

## **“OVERCOMING FEAR WITH FAITH”** **(Genesis 32:1-21)**

Today I want to talk to you about overcoming fear with faith. Fear is one of the strongest and most common emotions, and there are any number of things that make us afraid. This week I looked at several lists online of people’s greatest fears, and here are the top ten fears that show up on most lists...

- #10: Going to the doctor.
- #9: Agoraphobia: the fear of crowds.
- #8: Brontophobia: the fear of thunder and lightning.
- #7: Flying.
- #6: Needles and getting shots.
- #5: Spiders and snakes.
- #4: Claustrophobia: the fear of confined spaces.
- #3: Heights.
- #2: Death.
- #1: Speaking in public – I’m always amazed that public speaking ranks higher in fear than death. As Jerry Seinfeld said, “At a funeral most people would rather be in the casket than give the eulogy.”

Fear is a natural emotion we can’t avoid, and fear can be both positive and negative. On the positive side, fear plays an important role in alerting us to danger so that we take precautions to protect ourselves. Fearing God, Proverbs says, is the beginning of knowledge – we are to have a healthy fear and respect for God and His ways. On the negative side, fear can consume us to the point where we’re afraid to step out in faith and enjoy life.

It’s encouraging to know that even the strongest saints in the Bible were overtaken by fear – Abraham, Moses, Gideon, all twelve disciples – yet each one emerged from their bouts of fear with greater trust and confidence in God. As we continue our study of the life of Jacob, today we come to Genesis 32 where Jacob faces one of the most stressed-filled moments of a life that has already been filled with stress.

As I read over this passage several times I kept trying to decide if Jacob’s response to fear was good or bad – are we supposed to follow his example or avoid his example? The conclusion I came to is both. Jacob displays both fear and faith, and I think that is exactly the way most of us deal with fear – we panic *and* pray – we trust God *and* devise our own solutions. And like Jacob, we often alternative back and forth between fear and faith. The goal is with every crisis and trial we face, our natural response will be faith over fear.

As I’ve mentioned several times, it’s helpful to understand that the book of Genesis was written by Moses to the exodus generation who had just come out of bondage in Egypt and were headed back to the Promised Land. The people of Israel faced a number of fearful situations as they reentered the land, and panic set in when the twelve spies came back with a daunting report... “The people in Canaan are big and strong and fierce – there are giants in the land, and we are like grasshoppers in comparison... and the cities are fortified with huge, thick walls.” Their report sends the people into shock and they say, “Let’s turn around and head back to Egypt.” They were paralyzed with fear.

The Israelites could take courage in knowing that Jacob faced the exact same fears when he returned to the Promised Land over 400 years earlier. After being exiled from the land for twenty years, Jacob is now returning to the Promised Land with his large family and a large entourage of servants and large herds of animals.

He has just escaped one enemy in Laban, and is about to face an old enemy in his brother Esau. Twenty years earlier he deceived Esau out of his birthright, and Esau vowed to kill his brother. Jacob knows that his biggest hurdle in returning to the land is Esau. Is he still mad? How is he going to respond when he sees me? Will he let bygones be bygones or will he try to kill me? Jacob assumes it will be the latter.

The chapter begins with Jacob receiving divine encouragement. Verses 1-2... Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is the camp of God!" So he named that place Mahanaim.

When Jacob fled from the Promised Land twenty years earlier, he had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on earth, reaching all the way to heaven, with angels of God ascending and descending on it. Angels are God's messengers that help carry out His will on earth, and seeing God's angels going back and forth between heaven and earth assured Jacob that God was working on his behalf. At the top of the stairway stood the Lord, who spoke to Jacob and promised to be with him and bring him safely back to the land.

Now as Jacob is about to reenter the land – he's just on the eastern border of the land – he is met once again by the angels of God. The whole time Jacob was exiled from the land, God's angels were watching over him and protecting him, and now the angels of God reassure him that God will protect Jacob as he comes back to the land. As Romans 8:31 says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" From a human perspective Jacob had much to fear, but from a divine perspective – with the angels of God surrounding him – he had nothing to fear.

Likewise, as believers we are assured that God surrounds us with His protection. He uses angels to guard us, but an even greater assurance of His protection is the Holy Spirit of God who lives in us. God's presence is with us 24/7, around the clock, and His presence in our lives calms us and assures us that everything will be okay. No matter what fearful situations we face, even if we walk through the valley of the shadow of death – as Psalm 23 says – we know that God goes with us – and because He does, we need not fear evil.

Twenty years earlier, Jacob named the place where he had his dream *Bethel*, meaning the house of God. He said, "How awesome is this place! This is the house of God, and the gate of heaven." Now twenty years later, after his second encounter with angels, he names the place *Mahanaim*, which means "two camps." He said, "The camp of God – with His angels – is connecting with my camp – just as the stairway connected the heavenly world with earth. God was with me as I left the land, and He is with me as I return to the land."

With this reassurance, Jacob has nothing to fear. All he has to do is to trust God and march forward to the Promised Land. But he's human – he's Jacob – and Jacob can't help but come up with his own scheme to alleviate his fears...

Verses 3-5... Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them: “This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: ‘Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.’”

Jacob wants to grease the wheels, and he sends messengers to Esau with three basic messages: One, I haven't been hiding or avoiding you – I've been staying with Uncle Laban all this time. Two, I'm not coming to take anything from you – I have plenty. Three, I don't want you to be mad at me anymore – I want to patch up our relationship and start over.

It's not necessarily a bad move on Jacob's part to communicate these things to Esau, but it still appears like Jacob is relying on his own devices, and that is usually our first impulse as well. When there's a problem we automatically shift into problem-solving mode because we want to relieve the pressure as quickly as possible.

But the longer we walk with the Lord – over time – our automatic response is to turn straight to the Lord with our problems. As Proverbs 3:5 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” It's helpful to think about what we understand – which isn't much – compared to what God understands – which is infinite. 1 Corinthians 1:25 says, “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.” Even if God ever did anything foolish (and He hasn't), it would be wiser than the smartest thing a human genius has ever done. It would only make sense then to lean on God and His wisdom instead of learning on our own problem-solving schemes. God wants us to think and plan, but to do so with His wisdom and guidance.

Did Jacob's plan work? Verse 6 says... When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, “We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” This verse tells us a couple of things. It tells us that over the past twenty years Esau has built up his own wealth and strength, including an army of 400 men – which for the day was a huge army. It's more men than Abraham had when he went to rescue Lot with 318 men. It also tells us that Esau has deployed his army of men 400 to go out and “meet” Jacob.

Are they coming out to greet him and give him a welcome home party? Or, as Jacob assumes, they are coming to kill him and massacre his family? The crazy thing about fear is that 85-90% of the things we worry about never come to pass. Five hundred years ago, French philosopher Michel de Montaigne said: “My life has been filled with terrible misfortune; most of which never happened.” We have an amazing tendency to imagine or exaggerate the worst possible outcome, and make our lives miserable by worrying about things that will never happen.

Like the hymn says, “Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear; all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.” When you begin to worry, 1 Peter 5:7 says, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Don't let fear consume you, cast it on God, and keep casting it – give your burdens to Him.

Jacob doesn't do this, at least not right away. Verses 7-8 says, In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, “If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.”

Jacob is overcome with fear and distress – he assumes that Esau’s army is going to attack his family – and he panics. He divides his group into two camps, thinking that if Esau attacks one camp, the other might be able to escape. What Jacob forgets is that he already has two camps – his camp is surrounded by God’s camp of angels. With God’s camp joining Jacob’s camp, he is completely safe. Psalm 34:7 says, “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.”

It reminds me of the story in 2 Kings 6 where the prophet Elisha is surrounded by a foreign army. Elisha is calm, but his servant is full of fear. He says, “What are we going to do? We’re surrounded.” Elisha prayed, “Lord, open his eyes so that he may see.” The Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw the hills full of horses and chariots, with an angel army surrounding Elisha. Maybe you’re like the servant and all you can see is doom – what a great reminder this is that God surrounds you with His presence and protection – He is in your camp – and He will deliver you in His time and His way.

In verses 9-12 Jacob finally looks to the Lord and prays, and even in his prayer you can sense a combination of faith and fear. Jacob prays, “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’ I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”

The core of Jacob’s prayer is summed up with two words, “Save me!” “Lord, I’m afraid of Esau and afraid that his army of 400 will wipe me and my family out... Dear Lord, save me!” There are many “save me” prayers in the Bible. When the Children of Israel were being pursued by Pharaoh’s army and trapped against the Red Sea, they cried out to God, “Save us!” When Jonah was in the belly of the fish, he cried out to God. The Psalms are filled with petitions for God for His deliverance. Even people who don’t ever pray, in a crisis suddenly find themselves praying.

In his prayer Jacob gives four arguments for why the Lord should deliver him. The first is **God’s covenant**... “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac.” Jacob acknowledges that his family plays a special role in God’s plan for the world, and that the covenant first given to his grandfather has been passed down to his father and then to him.

Secondly, he argues **God’s command**... “You said go back to my country and my relatives and I will make you prosper. I’m doing exactly what you told me to do, so please protect me.”

Third, he argues **God’s faithfulness**... He says, “I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant.” How true this is – Jacob lied and schemed and manipulated his way through life, and it is only by God’s grace that he has been blessed. He acknowledges that all he possessed when he left twenty years earlier was a walking stick in his hand, and now he has God has blessed him with a large family and great wealth.

For much of his life Jacob was a self-made man. God was there when he needed him, but for the most part he relied on his cleverness and ingenuity to get by. Sometimes it takes a crisis for God to break us of our self-reliance. When 400 men are headed towards you, and you’ve exhausted all your resources, there’s nowhere left to turn than to God.

Why does it often have to come to that point? Because we're tough nuts to crack – we stubbornly trust in our own abilities to solve problems, but eventually we come to the point where we know we can't – where we recognize our weakness and incompetency. God is looking for humility, and it is only when we're humble that God can work in our lives.

Humility is required for salvation. Jesus said, “Unless you become like little children – unless you take on their lowly, humble attitude of dependence, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” We must humbly admit we are sinners in need of God's grace. Once we're saved by God's grace, He calls us to a life of continued humility and dependence on Him. Jacob has reached that point of humility and acknowledges his dependence on the Lord.

Fourth, Jacob argues **God's promises**... In verse 12 Jacob reminds God of His promise to prosper him and bless him with many descendants. He says, “If Esau and his army kill me and my family, none of those promises will be fulfilled.”

While God hasn't promised us the same things He promised Jacob, in scripture we read of several promises He has given to every believer... He's promised to never leave us or forsake us... He's promised to meet all of our needs... He's promised to work all things together for good... He's promised to give us peace and joy and wisdom. During fearful situations we need to review God's promises and stand firmly on them so that we can face our fears with confidence.

Prayer should be our first response when we're afraid, and a great verse to remember and memorize is Philippians 4:6-7 which says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

God wants our first impulse, our first instinct to be prayer – to come to Him, the God of the universe, who knows the beginning from the end – to come and present our fears to Him so that the peace of God will wash over us and calm our anxious souls. One writer, Sam Storms, wrote this, “When we fervently and honestly and passionately pour out our requests to God, something of the very nature of God himself, his inner peace, what he himself as God experiences, comes into us and takes up residence and governs our hearts and overcomes and replaces our anxious thoughts and enables us to experience the depths of that spiritual serenity that God himself feels and enjoys.”

You'd think that prayer would bring peace to Jacob's heart, but in verse 13 he seems to go right back to self-reliant problem-solving. We do the same thing, don't we? We pray and gain a renewed sense of confidence, and without realizing it, we go right back to scheming and plotting our way out of our problem. Verses 13-16... He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, “Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds.”

Jacob decides that the way out of his crisis is to placate Esau with gifts – kind of like the husband who buys roses for his wife to smooth things over from his latest blunder. In Jacob's case, he offers an enormously generous gift to Esau. He's willing to give away a large portion of what he has to smooth things over with Esau.

Verses 17-18... He instructed the one in the lead: “When my brother Esau meets you and asks, ‘Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?’ then you are to say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.’”

Twenty years earlier Jacob stole Esau’s blessing – he deceived Isaac into giving him the lion’s share of the inheritance as well as the honor of being the leader of the family – and now Jacob is prepared to give it all back to Esau. He wants to recompense Esau for all that he took away from him, which is a good gesture. When Zacchaeus came to faith in Christ, he made amends with those he cheated as a tax collector, paying back four times the amount he stole from them. Zacchaeus did this out of a repentant heart, but Jacob appears to give all these gifts to Esau, not out of remorse, but out of a desire to save his skin.

What’s more, he refers to himself as “your servant Jacob,” and refers to Esau as “my Lord.” Not only is he willing to return the blessing to Esau – the blessing God sovereignly chose for Jacob to have while the twins were still in their mother’s womb – but he’s ready to give up his God-appointed place of leadership in the family. Jacob is letting fear rule his decisions.

But Jacob goes even further – he sends a total of three separate delegations of servants bearing gifts ahead of him. He’s going to try and appease Esau with a wave of gifts. Verses 19-21... He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: “You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him. And be sure to say, ‘Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.’” For he thought, “I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.” So Jacob’s gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp. Jacob hopes all these gestures of kindness will soften Esau and cause his brother to welcome him with open arms.

I know when you’re reading a book that you’re not supposed to look ahead and see how things turn out, but when we come to chapter 33 in a couple of weeks, we see that all of Jacob’s fearful planning and scheming was all for naught. Esau runs out to meet him and embraces him with a big, hairy, Esau-like hug. All of Jacob’s worrying and fretting was all for nothing. All he had to do was to go to the Lord in prayer and leave it in His hands. All he had to do was to remember that the angels of God surrounded him, and that God would bring him safely back to the Promised Land just as He promised. Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear; all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer.

What do you fear this morning?

- Maybe, like Jacob, it’s facing someone you’re at odds with or facing a difficult conversation with someone.
- Maybe you’re waiting on a test result from the doctor, or you’re worried about making enough to make ends meet?
- Maybe you’re afraid about something related to your kids.
- Maybe you’re afraid of all the cultural upheaval in our country and what that means for our future.

God’s Word to you this morning is: Don’t panic. Run straight to God with your fears. Remember that He is with you – He encamps around those who fear Him. Life will provide you with several opportunities – even this week – to trust God. Each time you run to Him, fear is replaced by faith and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.