

SERIES: Unwavering Faith (Genesis Vol. 3)

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Message Title: Is It Jacob Or Israel? Pt. 1

Release Date: Wednesday 4-22-20

Some of you may be aware that one of my personal mentors is Barney Fife. *[Laughter]* He has taught me how to be cool and calm under pressure. *[Laughter]* 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.

Well, 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. Now there's lots of discussion when Jacob bows down to Esau, whether that was just 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*. I have *faith*.

Nat: It is so easy to criticize Jacob for his lack of faith, but we struggle the same way today and we have so many more promises to claim. Isn't that right Bryan?

Bryan: Yeah, I think that's a really good point, Nat. We do like to criticize the lack of faith of these Old Testament characters, but we do have so much more. The story is so much more developed. The Savior has come, with the indwelling Holy Spirit. We have so much more mapped out that before we get too critical, we probably need to remember how important it is for us to trust God and the promises He's made to us.

Nat: Yeah, we always have to remember that we're in a process of becoming more and more like Christ. And so it really is just step by step and that's kind of what's happening with Jacob, isn't it?

Bryan: It's a slow process. You know, he's making progress, but it feels at times really slow. And you remember, God is patient and God is faithful, and God keeps moving him forward. But I'm also reminded, these are really intense situations. I mean, again, we're talking about 20 years, so there's lots of days and weeks and months of relative boredom and routine, but these moments that are recorded tend to be pretty intense. So this is life and death. He doesn't know if Esau is going to kill him or not, just like he didn't know if Laban is going to kill him or not. So it's not hard to see why you'd be a little anxious and revert back to some unfortunate patterns.

Nat: Yeah, that's really helpful to remember. And I think it's interesting that you noted that God dealt with Laban one way, but then He deals with Esau another way, so tell us a little bit more

about that.

Bryan: Yeah, so it is interesting. There's not a lot of detail, but certainly Laban was judged by God and God intervened and he took away from Laban, gave to Jacob. But even when Laban was chasing Jacob, God intervenes and essentially gets in Laban's face and says, you can't touch him. On the other hand, we don't know exactly what happened with Esau, but he's a different Esau. He comes favorably. He seems to genuinely care about Jacob. So something happened, and I'm going to assume because of Laban's heart, God dealt with him one way; because of Esau's heart, something happened and God dealt with him differently. But these are two problems for Jacob, but clearly God has dealt with them in two different ways.

Nat: Yep. Very clear. One of the things though that I think most people are probably still wrestling with, in fact I know I do from time to time, is this relationship between God's part and our part. To be honest, it's just really perplexing. Can you just go over it one more time so our listeners kind of get a better understanding of this?

Bryan: Right. So it is very confusing and it's always going to be somewhat mysterious. But I think there is a part that we play. You can't just sit down and do nothing and expect God to fix everything. Sometimes people talk about let go and let God, and I suppose it depends on the context of that statement, but most of the time, God's not asking us just to let go and do nothing. Maybe it's just to wait, maybe it's to trust, maybe it's to pray, but those aren't nothing. Those are something. Other times there's things we need to do. That's our responsibility. But then there's God's part. There's the part we can't change, we can't fix, we can't control, we can't manipulate. So you have to trust God with His part. And I need to be faithful with my part. Fear results when we don't trust God to do His part. You know, we usually don't have fear about our part. The fear comes into, this is God's part and I don't trust Him, so that makes me fearful.