altars.' But we must beware of settling too close to the world. Jacob's compromise, camping near Shechem rather than going on to God's appointed place, exposed his family to corruption and tragedy.

Help students see the danger of comfortable proximity. It is rarely a sudden plunge into sin that ruins us, but a gradual settling near it, a comfortable closeness to worldly influences, until, like Lot near Sodom and Jacob near Shechem, we and our families are entangled. Worship and worldly compromise cannot safely coexist.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship as the right response to God's deliverance (Genesis 33:20).
- The danger of settling too comfortably near the world (33:18).
- Compromise as gradual proximity, not always a sudden plunge.
- Worship and worldly compromise unable to safely coexist.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Jacob respond rightly to God's deliverance?
- What was the danger in settling near Shechem?
- How does compromise usually happen gradually?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where have you "settled near Shechem," allowed yourself a comfortable closeness to compromise, to worldly influences or habits that slowly pull you off course? What might God be calling you to move away from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the danger of 'settling near Shechem' to the student's life. Few of us decide outright to embrace sin; more often we allow ourselves a comfortable closeness to it, friendships, entertainment, habits, environments, that slowly pull us off course.

Help students identify their Shechem. Where have they camped near compromise? It may be the company they keep, the media they consume, the financial or moral gray areas they linger in, the gradual accommodation to values that are not God's. The proximity feels harmless until its fruit appears.

Draw the New Testament principle. 'Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers... Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate' (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). This is not a call to harsh isolation from people, for we are sent into the world as light, but a call not to settle into the world's ways and let them shape us.

Invite a concrete step: where the student has settled too comfortably near compromise, and one move God may be calling them to make away from it, toward the 'Bethel' of wholehearted devotion rather than the 'Shechem' of comfortable closeness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying our comfortable proximity to compromise.
- Gradual accommodation to worldly values.
- The call to come out and be separate, without harsh isolation (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).
- Moving toward wholehearted devotion rather than comfortable closeness.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you 'settled near Shechem' in your own life?
- What worldly influence is slowly pulling you off course?
- What might God be calling you to move away from?

Question 7

Student Question:

Chapter thirty-four tells of a grievous wrong done to Dinah, answered by her brothers Simeon and Levi with deception and a violent massacre (34:1–31). Without dwelling on the details, what does this tragic chapter teach us about how sin spreads and how compromise with the world can lead a family into ruin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter thirty-four is a dark and tragic narrative, and should be taught with restraint. A real and grievous evil is done to Dinah, Jacob's daughter, by Shechem the prince of the city. Then her brothers Simeon and Levi answer that evil with a colder one: they use the covenant sign of circumcision deceitfully as a trap and, while the men of the city are incapacitated, slaughter them all and plunder the city. One sin is met with a greater sin.

Without dwelling on the disturbing details, draw out the lesson about how sin spreads. The chapter is a chain reaction of evil: lust and violation, then deceit, then mass murder and plunder. Sin does not stay contained; it multiplies, drawing more and more people into greater and greater wrong. What began as one man's sin engulfed an entire city in death.

Connect it to the family's compromise. The tragedy is rooted in part in Jacob's settling near Shechem, his family's comfortable entanglement with the Canaanite world. Compromise with the world exposed his household to corruption, and the results were catastrophic. The choices of chapter thirty-three bore bitter fruit in chapter thirty-four.

Note the verdict Scripture itself renders. This was not righteous justice; it was wicked vengeance. Jacob is horrified, and on his deathbed he condemns Simeon and Levi: 'Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel' (49:5–7). God's word does not endorse their revenge; it denounces it. Real wrong does not justify greater wrong in response.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The destructive, multiplying spread of sin (Genesis 34).
- Compromise with the world exposing a family to corruption and tragedy.
- Teaching the disturbing content with restraint, focusing on the lessons.
- Scripture's own condemnation of the brothers' vengeance (Genesis 49:5–7).

Discussion Prompts

- How does this chapter show the way sin spreads and multiplies?
- How is the family's earlier compromise connected to this tragedy?
- How does Scripture itself evaluate the brothers' revenge?

Question 8

Student Question:

When you are genuinely wronged, how do you handle the anger and the desire to make the other person pay? What is the difference between seeking justice and taking revenge?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves from the chapter's tragedy to the student's own experience of being wronged. Everyone gets wronged, and the desire to make the offender pay is deeply human. The brothers' response shows where unchecked anger and the thirst for revenge can lead.

Help students distinguish justice from revenge. Justice seeks what is right, is measured, and submits to proper authority and to God; revenge is personal, escalating, and seeks to satisfy our own anger. Simeon and Levi did not pursue justice; they pursued vengeance, and it became a far greater evil than the wrong they avenged.

Draw the biblical instruction. 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:19, 21). We are not told to pretend wrongs do not matter, but to refuse personal vengeance and entrust justice to God, who judges rightly.

Invite honest reflection: how the student handles being wronged, whether anger and the desire for revenge rule them, and what it would look like to seek justice rightly while refusing the path of vengeance that ruins both the avenger and others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The human desire to make the offender pay.
- Distinguishing justice (right, measured, submitted to God) from revenge (personal, escalating).
- Never avenging ourselves but leaving wrath to God (Romans 12:19).
- Overcoming evil with good rather than with greater evil (Romans 12:21).

Discussion Prompts

- How do you handle the anger when you are genuinely wronged?
- What is the difference between seeking justice and taking revenge?
- How can you entrust a wrong to God rather than avenge it yourself?

Question 9

Student Question:

Place the two chapters side by side: in chapter thirty-three, a wrong is met with humility and reconciliation; in chapter thirty-four, a wrong is met with deceit and vengeance that only multiply the evil (and which Jacob later condemns, 49:5–7). What do these two paths teach us about God’s way of responding to being wronged, leaving vengeance to Him (Romans 12:17–21), versus the world’s way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point: the two chapters set two ways of responding to being wronged side by side. In chapter thirty-three, Jacob and Esau show God’s way: humility, the first step, an embrace, forgiveness, reconciliation. In chapter thirty-four, Simeon and Levi show the world’s way: a wrong answered with deceit and violence that multiply the evil and leave everyone worse off, a path Scripture explicitly condemns (49:5–7).

Lay the contrast out plainly for the class. Both chapters involve real grievances and strong emotions. But one path leads to weeping on each other’s necks and restored relationship; the other leads to a slaughtered city and a father’s despair. The difference is not whether a wrong occurred, but how it was answered.

Teach God’s way as the New Testament makes it explicit. ‘Repay no one evil for evil... so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... never avenge yourselves... if your enemy is hungry, feed him... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good’ (Romans 12:17–21). This is not weakness or passivity; it is the strength to refuse the escalation of evil and to leave justice in the hands of the God who judges rightly.

Show why the world’s way fails even on its own terms. Revenge feels like justice, but it does not heal the original wrong; it adds new wrongs, binds us to bitterness, and often harms the innocent. Simeon and Levi did not undo Dinah’s suffering; they multiplied death and brought lasting shame and danger on their family. Vengeance never delivers the peace it promises.

Land it in the gospel and in choice. God’s way of reconciliation is rooted in the cross, where God Himself, the truly wronged party, did not avenge but bore the wrong and opened the way to peace (Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:20). Those who have been reconciled to God by such grace are called to walk the same path: to forgive, to seek peace, to refuse revenge, and to overcome evil with good. Every student will be wronged; the passage presses the choice of which path they will take, and points them to the One who took the path of reconciliation for them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two ways of responding to being wronged: reconciliation (chapter 33) versus vengeance (chapter 34).
- God’s way: repay no evil for evil, live at peace, leave wrath to God, overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17–21).

- God's way as strength to refuse escalation, not weakness or passivity.
- The failure of revenge even on its own terms: it multiplies evil and never heals the wrong.
- Reconciliation rooted in the cross, where God bore the wrong to make peace (Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:20).
- The reconciled called to walk the path of reconciliation and refuse revenge.

Discussion Prompts

- How do the two chapters present two opposite ways of responding to wrong?
- What is God's way of handling being wronged, according to Romans 12?
- Why does the path of revenge fail even on its own terms?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Name one specific way God is calling you to pursue reconciliation, to guard against worldly compromise, and to respond to wrongs His way rather than the world's.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to bring the passage's choice to a personal point. We have seen the beauty of reconciliation, the humility it requires, the danger of comfortable compromise, and the contrast between God's way and the world's way of answering wrongs. The question is what God is forming in this student.

Press for the specific. For one it is pursuing a reconciliation they have avoided; for another, moving away from a comfortable compromise; for another, refusing revenge and entrusting a wrong to God; for another, becoming a peacemaker rather than an escalator of conflict.

Close in the gospel. The God who turned Esau's heart and reconciled the brothers is the God who reconciled us to Himself in Christ, taking the path of the embrace rather than vengeance toward us. To be formed by this passage is to walk that same path: to pursue peace, to guard against the world's pull, and to answer the wrongs we suffer not with the deceit and violence of Shechem but with the humble, costly grace of reconciliation, reflecting the God who first reconciled us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pursuing reconciliation with humility.
- Guarding against comfortable worldly compromise.
- Refusing revenge and entrusting wrongs to God.
- Reflecting the God who reconciled us in Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Which call is God pressing on you: reconciliation, separation from compromise, or refusing revenge?
- Where do you most need to choose God's way over the world's?
- How does God's reconciling grace to you shape how you treat those who wrong you?