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WHEN FEAR GRIPS YOU

Genesis 32:1-21

by

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Genesis Lesson 58

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Genesis 32:1-21

Someone has observed, "A good scare is worth more to a man than good advice." (*Peter's Quotations* [Bantam Books], p. 190.) We all have many recurring fears, but when those fears come to a head in a good scare, we learn a lot about ourselves and about life.

Most of us fear getting cancer. Frankly, I'd rather die suddenly. A few years ago I had a couple of lumps removed from my body. The doctor thought they were benign, but routinely sent them in for a biopsy. A week later, I called to see whether the nurse could remove my stitches or whether I needed to see the doctor. The receptionist put me on hold and then came back on the line to say, "The doctor wants to talk to you about the biopsy." "Okay," I replied weakly. I hung up and thought, "The only reason he would need to talk to me is if the biopsy revealed a malignancy. I must have cancer!" I was scared! As it turned out, nothing was wrong. But in the hours between hanging up the phone and seeing the doctor, I learned some things about my fear of death and my faith in God.

Moses' readers needed to learn how to face fear. Years before, spies had brought back a report of giants who lived in Canaan, which God had promised to them. Because of their unbelief and disobedience, a generation had died in the wilderness. But the rumors of those giants had not died. They had grown bigger with the years. Now God's people were on the verge of going into that land and facing those giants. They had to know how to deal with their fears. The story of Jacob's fear in meeting Esau taught them and teaches us that ...

When fear grips you, rely on God's  
provision, not on your plans.

Jacob here gets the scare of his life. Twenty years before he had fled for his life to Haran after taking his brother's birthright and blessing. Now he was returning to Canaan in obedience to God. God had just preserved his family and possessions from the angry Laban. But every step he took in the direction of Canaan seemed to thunder in Jacob's ears, "Esau! Esau! Esau!" Jacob knew that he would have to face his brother who had planned to kill him.

So Jacob sent messengers to Esau with a carefully worded message to let him know that Jacob wasn't coming back to try to dominate Esau. He was coming as Esau's servant, seeking his favor (32:4-5). As he nervously waited for his messengers to return, he must have thought, "Surely Esau will be friendly by now. After all, it's been 20 years. And, since God commanded me to return, He must have calmed Esau's anger." The messengers returned and said, "We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him" (32:6). Jacob froze with fear!

1. Fear grips us all at times.

Let's face it, there are a lot of things in our world to be afraid of! To some extent, we all fear death--either our own or the death of loved ones. We fear the unknown future. We fear for our children and their safety. We may fear being victimized by crime or by accidents caused by drunk drivers. Just when we sort of got over the fear of nuclear war, now they're throwing at us the fear that our planet will be hit by a giant asteroid!

The first mention of fear in the Bible is just after Adam and Eve sinned. When God came looking for them in the garden, they hid themselves because they were afraid. Sin results in guilt and guilt causes fear toward God and toward the one we've wronged. We fear the retaliation we know we deserve. That was the root of Jacob's fear. Even though 20 years had passed, Jacob's conscience came stalking when he thought of

facing Esau, especially when he heard that Esau was riding toward him with 400 men! He flashed back to that day when he tricked Esau and his father out of Esau's blessing. He could hear Esau's anguished cry as he discovered what had happened. He could remember the murderous looks his brother had given him before he fled to Haran. It all came back when he heard that Esau was coming.

We would like to think that if we just let our sin and guilt alone, that over time it will just fade away. But before we can enjoy the peace and promises of God, we've got to be reconciled to our brother (Matt. 5:23-24). We've got to confess our sin to God and seek the forgiveness of those we've wronged. But what do we usually do when fear grips us? We usually do what Jacob did:

2. When fear grips us, our tendency is to rely on our plans.

Jacob, the schemer, is making progress: Here he not only plans, he also prays! It's the first reference to Jacob praying and it's a good prayer, as we'll see. Because Jacob prays, many commentators argue that his planning is an example of prudent action, that he was just "trusting God and keeping his powder dry," as Cromwell's saying goes. But Jacob's faith was mixed with fear, and his plans are more tied to his fear than to his faith.

One reason I argue this is that Jacob prayed for God's protection, but he failed to pray for God's direction. His plans were not in response to waiting on God. In fact, Jacob's plan of dividing his people into two camps ignored God's provision of the camp of angels to protect him. In verse 1, Jacob encounters God's angels as he comes back to the borders of Canaan. It was not just one or two angels, but a whole regiment. It should have shown Jacob that Almighty God was guarding him. Jacob named the place "Two Camps" ("Mahanaim"), referring to his little camp and to God's camp of

angels.

But when Jacob hears of Esau and his men marching toward him, he panics and divides his own group into two camps (32:7, where the Hebrew root for Mahanaim is repeated), thinking that if Esau attacks one camp, the other might be able to escape. But he is forgetting about God's camp of angels and substituting his own two camps for God's two camps. With God's two camps (the angels and Jacob's), Jacob was perfectly safe. But Jacob's two-camp plan had a major flaw--it left God out!

The expected results of Jacob's plan also show that it was not of the Lord. When Jacob had God's two camps, he was perfectly safe. No one could have gotten past an army of angels to touch Jacob, his family, or his possessions. But when Jacob traded God's two camps for his own two camps, the best he could hope for was that one camp would be wiped out while the other *might* escape (but also might not!). That's the problem when we start planning without waiting on God. Our best plans, as clever as they may be, always fall short of God's perfect provision.

Another clue that Jacob's plans were not of the Lord is the groveling flattery that he uses to try to pacify Esau. He goes far beyond common courtesy or custom by repeating over and over the phrases, "my lord, Esau" and "your servant, Jacob" (see 32:4, 5, 18, 20). It's more than ironic that the man who schemed and manipulated for so long to gain preeminence over his brother is now babbling, "my lord, Esau" and "your servant, Jacob" as he thinks about meeting him face to face! All his schemes for grabbing power and privilege over Esau have backfired.

There is a final reason to argue that Jacob's plans were not of the Lord and that he was relying more on them than on the God to whom he prayed. In verse 21, there is a word play in

the Hebrew text which causes the reader to flash back to verse 1. It says, "So the present (Hebrew = "hamminhah") passed on before him, while he himself spent that night in the camp (Hebrew = "bammahaneh"). Which camp? Verse 1 reminds us: The camp of God, where an army of angels surrounded him. If Jacob had remembered that he was in God's "mahaneh" (camp), he wouldn't have needed his "minhah" (present). The word play makes the point subtly here, but it's spelled out plainly in chapter 33, where we find that Jacob's elaborate gift was unnecessary. Esau didn't even want it. (This insight is from Alan Ross, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* [Victor Books], 1:80.)

So while Jacob is growing in faith, as his prayer reveals, he's still up to his old tricks, trying to scheme his way out of a tight spot. It's not wrong to pray and then plan. There is a proper sense in which prayer without action is not enough. God expects us to plan and to take action. But the problem comes when we don't seek the Lord concerning our plans and then we rely more on our plans than on the Lord. W. H. Griffith Thomas writes (*Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* [Eerdmans], pp. 298-299),

The soul that is truly and fully occupied with God will never be at a loss to know the true relation between prayer and work, work and prayer; for in answer to prayer comes the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of a sound mind, the spirit of courage and fearlessness, the spirit of calm restfulness and equally calm progress. It will know when to "stand still" and when to "go forward," because God is its all in all.

So it's not wrong to plan; it's wrong to plan without relying on God and then to rely on our plans. Instead,

3. When fear grips us, we must rely on God's provision.

A. God's provision is completely adequate for our needs.

If Jacob had kept his mind on God's provision at Mahanaim, he could have confidently marched at the front of his family and flocks as he met Esau. He could have confidently thought, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). But as it was, he cowered in the rear, letting everyone else go first as cannon fodder.

Note three things about the adequacy of God's provision:

*(1) The when of God's provision: Just when we need it.* Jacob was between the rock of Laban and the hard place of Esau. He has just left Laban, who could have done him great harm, had it not been for God's intervention. In a matter of days, he will hear the news of Esau's threatening approach. But before Jacob even knows the magnitude of that problem, God graciously gives him assurance of His protection by sending His angels to meet him on the way. It's a beautiful example of how God meets our needs before we even know we have them, but at just the right time.

God often provides at the eleventh hour. He has to bring us to that point, because so often we lean on our own schemes until that eleventh hour, when we're forced to say, "If God doesn't come through now, we're doomed." Of course! That's always true, but we don't realize it until every human prop has been knocked out from under us.

King Hezekiah was a godly man, but the Lord allowed Sennacherib to surround Jerusalem with his army to the point that it looked sure that the city would fall. The Assyrian generals were taunting Hezekiah's trust in the Lord as a futile hope. But then, in response to his

desperate prayer, the angel of the Lord in one night wiped out 185,000 Assyrian troops and delivered Jerusalem.

That's when God provides--just when we need it. George Muller, whose orphanages fed and clothed up to 2,000 orphans at a time without appeals for money to anyone except the Lord, and without any human source of funding, was often brought down to the very hour of need before the provisions came in from some unexpected source. God provides when we need it, not always before.

*(2) The where of God's provision: On the path of obedience.* God's angels met Jacob as he "went on his way" to Canaan in obedience to the Lord. God had just protected Jacob from Laban behind him; now He would protect him from Esau in front of him. God sent His angels there to show that He protects His obedient servants, no matter how threatening the enemy. This is not to say that all who obey the Lord never get harmed. There are some difficult and frightening situations even on the path of obedience. Both the Bible and church history show that sometimes God's servants get martyred. But when that is His sovereign purpose, it is not because His protection was lacking. If we are obeying God, we can trust that either His angels will protect us or they will usher us into His presence.

In *Peace Child* [Regal Books], Don Richardson tells of the frightening reception the Sawi tribe gave him when he brought his wife and infant son to live among them. He had made earlier contacts himself, and had built a crude house for his family with the help of several natives, who seemed friendly. But he wasn't quite prepared for the reception when he brought his family up the river for the first time.

The whole village turned out, their faces done up with garish white paint which made their eye sockets look like gaping black holes. They were waving their barbed spears and beating drums of lizard skin glued on with human blood, which trickled down the sides. They were wildly dancing and seemingly going crazy as they surrounded the Richardsons. Don wondered if he had miscalculated their earlier friendliness. Would he and his family be safe among these wild savages? He writes (p. 139), "Suddenly, in the blue glow of twilight, a Presence stronger than the presence of the multitude enveloped us. The same Presence that had first drawn us to trust in Christ, and then wooed us across continents and oceans to this very jungle clearing." As he sensed the Lord's presence and thought about why he had come to this people, in obedience to the Lord, he was flooded with God's peace. That's where you can count on God's provision--on the path of obedience to Him.

*(3) The what of God's provision: What we need in each situation.* God knew that Jacob needed protection here, so He sent a regiment of His angels. Who needs to fear Esau and his 400 men when you've got the army of the Lord of hosts protecting you? I think the army of angels was just for show, to bolster Jacob's weak faith. Years later, how many angels did the Lord have to send to wipe out Sennacherib's 185,000 men? Just one! A single angel easily could have protected Jacob from Esau's 400 men. So the Lord sent the regiment of angels to encourage Jacob.

But Jacob needed more than angels to shore up his sagging faith. Jacob's problem, which most of us can relate to, was that he didn't yet understand that the real battle is spiritual, not physical. Jacob was saying, "Angels! That's nice! Now, let's divide the camp into two

sections so that if one gets massacred, the other will escape. Yes, let's pray about it, too! Now, where was I? Oh, yes, let's get a nice gift for Esau. How about 550 animals, arranged in groups, to appease him?" Jacob is a flurry of activity trying to get his plan together. And when he finally meets Esau, what happens? Esau runs to meet him, embraces him, kisses him and weeps. Then he says, "What's all this stuff?" Jacob had wasted his time with his elaborate scheme. God's provision was sufficient without Jacob's frenzy of activity.

God's provision is always directed toward our particular need. When Adam needed clothing, God provided it. When the problem was a flood, He directed Noah to make the ark. When Hagar needed water, God directed her to a well. When the Israelites later needed food, He sent manna. When they needed water, He caused it to flow from the rock. And, of course, God met our greatest need in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, "who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). You don't have any need and never could have a need that God hasn't already met in Christ. And He tailors the blessing to each situation, showing us how Christ is adequate for all of life. So when fear grips us, we must rely on God's provision for us in Christ. How?

- B. We rely on God's provision through believing prayer.

Notice five aspects of Jacob's prayer:

*(1) He approaches God as Yahweh, the covenant God of his fathers.* He could have improved things a notch further by praying, "my God," but this isn't bad for a first prayer. He is approaching God as the One who entered into a covenant relationship with his fathers, who can be counted on to keep that covenant. We approach God

through the new covenant established by the Lord Jesus Christ.

*(2) He bases his prayer on God's word.* Twice he reminds God of what He said (32:9, 12). He reminds God that he is obeying what the Lord told him to do. Based on that and on God's previous promise to prosper him and multiply his descendants, Jacob asks for deliverance from Esau. God delights to have us take His Word and pray it back to Him, claiming the promises He has made to us.

*(3) He appeals to God on the basis of grace, not merit.* He admits his own unworthiness and thanks the Lord for all His past mercies and blessings. If you ever come to the Lord on the basis of how good you've been, you're on shaky ground. We can only come to God because of His abundant grace shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

*(4) He presents his request honestly and fervently from the heart.* "Deliver me ... from the hand of Esau; for I fear him ..." (32:11). If Jacob had focused on the camp of angels, he wouldn't have been fearing. But God didn't scold him for his lack of faith. He accepted his troubled child into His arms and listened to his cry for help. You can bring your requests honestly before God, admitting, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." He knows your fears; He wants you to bring them honestly and fervently to Him.

*(5) He prays for God's purpose.* He asked God to fulfill His promises concerning the seed of Abraham (32:12). Jacob is arguing his case based on the revealed purpose of God. The Lord is always eager to hear us pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." If your prayer is aimed at fulfilling God's purpose in Christ, you will gain a ready hearing in His presence.

## CONCLUSION

Most parents have been awakened in the night by one of their toddlers who is afraid. When that happens, you assure the child, tuck him back into bed and pray with him. But a young child's response is so natural: When you're afraid in the dark, you go to Daddy. Whatever your fears, take them to your Heavenly Father. Rely on His provision, not on your plans. As Paul put it (Phil. 4:6-7), "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can we know whether a fear is a legitimate warning to be heeded or a feeling to be overcome by faith?
2. When does proper concern cross over into sinful anxiety?
3. How can we know whether we've gone too far in relying on our plans rather than on the Lord?
4. How can we trust God with our fears if we aren't sure He's going to deliver us? After all, Peter was delivered, but James was beheaded (Acts 12).

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