

November 29/30, 2003

Fear or Faith: A Study in the Life of Isaac & Jacob

Jacob Finally Surrenders

Genesis 32:1-32

Pastor Bryan Clark

Several years ago there was a short-lived television series about a bumbling detective. Every time he got in a critical moment, he would look at somebody and he would say, “Trust me. I know what I’m doing.” And then of course the humor in that was he didn’t, and at that point everything would fall apart.

We all understand the reality is we can’t just say to people, “Trust me. I know what I’m doing.” Trust has to be earned. It comes over a period of time as we demonstrate ourselves to be people of integrity and character. We demonstrate that we are trustworthy. Certainly the opposite is true. If we live lives of irresponsibility, then people won’t trust us because we’re not trustworthy. Certainly the same thing, then, should be true of God. As a people of faith, we have to learn what it means to trust Him. A part of developing this trust is really looking at the faithfulness of God.

Thanksgiving is always a good time to look back at the last year and look at God’s faithfulness and review that. As a matter of fact, it would be good to make a list, and on that list have two different columns. In one column write down all the ways in the last year that God has been faithful—ways that God has kept His promises. And then on the other column write down all the ways that God has failed—all the ways that God has not kept His promises, all the ways that God has lied and deceived and manipulated. Well, of course we understand that would be a very short list. As a matter of fact, there would *nothing* on there at all, because God has been perfect in His faithfulness.

Now I realize sometimes people have false expectations, but that’s more a problem with *us* and our expectations than it is with God. There isn’t a person who could say, “God promised this and He didn’t keep His promise.” As a matter of fact, the whole celebration of Christmas is the fact that God made a promise thousands of years before, and God kept His promise, just like He said He would, and sent the Savior of the world.

So if it’s true that God is perfect in His promises, then why do we struggle to trust Him? I know initially we would say, “Oh, no, we don’t struggle. We trust Him.” Really? Then why are we fearful? Why are we anxious? Why do we worry? Those are not things consistent with faith. They expose the reality that we really don’t fully trust God.

This isn’t a new problem. This has been a problem we’ve all struggled with. The people of God have struggled with it for thousands of years. It goes all the way back to Jacob. If there was ever a man that had a track record of God’s faithfulness demonstrated to him, it would be Jacob. Time and time again God has demonstrated His faithfulness to Jacob, yet Jacob just doesn’t get it! He just doesn’t believe.

We find ourselves asking the question, “What will it take for Jacob to finally surrender and believe in the promises of God?” That question is answered for us in our story today in Genesis 32. As we look at that, one of the things we want to process is the same question: What will it take *us* to finally believe and to trust Him?

Before we get into Genesis 32, I want to review chapter 31, which was loaded with statements about God’s faithfulness. Many of those statements came out of the mouth of Jacob himself

as he reviewed the last 20 years with Laban. Over and over again he stated that God had been faithful. No matter how hard Laban tried to cheat Jacob, God intervened and God protected Jacob. Even when Laban was coming to possibly attack and do harm to Jacob, God literally intervened and got in Laban's face and said, "You can't touch him. You can't harm him." And Jacob knew that; Laban told him so.

So Jacob has had every evidence imaginable that God is faithful. He knows, *You can trust Him; He's going to take care of you.* With that in mind, we expect Jacob to come out of chapter 31 with this remarkable faith and with this boldness and courage. We expect that if ever there was a man of faith, it would be Jacob. He ought to be rock solid—shouldn't he? Chapter 32, verse 1:

Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. Jacob said when he saw them, "This is God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim. (vs. 1-2, *NASB)

You remember, when Jacob left the land of promise he had an experience with angels. That was 20 years earlier than this, and the angels were ascending and descending the ladder. He's been out of the land for 20 years; now he's reentering the land, and again he has an angel encounter. It's almost as if there are angels that are guarding the land of promise, as he goes through them going out and as he goes through them coming in. But he says, "This is God's camp. I'm going to call this place 'Two Camps' or 'Two Armies.'" In other words, what he's saying is, "I understand there's our camp. But then there's this divine camp, or this divine army of God, that is now with us." So if Jacob didn't have enough evidence before, now he has even had this angel encounter where God has shown him the army that's going to go with him. Now he absolutely has nothing to fear. He has *got to be* absolutely rock solid. He's got it all!

Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight." ' " (vs. 3-5)

Jacob probably hasn't thought a lot about Esau in 20 years, because he has had his hands full with Laban. But now he is entering back into the land of promise. They have drawn a line in the sand. He can't retreat; he already made a covenant with Laban. He won't go back to Laban's land. So now he has to deal with Esau; and the last he knew, Esau wanted to kill him.

The language in this text is interesting, where Jacob continually refers to Esau as "lord" and himself as "your servant." Now this is the Jacob who lied and deceived and manipulated his way into the blessing so that he would be the lord and Esau would be his servant. God said that's the way it would be. But now coming back into the land, driven by his fear, it's as if he's willing to give that up in order to just survive. So he calls Esau "lord" and himself "your servant."

He has a three-part message he wants delivered to Esau. Number one: "I've been with Uncle Laban." In other words, "I haven't been in the caves hiding from you; I've been with Uncle Laban, getting a wife and family." The second message is: "I have all that I need; I'm not going to take anything from you." And the third message is: "Can't we just be friends? Can't we let bygones be bygones? Can't we all get along here?"

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; for he said, “If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape.” (vs. 6-8)

I think verses 6 through 8 are pathetic. Jacob is now *very* frightened because Esau and 400 men are coming. It never dawns on him that God may deliver him—that God may protect him! His best plan is: “Let’s divide the group in two.” This weakens his little ragtag army, but the plan is: “Whichever one gets slaughtered, the other one can maybe get away.” Now what kind of a plan is that?

There’s a bit of irony in the fact that Jacob has just said, “I’m going to call this place ‘Two Camps’—because there’s our camp and there’s God’s camp.” But now he forgets that and he just divides his own camp into two—as if somehow God’s camp disappeared. Once again he’s scheming and plotting, driven by his fear.

Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you, I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with children. For You said, ‘I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.’ ” (vs. 9-12)

Finally at this point, Jacob prays. And it’s worth noting that this is the first time in the story of Jacob that we’re ever told that Jacob prayed. Now he probably prayed before, but the text never recorded it. Just think through all of the experiences Jacob has been through. It is sobering to realize this is the first time he prayed that is recorded in the text. And it’s a great prayer. He opens with “God of Abraham...God of Isaac.” What’s still missing is “God of Jacob.” That’s the part he still doesn’t get.

Then he reminds God, “God, it was You who said, ‘Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you.’ ” (And God in the heavens said, *Oh...I forgot I said that.*) Jacob is reminding God as if God has somehow forgotten. Jacob heard that. Jacob knew it was God who said, “Go home.” Why didn’t he just believe that? He’s reminding God of that, and then he reminds himself that God has been faithful—not because Jacob deserved it, but because God is faithful. He says, “God, I’ve been undeserving of everything You’ve given me.” It’s a statement of grace: “I understand I didn’t deserve any of this, but You did it for me.” In other words, he’s *not* saying, “God, if I had performed better You would have rescued me.” His theology is really solid here. He understands, *God, I haven’t deserved anything that You’ve given me, but You’ve been faithful.*

He pleads with God to protect him from Esau. Then he reminds God one more time in case He forgot that twenty years ago He said, “I’m going to prosper you and make you a great nation.” Now this is a great prayer. Jacob *knows* the promises of God. He *remembers* the promises of God. It isn’t a case where he didn’t hear it, didn’t understand it, didn’t remember it. He prays it back to God. And then Jacob does what he does best: he plots; he schemes; he goes back to doing it *himself*.

Do you ever find yourself doing this? We come before God and we offer these great prayers where we maybe even quote Scripture back to God: “God, You said...You promised...” We may have these beautiful prayers, and then five minutes later it’s as if we didn’t believe a word of it. Five minutes later we’re right back to worrying, right back to our fears, right back to our anxiety like we didn’t believe a word of what we just prayed. That’s Jacob. Great prayers—too bad he doesn’t believe it. So he schemes:

So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, “Pass on before me, and put a space between droves.” He commanded the one in front, saying, “When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, ‘To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?’ then you shall say, ‘These belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present sent to my lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.’ ”

Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, “After this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; and you shall say, ‘Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.’ ” For he said, “I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.” So the present passed on before him, while he himself spent that night in the camp.

Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. (vs. 13-23)

Immediately after Jacob’s prayer he goes to scheming and plotting. In his mind he’s thinking, *Maybe I can buy Esau off.* That’s what he means when he says, “I can appease him.” *Maybe if I give him enough, then he won’t kill me.* So he sends him this magnificent gift by droves, by waves. About the time Esau receives something, another wave comes...and another wave comes. Just to put some perspective on this: What Jacob was giving to Esau was far more than what a small town would have given to honor the king. This was an absolutely magnificent gift. *Maybe this will appease him; maybe I can buy him off.*

Then finally Jacob takes his immediate family and he crosses the river. They are, in a sense, the last drove. And he’s alone. Remember the last time he was alone? It was 20 years ago when he was fleeing for his life from his brother Esau. And it was in that place that God met him and he had this encounter with God. Now here he is, 20 years later. He’s alone, fleeing from his brother who wants to kill him, and we find ourselves asking, “Jacob, what have you learned? You’ve been in God’s school of faith for 20 years. What have you learned?”

Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” (vs. 24-26)

Now what's happening here? If we didn't know the story, we might be tempted to think that the one who was wrestling with Jacob was Esau—that perhaps in the darkness he had snuck around and jumped him in the middle of the night. But as the text goes on we find out that, no, this is some sort of a divine opponent that has this divine touch. Hosea 12:4 tells us this was an angel. As a matter of fact, it may very well have been *the* Angel of the Lord, which would be God Himself. That seems to be what Jacob believes.

So all night long they are engaged in this wrestling match, and the man cannot prevail over Jacob. He's tenacious. He fights all night long. As the sun is beginning to rise, finally the man reaches out and touches the hip of Jacob and dislocates it. Some translations say "he reached out and struck his hip." That's a very bad translation. The Hebrew word is very clear that this is a very *light* touch. It's implying that this was divine power and not the force of a blow that dislocated his hip. At that moment Jacob figures out who this is. The man wants to escape and Jacob won't let go. He is clinging to him and says, "I won't let go until you bless me."

Now what is this all about? If this man is actually God in human form, then why couldn't God prevail over Jacob in this wrestling match? It's because there's a lesson being taught here that we need to understand. All Jacob's life he has wrestled with God and he has wrestled with man. God has done everything in His power to reveal His faithfulness to Jacob. But God has not prevailed, because Jacob won't let Him. He won't surrender. So once again Jacob is driven by his fears because he is determined to do it himself.

Finally, God has no other tool in His toolbox left but to totally disable Jacob. So he reaches out and touches him on the hip and he dislocates his hip. At this point Jacob literally is totally disabled. Here the sun is coming up. Esau and 400 men are coming to kill him, and he can't move! He is now totally helpless. He knows at this moment he has one choice—and that is to cling...or die. Cling or die.

So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." (vs. 27)

In the ancient Near East, when you gave up your name it was the equivalent in our culture of saying "uncle." It meant, *I give up; I surrender*. So when the man asked Jacob for his name and he gave it, Jacob was saying, "I'm defeated; I give up; I surrender." And he gave his name: "It is Jacob."

He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." [Jacob is thinking maybe this was a tie!] But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" [In other words, "No...I won! I'm not going to give you my name."] And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh. Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip. (vs. 28-32).

The man says to Jacob, "What is your name?" And he says, "Jacob. I give up. I'm defeated." God knows at this point something has changed. For the first time in Jacob's life he surrenders. He gives up control. He has no more plotting, no more scheming, no more manipulation left in him. He is totally disabled. He must cling to God or die. God knows that. He sees that in Jacob's heart. So He says, "Then I'm changing your name. All your life

you've been a supplanter, a deceiver, a schemer." That's what his name "Jacob" meant. But God said, "I'm changing it now to 'Israel.'" "

Now there's a lot of debate about what the name "Israel" means. I think it means "God prevailed." God finally prevailed because Jacob surrendered. This is followed by the statement, "Jacob, you have wrestled with God and with men and you have prevailed." In other words, "Jacob, you have spent your life wrestling with God and wrestling with men. But for the first time in your life, you have actually surrendered. So you have won!"

In the language of the New Covenant, the New Testament, Jacob has finally understood that you must *die*, to live. Jesus said, "If you want to keep your life, you will lose it. But if you lose your life, you will find it." This is the paradox of faith: that we must die, to live. We must surrender, to prevail.

Jacob was finally brought to the point where he had nothing left but surrender. And God said at that moment, "You finally have prevailed; you finally win." Why did God do that? Why did God so desperately want Jacob to surrender? So that He could punish him? No, so that He could bless him! That's all God has wanted for the last 20 years: to *bless* Jacob. But for that to happen, Jacob has to surrender.

The text tells us that Jacob walked with a limp, as a way of saying this wasn't just some dream. He would live with the constant reminder of this night when he finally surrendered to God. God had shown Himself faithful over and over and over again, in almost every way imaginable—including letting Jacob see this army of God's angels at his disposal to protect him. But no matter what God did, Jacob was determined to do it himself. And because of that, his life has been characterized by fear, anxiety, worry—because he believes it's all up to him. The only way God could get him to understand what it means to trust Him is to totally disable him—to where he had *no* choice but to cling...or die.

There are many of you who remember that day and that hour when you reached that point where you were brought so low you had nothing left but to reach out and to cling to God. And you surrendered, that you might prevail.

But there are also many of you who still are not at that point. If you were to be honest, you would say your life is driven by your insecurities, your fears, your anxiety, your worry. That's because you have convinced yourself it's all up to *you*. You may be able to pray these magnificent prayers that quote all these verses claiming the promises of God. But five minutes later, the fear is there; the anxiety is there; the worry is there; the insecurities are there. You haven't believed a word of it.

The question is: What will be necessary before you finally believe that God can be trusted? What will it take for you to surrender—to understand you have to die, to live? Will it become necessary for God to completely disable you—to strip everything away from you—before you finally cling to Him and learn what it means to trust Him?

Why would God do that to you? Because He's angry with you? Because He wants to punish you? No. It's because more than anything else, God wants to *bless* you. But He cannot bless you until you surrender—that you might prevail.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

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Study Questions

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Opening Discussion

1. As a group, make a list of all the ways God has been faithful over the past year.
2. Now, as a group, make a list of all the ways God has been unfaithful this past year.
3. Based on these lists, what is the likelihood that God will be faithful in the upcoming year?
4. Based on your answers to questions 1-3, why do we worry and fear? What more does God need to do for you to trust Him?

Bible Study

1. Read Genesis 32:1-23.

Jacob's encounter with angels in 32:1 provides a bookend with 28:12 to frame this chapter in his life. It's as if angels guard the promised land and he meets them going out and coming back in. What did God promise Jacob at Bethel (ch. 28) and in what ways did God demonstrate His faithfulness to keep those promises over the past 20 years of Jacob's life?

3. Jacob obviously sees God's faithfulness to him over the past 20 years with Laban, including God preventing Laban from harming him in his escape. How then do we explain Jacob's "fear and distress" over Esau?
4. How might Jacob's state of mind in 32:24 be similar to his state of mind in 28:10?

Why is it that we often don't hear the voice of God until we get to this place in our lives where Jacob finds himself in chapter 32?

5. Read 32:24-32. The text states that "he (the man) had not prevailed against him (Jacob)." Who is the "man"? Compare with Hosea 12:4. What does the writer mean when he says the man "had not prevailed against him"?

The "touch" of the "man" makes it obvious he had plenty of power to defeat Jacob. Therefore, the idea of prevailing must include Jacob's willingness to surrender. Compare Jesus' words in Matthew 10:38, 39 and John 12: 20-26 and Paul's words in Galatians 2:20.

6. Changing names is symbolic for a change in character in the Bible. God changed Jacob's name because something in Jacob changed. What do you think changed?

What did it take for Jacob to change?

What might a modern day wrestling match with God look like?

Application

1. What are you worried about or anxious about these days?

How do you explain your fear, in light of God's past faithfulness?

What more does God need to do for you to trust Him?

2. Jesus said to live we must first die. Practically speaking, what does this look like for you on a daily basis?

What must change for you to truly live?

List one specific area of your life where you struggle to surrender. What will surrender look like in that area?

3. Pray for one another in this area of trust and surrender. Pray that we will see God's faithfulness and trust Him before He has to "touch" our lives to get us to give up.