

**Introduction:**

- A. Jacob was born second but from the git-go he wasn't happy about it. He literally came out of Rebekah's womb hanging on to the heel of his twin brother Esau. Thus his name, 'Heel-grabber,' which was also Hebrew slang for 'Deceiver,' like someone who trips you up from behind. It was a hard name to live down.

The bummer about being the second-born twin was that he **lost the rights of the firstborn son** by a matter of a minute or two. The firstborn son always got the lion's share of the father's estate, but in time Jacob grabbed Esau's heel, you might say, and pulled him back to second place. He conned both Esau and their father Isaac into giving him the firstborn's birthright *and* Isaac's prophetic blessing: This is what Isaac gave Jacob, *thinking* he was speaking to Esau: "*May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.*" That's what Esau lost and Jacob gained.

So guess who was really, really angry! And guess who ran for his life. Right. Jacob. On his way he had a remarkable dream where he saw angels going up and down the stairs to heaven, and "*There above it stood the LORD, and he said: 'I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth... All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I*

*have done what I have promised you.*” [Gen 28:13-15] Jacob called that place **Bethel—House of God**.

Jacob kept running far north of Israel to his mother’s brother, Uncle Laban. He was safe there, sort of. Laban was a shifty and greasy a guy as you’ll ever meet. Jacob, the con man, met his match. Jacob settled there for 20 years, married his two wives, Leah and Rachel, and had 12 sons.

Then, the angel of the God told Jacob in a dream, *“I am the God of Bethel... Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.”* So despite the pushback from his wives who weren’t crazy about leaving their father Jacob packed everyone up and slipped out of town. It was three days before Laban realized they were gone and he gave chase. But before he caught up to Jacob, God warned Laban in a dream not to give Jacob any trouble, or else! So when they met up they formed an uneasy truce. The girls and the grandkids all kissed Grandpa Greasy goodbye and they parted in peace.

That brings us **Gen. 32-33**, the two remarkable chapters we’re going to study this month. Turn to **Gen. 32**. It seems at this point like the worst is behind Jacob. Listen to **vv.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—Two Camps.”* Wow! How amazing is that! You’ve heard of guardian angels? Well, here they were! And if the angels were there God was there too. *“This”* Jacob said, *“is the camp of God!”*

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Jacob was facing a very serious problem. He couldn’t get where God had sent him without first facing Esau. Which for Jacob, was about the same as facing a fire-breathing dragon. So Jacob sent out

some messengers to find Esau and to tell him that “*Your servant Jacob*” was coming, to explain that he’d been with his Uncle Laban all these years and was coming back with plenty of stuff and a big family, so there was no need for Esau to worry that he was coming to cause trouble. But when the messengers returned they said, “*We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you... and four hundred men are with him.*” [Play Storm Troopers theme!]

Look at **v.7**, “*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 figured that if Esau massacred one group the other might escape. Imagine the terror of that situation. It was a like a premonition of Custer’s Last Stand.

Then Jacob prayed. Old Heel-grabber, Jake the Snake, standing with his hands stretched to heaven, throwing himself on the mercy of God. **Vv.9-12:**

*Then Jacob prayed, “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.’”*

After his Amen, Jacob divided 550 of his animals into five herds each with servants to drive them, and sent them out ahead to meet Esau, like an animal parade—goats, sheep, camels, cattle, donkeys. He instructed his herdsman,

each in their turn, to tell Esau these animals were gifts from Jacob “*for my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.*”

And if this was in a theater, it is right here that the curtain would fall on Act One, leaving you thinking, “Well, then what happened?!” If you’ve never read this story, you’d never guess in a million years what happened next. Come back next week for Act Two.

- B. Jacob might be the most interesting person I’ve ever met in the Bible, beside Jesus. He’s typically portrayed as being something of a lowlife. I’d have to say my sermon series on Jacob 11 years ago might have been the most intriguing sermons *to me* that I ever tackled. That’s because Jacob was so complex. Sometimes nasty, other times pitiful, or romantic or even reverent, usually headstrong, and by the end fragile and tender. In fact, **he is the Bible’s Everyman.** God eventually changed his name to Israel, and he is the personification of that nation, their Everyman. **As believers, struggling as we all do, I think we are all more like him than anyone else in the Bible.**
- C. Now this particular part of Jacob’s story, which we have begun this morning, is the pivot of his life. And **here is our story of fear, the face of God, and faith.**
- D. There’s a strange detail in Gen 31 where Jacob and Laban meet for the last time. Twice, in **vv.42 & 53**, Jacob refers to the God of father Isaac as “*the Fear of Isaac.*” It’s the only place in the whole Bible where God is given that name. And it is interesting that it comes up just as Isaac’s son is about to face “*the Fear of Isaac*” himself.
- E. God is in the habit of pushing us over the threshold of fear—the way we’d push an unsuspecting friend into the pool—in order for us to understand how he saves.

**I. EVEN IF YOU'RE FACING A CRISIS OF YOUR OWN MAKING, GOD IS ON YOUR SIDE**

- A. Every mess that Jacob was in was his own doing. He was no innocent victim. He'd lied to his father and cheated his brother out of a priceless blessing. He deserved whatever he got... or was about to get. We don't have to feel sympathy for Heel-grabber. Furthermore, we don't expect God to have any sympathy for him either. Maybe you've been in the same situation—deep trouble of your own doing, with no right to even ask God for help.
- B. Trust this: **God plays favorites!** When God plays favorites we call it grace. Here in this story what Jacob doesn't really understand is that God won't treat him as he deserves, but will rather treat him as a favored son. In fact, God treated him as his firstborn son. God was on his side. That means that in the end, when the curtain falls on Act 3, you'll be smiling. **God's favor means there will be a happy, God-blessed ending.** But we're not there yet!
- C. When you're facing trouble remember that God has your back. Look again at those angels in **vv.1-2**. "*Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him.*" Jacob had seen angels twice before, both in God-given dreams but this was no dream. He knew that if angels were there God was also there. "*This is the camp of God!*" he said. Imagine you are headed into some unknown frightening situation and a platoon of *God's angels* meet you! Their presence speaks louder than words, doesn't it! How much braver would you be if you were met by God's angels and you knew that you were actually in "*the camp of God.*" **Jacob would have to go out to meet Esau but look who had his back!**

God and his angels camp near you as surely as they camped near Jacob. Psalm 91 says,

*If you say, “The LORD is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. **For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.***

- D. Even more wonderful than that is Jesus’ promise, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Jesus doesn’t guard us because we deserve his protection. He guards us because we are his own beloved people. **It isn’t just that God protects us by his *might*, but also by his *grace*. God plays favorites, and thanks to Jesus, we are among his favorites.**

So *despite* being guarded by God’s angels, Jacob was terrified when he heard that Esau was coming toward him with 400 men. I suspect that, despite the angel band, Jacob wasn’t all that sure that God would defend him, given what he’d done to Esau. But in the midst of his fear he did one thing right: he prayed. Years ago, when I first studied this, I asked my study buddy, Doug Becker, about this prayer. “*This is the greatest prayer in the book of Genesis,*” he said. And who prays it? The guy who is more like you and me than anyone else in the book. Three-steps-forward-two-steps-back Jacob. Jacob the slick and sly. Leave-it-to-me Jacob throws himself on God’s mercy in one of the Bible’s great prayers.

## **II. WHEN YOUR FUTURE IS FRIGHTENING, PRAY! (32:9-12)**

- A. Don’t miss the sequence here: “*In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people into two groups...**Then Jacob prayed.***” I wouldn’t be at all surprised if Jacob hadn’t actually prayed in a long time. A lot of us aren’t very faithful in praying *until we’re afraid*. Then we get down to

business. We close the door, maybe we kneel, and we pray our heart out. Fear is often the front door to the school of prayer.

- B. At the heart of his prayer is the most familiar of all prayers, “O Lord, save me!” I discovered that “save me” appears in 25 psalms! “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.” “Then I called on the name of the LORD: “LORD, save me!” “Save me, for I am yours.”
- C. Jacob’s prayer was encapsulated in what he knew of God. Listen again to how he began in **9**: “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD [YAHWEH], you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper...’” Let’s stop the tape for a moment. In other words, “LORD, you have promised my fathers and me our own homeland where we’ll be secure, but now that hope seems to be threatened.” In the same way, we might pray, “LORD, you have promised me as one of your beloved people that you are my strong shelter in this world and my certain hope for the next but now I’m afraid that I might be crushed.” That is the solid ground you stand on when you pray.
- D. In his past, when Jacob faced a situation he couldn’t manage, he’d finagle and conspire. This time, he simply “gets low.” He humbles himself. **V.10**, “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.” Proud people, self-sufficient people, I-can-handle-things-myself people don’t pray well. Their prayers have no lift. Jesus said, “God blesses people who are poor in spirit.” **Jacob came to God with his pockets pulled out empty.** God does *not* always help those who help themselves. In fact, he is more likely

to help those who know they are *helpless*. **Is. 57:15** says, “*For this is what the high and exalted One says— he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but **also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit**, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”*”

- E. So Jacob has encased his prayer in the capsule of God’s promises and his own humility. Then he asks. **Vv.11-12**, “*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.’”* If Esau attacked and killed the children—Jacob’s twelve sons—God’s promise of countless descendants would die with them. Jacob not only feared for his own life and the life of his family, but for the legacy God had promised. **God’s entire covenant with Abraham to bless all the world through his descendants hung in the balance.** We whose faith rests in Jacob’s great descendant, Jesus, are among those countless descendants.

When you pray, carry your fear into God’s gracious promises. *LORD, you have promised that once our faith is in Christ nothing will ever take us from his hand, so whatever happens, do not let go of me! LORD, you promised in **1 Pet 5:10:11**, “the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever.*

When we cry out to God in a time of trouble rests on God’s promise to preserve and bless his people. Wrap his promises around your fears and then lift them to the Lord.

## **Conclusion:**

*Well, what happened next?! Sorry. End of Act 1. We have all lived in those times where God’s curtain hides our future, when danger approaches threatening to overwhelm us and all we can do is wait.* Night is upon us and only God knows what tomorrow holds. In those dark waiting hours or days or years go back to what is sure. The threat is *not* sure. The enemy is *not* invincible. You *don’t* know what will happen nor what your God might do. In fact, you are *not* in such danger as you fear.

**Go back to “the camp of God” where God’s angels stand guard over you,** angels he has put in charge of you to keep you in all your ways. Angels who are at the beck and call of God, and who are his lightning quick messengers.

**Go back again to the mighty and enduring promises of our God.** Wrap them around your fearful prayer like the very armor of the Almighty. He has a future for you and me. He is on our side. He plays favorites, and we’re his favorites. His grace is sufficient for you. His peace is your birthright. Here “*in this fearful, fallen world,*” God will be your home, and soon—very soon—he will bring us safely home.