

## Wrestling With Fear | Genesis 32:1-21

*“The Reverend John G. Paton, pioneer missionary in the New Hebrides Islands, told a thrilling story... Hostile natives surrounded his mission headquarters one night, intent on burning the Paton’s out & killing them. John Paton & his wife prayed all during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see that, unaccountably, the attackers had left. They thanked God for delivering them.*

*“A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Jesus Christ, & Mr. Paton, remembering what had happened, asked the chief what had kept him & his men from burning down the house & killing them. The chief replied in surprise, “Who were all those men you had with you there?” The missionary answered, “There were no men there; just my wife & I.” The chief argued that they had seen many men standing guard—hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords in their hands. They seemed to circle the mission station so that the natives were afraid to attack. Only then did Mr. Paton realise that God had sent his angels to protect them. The chief agreed that there was no other explanation.”*

The story in our reading is a very different story which nevertheless contains the same ingredients. Jacob encounters angels, fears the worst & offers a prayer for deliverance. This is my outline today.

### **1. Camping with Angels (1-2)**

As Jacob headed home the Bible says; **“and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s camp!” So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.”** Mahanaim simply means ‘two camps’ or ‘dual camp’. Jacob most likely gave the place this name because he saw there was not only his own camp but also a camp of angels with them for the journey. For this reason Jacob acclaimed; **“This is God’s camp.”** This was God’s way of assuring him he was with him for the journey.

King David writes in Psalm 34:7; **“The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”** Again we have the idea of angels camping with God’s people. Perhaps David had this story in mind when he wrote these words or maybe God had enabled him to see something similar to Jacob. Either way both texts give a vision of angelic protection. We can also think of the account of Elisha & his servant when they saw an army of angels in 2 Kings 6:16-17... Psalm 91:11 says in the context of God’s protection & deliverance; **“For He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”** Whether or not we ever see angels God’s Word assures us of their protective presence with those who fear him. In Genesis angels also play a protective role in the story of Lot! In Colossians 2:18 Paul warns about get distracted or carried away with the idea of angels when he writes; **“Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going into detail about visions...”** Yet angels are unashamedly part of the Biblical narrative & therefore should be part of a truly Christian worldview. We

should be comfortable with stories like the one we opened with today but at the same time we should be uncomfortable with people who put the focus on angels & go into great details about visions... Hebrews 1 talks of Jesus being **“much superior to angels”** & also declares **“Let all God’s angels worship him.”** Like us angels exist to worship not to be worshipped, yet with that in mind we need to hold on to the Biblical vision of angels encamping around those who fear God. In the Gospel’s we also read of angels ministering to Jesus in his time in the wilderness & they are also very active around his birth & resurrection. If you go to Bible Gateway & type the word ‘angles’ in the search box it will give you a good overview of what the Bible records regarding angels. For now let’s focus on the truth in our reading: An angelic camp had met up with Jacob’ camp assuring him of God’s protection for the journey.

## **2. Fearing the Worst (3-7, 13-21)**

Yet even though Jacob was camping with God’s angels as well as knowing God’s promise that he would return home safely Jacob still became **“greatly afraid and distressed.”** This encourages me because even though Jacob had such tangible assurances of God’s protective presence he still wrestled with fear, he still allowed his head to go to wrong places. In this section we read of him sending out messengers before him letting Esau know he is coming & had plenty to offer the family. Some commentators highlight how this was an appropriate gesture. He was willing to make the first step towards reconciliation & in doing so he showed humility by describing himself as Esau’s servant. One person comments; *“He knows there can be no peace & quiet until his relations with Esau are assured and put on a proper footing... Is not this the great principle of the spiritual life? We must put right what we know to be wrong before we can enjoy settled peace.”*

When the servants returned they told Jacob; **“We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.”** Maybe they could have put this better but anyway it says at this point; **“Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed”** & he came up with the idea of dividing the camps. Again commentators point out how Jacob in spite of fearing the worst was still able to think on the spot & make a plan. Jacob didn’t only plan though he also prayed. So we could quickly point out both the importance of planning & praying. Yet I want to point out how his plan was ignited by fearing the worst. That is never a good place to start a plan from, especially when you have assurance of God protection. There is a difference between including a worst possible scenario in our planning (that’s wisdom), but that is very different from planning from a place of fearing the worse (that’s foolishness).

In the final part of our reading Jacob goes overboard with sending gifts to Esau hoping to each wave of gifts will cool his temper. The reality of course was very different. In the next chapter we learn Esau was really happy to see him. It says in verse 4; **“Esau ran out to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”** Esau then basically asks; *“what are you at sending me all these gifts...”* he says

**“I have enough, my brother, keep what you have for yourself.”** He calls him brother & it’s obvious he has also been greatly blessed by God over their twenty years apart. There is no hint of bad feeling or bitterness only embrace & kissing. In fact I see some parallels between this story & that of the prodigal son... Yet Jacob gets a much better welcome from his elder brother just like we do from our elder brother Jesus...

What I want us to notice is that Jacob was thinking & planning from the position of fearing the worst. He had a narrative going on in his head that was affecting the decisions he was making but the reality turned out to be very different. In this case this didn’t lead to the story working out any different but it did rob Jacob of peace of mind & an awareness of God’s protection. How like us Jacob was! He assumed the worst! Yet what I want us to see is that this time instead of running from the man he fear like in the previous chapter he went to God in prayer.

### ***3. A Prayer for Deliverance (9-12)***

Listen to his prayer: **“O God of my father Abraham & God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country & to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love & all the faithfulness that you have shown your servant, for with only my staff I crossed the Jordan, & now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come & attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, & make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’”**

In his prayer he reminds himself & God of the truth of God’s promise to him... he acknowledges God’s grace & faithfulness over his life... he humbly asks for deliverance... he honestly admits his fear... then he clings again to God’s promise...

I believe Jacob’s prayer gives us a good strategy for wrestling with fear & doubt. Sometimes people critically comment on those who repeat what God said back to him in prayer... What they don’t understand is that this is an important part of wrestling with God in prayer which is thoroughly Biblical... Jacob likely wants to run again, but he has learned something from his confrontation with Laban, he is learning to trust God. He has not arrived but he does take another step forward. Instead of running he turns to God in prayer, & yes maybe afterwards he goes a little overboard with gifts but he doesn’t run, he doesn’t try to take the easy route this time. Even though he is wrestling with fear & doubt he learning to trust God & engaging in prayer with God was a vital part of his trust development. Part of growing in the life of faith means honestly wrestling with our fears & doubts in the place of prayer. Pretending we have no fears or doubts or suppressing them gets us nowhere; wrestling through them in real interaction with God stops them from overcoming us & keeps us moving forward.

With Laban God orchestrated things so he had to confront the one who has wronged him now God is bringing him to the point he has to face the one he has wronged. God wants him to be free of fear & guilt so he can live in peace. For this reason deliverance did not mean the removal of what he feared but facing his fear, facing Esau. Yet as it turned out there wasn't anything to fear...

### ***Conclusion: Overcoming Our Fears***

Sometimes there really is something to fear like in the story of the missionary family. Other times fear is more the result of a narrative we are writing with our own minds. Perhaps more often it's the later, we try to guess how things are going to go & we guess the worst. Either way we can come before God with humility & faith & ask him to deliver us from what we fear. For Jacob it was a mixture of both; he had some reason for fear but he also had reason to trust God's promise to bring him safely home.

Being on the Christian journey with God includes allowing our trust in him to overcome our fears. As Paul said to Timothy; **"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."** Self-control includes keeping our minds on trusting God... I love how this verse on combating fear starts with power. Our minds can be so fragile but the spirit we've been given is not, it is a spirit of power & love & self-control that is fuelled by the truth & promises of God! Therefore we can say with David in Psalm 27:1; **"The LORD is my light & my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid."** Or what about this from Psalm 34; **"I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears."**! That is the language of the spirit we have been given & that summarizes well this story of Jacob! God delivered Jacob from his fear by making him face what he feared & he will do the same for us. As the prayer book of the Bible the Psalms give us great help & divine power in our wrestle with fear. There is an ongoing battle between our fragile minds & the spirit of power we've been given but like with Jacob that battle is won in the place of prayer.

### ***Sources used for this sermon***

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