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

Is It Jacob or Israel?

Genesis 33:1-20

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Some of you may be aware that one of my personal mentors is Barney Fife. He has taught me how to be cool and calm under pressure. One of the things I like about Barney is that he is always trying to pretend to be something that he is not. Barney wants to be somebody else; he is always trying to convince you of that. But he is a man driven by his fears—that just shows up all the time. I am not so sure we are that different from Deputy Barney Fife. Oh, we are smoother. We cover it up better. But I think deep within there is a lot of fear that drives our behaviors.

Have you ever thought about the fact that the person sitting around you who may seem like he or she has it all together and is very successful may be a person who is driven by fear? I am currently reading a book called *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership* written by Gary McIntosh. In the book he talks about this very thing. He talks about Christian leaders and leaders out in the culture who we would say are very effective leaders. But behind the scenes, they are people driven by their fears. That is the dark side of leadership.

I guess the question that would arise out of that is: Is that a problem? Is that a big deal? I think sometimes when we think about fear, we are thinking about Barney Fife. Basically he is a coward. Not too many of us would think of ourselves as cowards. But it is fear of all kinds of things. We have fear of failure. We have fear of not measuring up. We have fear of not being successful. We have fear that we are going to lose our money. We have fear of disease. We have fear of abandonment and fear of intimacy. We have fear that we won't be accepted or we won't be popular. We have a long list of fears that drive our behaviors. So is that a problem?

Let's see if we can answer that from the story of Jacob in Genesis 33. We have been studying the life of Jacob, who is clearly a man driven by fear. As a matter of fact, the writer of the text has told us over and over again that, instead of responding by faith, Jacob is a man driven by his fears. He is afraid. At each of these critical moments when he has to make a critical decision, we are often told that he is greatly afraid. That leads to the decisions he has made.

In chapter 32 Jacob has this incredible wrestling match with God, and finally God prevailed and Jacob surrendered. God saw that in his heart and God changed his name. He said, "Jacob, you have always been a 'Jacob.'" That name means deceiver, supplanter, or schemer. But He said, "Now your name is going to be 'Israel'" (which means God prevails). Not only did God prevail over Jacob, but God prevails. Jacob just has to realize that God ultimately prevails, so trust Him. That is what his name meant. So after that encounter, we have great confidence that Jacob finally has surrendered. Jacob finally gets it. Jacob is now going to arise as a great man of faith...isn't he?

Chapter 33: 1 begins with the word "then." Don't miss that word: *then*. It is saying, "Now following this great encounter with God..."

Then Jacob lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her

children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. (vs. 1-2, *NASB)

The last time we encountered Esau, Esau hated Jacob. Esau vowed to kill Jacob. We were introduced to Esau as a crude, brutish, selfish individual. There was nothing admirable about Esau. Now Esau is coming with 400 men and we don't know what his intentions are, but we can guess. Of course, Jacob is greatly afraid. There is really nothing he can do now. He can't run; he can't really fight. So he has to face his fears.

He lines up his family in a descending order. Out in front are his maids and their children, then Leah and her children, and in the back would be Rachel and Joseph. If there was any doubt before about who he liked best and who he liked least, that has been decided. This is not a way to bring unity to the family. The writer describes this in not naming the maids at all. Leah is named but not her children. But Rachel and Joseph are both named. It is a way of saying, "These were the favorites." This favorite child situation would cause Jacob grief the rest of his life.

He lines them up and, to his credit, he goes out in front of them all to face Esau. This looks like a step in the right direction. It looks like progress. He can't run and he can't hide. He is going to face it. Jacob bows down to Esau, and there is a lot of discussion whether that was a cultural way of honoring Esau or whether he was just groveling at Esau's feet. God had clearly said to Jacob that the older will bow to the younger, and he knew that. This looks to me like groveling. As a matter of fact, what needed to happen here is that Esau needed to bow to God and Jacob needed to represent that. But whatever the case, the story continues:

Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. He lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said, "Who are these with you?" So he said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." Then the maids came near with their children, and they bowed down. Leah likewise came near with her children, and they bowed down; and afterward Joseph came near with Rachel, and they bowed down. (vs. 4-7)

This could not possibly have entered the mind of Jacob. Everything he ever knew about Esau would have told him this scene could never have happened. But it did. Rather than wanting to kill him, Esau grabbed him, hugged him, and wept with him. As a matter of fact, the description of how Esau received Jacob is almost identical to how the father of the prodigal son in the Gospels received that son back. This was a remarkable scene, and it must have absolutely shocked Jacob.

Jacob introduces his family. Then Esau asks the question in verse 8:

And he said, "What do you mean by all this company which I have met?" And he said, "To find favor in the sight of my lord." But Esau said, "I have plenty, my brother; let what you have be your own." Jacob said, "No, please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have plenty." Thus he urged him and he took it. (vs. 8-11)

If there was any thought that maybe it was Jacob's plan—it was all this stuff that Jacob had sent ahead to Esau that caused Esau to respond the way he did—that idea is now gone. Because not only did Esau not want it, but I think he was offended by it. He said to Jacob, “Hey, what is it with all this stuff?” And Jacob did not tiptoe around. He said, “I was trying to buy your favor.” That is the Jacob that Esau has always known. Jacob was always the wheeler-dealer trying to buy or manipulate his favor, and Esau in a sense calls him on it. He says, “What is with all this stuff? I don't need this stuff; I have plenty. Keep it.”

But Jacob insists that he keep it. His explanation is very interesting. He says to his brother, “I want you to keep it because I see in your face the very face of God.” What does he mean by that? He made almost this exact same statement in chapter 32. You have to believe that these statements are coming out of Jacob's mouth in such close proximity to one another that they are tied together. In verse 30 of chapter 32 Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face.” He had experienced the power of God. He experienced God prevailing. He had seen the face of God. Now, as he looks into the eyes of his brother Esau, he sees the face of God, in the sense that he sees God has done in the heart of Esau what he never could have imagined. God changed Esau from a brutish, selfish man who wanted to kill him, to a brother that dearly loved him and welcomed him back.

Now, I think Jacob could not in his wildest dreams have ever imagined this reunion. As he is looking into the face of Esau, he sees the handiwork of God and he realizes God had gone before him. There was no reason for fear. There was no reason for worry and anxiety. Once again, God had prepared the way just as He promised He would. God dealt with Laban one way; God dealt with Esau in a different way. But God again had prevailed.

You also see this supported in the use of two different Hebrew words. They are both translated “plenty” in the English. When Esau says, “I don't need your stuff; I have plenty,” that is a good translation. But when Jacob says, “I have plenty,” that is a different Hebrew word which literally means “I have it all.” In other words, he was saying, “Esau, I want you to keep all this stuff because I realize now I have it all. God can do anything. I will never lack for anything.” It is a statement of faith. He is starting to get it. Esau has plenty. Jacob has it all because he is realizing God can do what he couldn't even have imagined. God promised in Genesis 28 to Jacob, “I will protect you. I will provide for you. I will be with you.” But Jacob has struggled to understand what that means. What does it mean that God will be with him? He is learning little by little that God can do for him what he could not possibly do himself.

The night that Jesus was arrested, He was in the Upper Room with His disciples. John's description of them was that they were “troubled.” It is a word that means they were stirred up; they were agitated and fearful. And Jesus said, “There is no reason for fear”—because of what He was about to do as Savior of the world. He would die for their sins, be buried and ascend back to the Father. Then He said, “I will send My Spirit, and My Spirit will be with you forever.” It is the same promise God made to Jacob: “You will have My presence always.” Therefore, Jesus said, “You don't have to be fearful; you can be at peace.”

But we still wrestle with that same question of what that means. What does it mean to practice the presence of God on a daily basis? Does that mean if I am a person of faith that I sit in the La-Z-Boy and God does it all while I just sip my Diet Coke? That is not what it means. It means that, as a person of faith, I have to fulfill my responsibility. I have to do what I can do. I need to be obedient. I need to be diligent. I need to control the things I can

control. I can control my own choices. I can control my own attitudes. I can control my own obedience.

The problem is, that is not what causes my fear. What causes my fear are those things around me that I cannot control. Every day I am surrounded by hundreds of things I cannot control. I cannot control my circumstances, people, or disease. I cannot control any of these things. That is what drives our fears. If we don't have God in our lives, then what do we do? We try to control those things. I control; I manipulate; and I intimidate. I may have to lie, deceive and compromise. That has been the way of life for Jacob.

But I understand if I have the presence of God in my life, I don't have to live that way—because even though I cannot control these people and I cannot control these circumstances, God can. *God* can...just like He did with Laban and just like He did with Esau. Therefore, I do my part, and that which I cannot control I don't try to manipulate. I don't try to intimidate. I don't need to lie, deceive, scheme and plot. I just need to believe that that which I cannot control, God can. Therefore, rather than fear, I have *faith*.

So it creates a dramatic difference between those who have the presence of God and those who don't. That is what Jacob is starting to learn here. I think he has it. I think he understands that God prevails and he has it all. The people around us may have plenty, but with the presence of God we may have it all. I think Jacob has it. I think he has got it... doesn't he?

Then Esau said, “Let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you.” But he said to him, “My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. Please let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir.” [*In other words, “I will meet you there.”*]

Esau said, “Please let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.” But he said, “What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.” So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. (vs. 12-16)

One of the issues in the ancient world was the danger of travel. It just was very dangerous to travel. And Leah and Rachel must have struggled with the danger to the family all the time. Now here comes Esau with this grand reunion. He has 400 men and he basically says, “Let's go home and I will escort you all the way home.” They are home free. (Rachel and Leah had been praying about this in Titus Women for weeks.) They must have said, “Finally, we are home free. God is so good.” And Jacob said, “No thanks. The cattle are tired and the children are tired, so you go on home and we will come at our own pace.”

So Esau says, “I'll tell you what: I'll just leave some of the men and they will come at your pace.” And Leah and Rachel were saying, “Yes; we are home free.” And Jacob said, “No thanks; we don't need it.” Now what is he doing? Are these great steps of faith where he realizes God is his protector and he doesn't need Esau's men? Maybe that is what it is. Maybe Jacob is taking great steps of faith ... or maybe not.

Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named Succoth. (v. 17)

You have to understand the geography here. Seir was almost straight south of where they were. Succoth is northwest, almost the opposite direction. As a matter of fact, to go to Succoth from where he was, Jacob and his family had to once again cross the Jabbok River, which was very dangerous. They had crossed it in order to have this encounter with Esau, and now they were home free. Instead, he goes the opposite direction, back across the river. You think, *Well, maybe he is just taking the scenic route.* No, he built a house. He is moving in. He promised Esau he would meet him in Seir. As a matter of fact, when God came to Jacob in chapter 28, he said, “Jacob, I am going to bring you back here and this is your home, Bethel.” This was down in the area of Seir. When God appeared to Jacob when he was in the land of Laban he said, “It is time to go home. It is time to go back to Bethel.” Jacob is going the opposite direction.

Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city. He bought the piece of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem’s father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel. (vs. 18-20)

Now nobody knows how long a time lapsed between Succoth and Shechem. Shechem was about 30 miles farther northwest, so he is still going the opposite direction.

There are a lot of interesting things that happened in this area of Shechem. For example, in Genesis 12 when Abraham first entered the land of promise, it was right in this area where he built the altar to God. Probably it was not still standing; that would have been 200 years earlier. This area of Shechem would have been the burial place for Joseph.

In John 4, Jesus has an encounter with the woman at the well. We are told in that Gospel that this encounter with the woman at the well was the well that Jacob dug when he was at Shechem. There is a lot of history right here. The problem is, this is not where God told him to go. He was supposed to go to Bethel. He bought a piece of ground for 100 pieces of money. He did not have to buy anything. God said in Genesis 28, “I will give you this land.” He did not say to go out and make an offer on it. This was all wrong. What is going on here? Jacob is still driven by his fears. He just does not believe that Esau is on the up and up. He does not want to live by him. He wants a river between him and Esau. Because of his fears, instead of going where God said to go, he went somewhere else—almost the opposite direction.

On top of that, Jacob lied to Esau. He said, “You go ahead. We will meet you there.” He is still the same old Jacob. He is a liar. He is a deceiver. He is a schemer. As a matter of fact, he is still Jacob. In chapter 32 God said, “I am changing your name. You will now be called Israel.” But throughout this story, he is not called Israel. He is called Jacob, because he is still acting like Jacob.

When God changed the name of Abram to Abraham and the name Sarai to Sarah, from that moment on they were referred to as Abraham and Sarah 100% of the time. But from the moment God changes Jacob’s name to Israel, he would continue to be called Jacob 45 times, and over his lifetime he would only be called Israel 23 times, because that is the way he continued to live. He was driven by his fears rather than his faith.

There are a couple of things that we can say with certainty. First, Jacob has been a man driven by his fear. And secondly, he has a track record for bad, disastrous choices. Do you suppose those two go together?

What if you were to make a list of your worst decisions of your life—the top ten worst decisions you have made? I would suggest to you that probably almost every one of those was driven by fear. I would also suggest to you that not one of those was driven by faith.

The reality is, God has remained remarkably faithful. Jacob just keeps doing his own thing and God continues to be faithful. Jacob said it twice in this text—that God has been gracious to him: “He has poured out to me what I don’t deserve over and over again.” If I were God, I would have taken him out a long time ago. But God just continues to be faithful. He will faithfully get him down to Bethel where he belongs, but Jacob will still live with the consequences of his choices. This decision, driven by fear to go to Shechem instead of Bethel, will effect a disaster in his family. For the rest of his life he will grieve his choice to go to Shechem. The fact is, yes, God will be faithful. But we still live with the consequences of our choices.

So is it a big deal? Sometimes we talk about faith and we are thinking, *Yes, I need to believe that to accomplish great things for God.* But we are talking about the everyday decisions of life. It is a big deal unless you want to make a disaster of your life. If so, then have at it. But if you don’t want to make a disaster of your life, then yes, this fear thing is a big deal, because fear never drives us to make wise decisions.

What are the big issues in your life? What are the big issues...the people... the circumstances? What would be a response driven by fear, and what would be a response driven by faith? If you allow yourself to be driven by your fears, you will make a disaster with your business, with your relationships, with your life.

It is a big deal. We have to deal with this fear within us. It is not necessary. I do what I can do, and beyond that I just have to trust by faith. I don’t have to control it. I don’t have to manipulate it. I don’t have to intimidate. I don’t have to scheme and plot. And I don’t have to live in fear of it. I do what I can do, and I trust God with the rest.

What will it be for you? Will you be driven by fear...or will you be driven by faith?

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

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Study Questions

Is It Jacob or Israel?

Genesis 33:1-20

Opening Discussion

1. In what ways does fear drive our culture? What are the evidences of fear in the people around you?
2. Do you struggle with fear? In what ways? What are the ways we might try to disguise our fear to appear “successful” to others?
3. Can you think of a time when you made what turned out to be a disastrous decision because of your fear? What would have been the response of faith in that circumstance?

Bible Study

1. Review Genesis 32. What seemed to change in Jacob?

What was the reason for changing Jacob’s name from Jacob (deceiver, supplanter) to Israel (God prevails)?

2. Read Genesis 27:41. As far as the readers know, nothing has changed in Esau. He’s coming with 400 men to kill Jacob. This is the cause of Jacob’s fear (32:7). What happens in reality, according to Genesis 33:4?

How do we explain the change in Esau?

Did Jacob really have anything to fear, given the promises God had made to him?

3. As a group list all the promises God has made to you as a child of God. The walk of faith simply means believing God will keep these promises. For each promise identify the fear response related to not believing that promise.
4. What does Jacob mean when he states in verse 10: “...for I see your face as one sees the face of God”? Compare that with Genesis 32:30.
5. Why does Jacob lie to Esau about meeting him in Seir (33:12-20)?

Is this faith or fear? Based on your answer, is this decision likely to be a good one or a disastrous one?

6. Jacob names the altar at Shechem, “God-God of Israel.” That sounds impressive, but is he living more like Jacob or Israel? From chapter 32 on he will be called Jacob 45 times and Israel 23 times. Why is this?

What are *we* called as believers? Do we live up to our names? Why or why not?

Application

1. In what specific areas do you struggle with fear, anxiety or worry?

What are some of the promises that apply in those areas?

What will be necessary for you to go from fear to faith in those areas?

2. What is the biggest issue in your life right now?

What would be the response of faith and what would be a response of fear?

3. How can the group practically help one another move toward faith rather than fear?

4. Spend time praying for one another. Pray for a response of faith in the big issues you are facing.