

“The Antidote for Fear”

Genesis 31-33

Dr. Jerry Nelson

September 17, 2000

Have you ever been truly afraid?

16 months ago (May 4 of last year) at about 8:30 in the evening, missionaries Ann Summer and her roommate Claudia were drinking tea while sitting in their apartment in a major city in Central Asia when the doorbell rang.

Claudia answered it and through the door a woman's voice said she needed to use the telephone – a common request.

The next think Ann heard was a scream from Claudia and as Ann ran to investigate, she was met by two men who immediately began hitting her in the face and head. He pulled a gun and continued to beat her until she fell to the floor where he kicked her into stillness.

As the man left her to begin rummaging through the apartment she rose to help Claudia who was being bound with tape. That man knocked both of them to the floor but surprisingly left them to join the other man in ransacking the apartment.

Badly cut, bleeding and in pain, Ann and Claudia managed to get out of that room and into another whose door they closed and barricaded while they screamed at the top of their voices and pounded with their heels on the floor hoping to attract the attention of their neighbors below.

They continued to scream and pound for twenty minutes when at last they heard sirens and just minutes later they were invited from the barricaded room by the police.

Saulea and Satar, the downstairs neighbors had reason to disregard Ann and Claudia. Just three weeks earlier Saulea and Satar had put up the first new wallpaper ever in their apartment. Three days later Ann accidentally flooded her kitchen which meant that the water ran into the apartment below ruining Saulea's and Satar's new wallpaper.

Now three weeks later, Saulea and Satar, who normally worked the evening shift, had taken the night off to re-wallpaper their apartment. In God's providence, they were home when the attack occurred.

Ann and Claudia moved back into their apartment two weeks later and Ann writes, **“Instead of allowing me to be fearful, God has caused my mind to dwell on his hand in the matter. As I think of the attack, I have such a clear picture of him saying, ‘The line is drawn here, this far, no farther.’ I remember the peace he gave me even during those twenty minutes. I understand in a new way His protection, his grace and his tenderness. I have experiential knowledge of God as my refuge and strength, a very close help in trouble.”** (from a letter to Stephanie Nelson of Women of the Harvest).

Have you ever been truly afraid?

The airplane suddenly drops several hundred feet and as your stomach jumps into your throat your pulse races.

What are you afraid of? Death? Dying?

Not all fear is because of imminent physical threat.

In fact most of our fears are more subtle, less overt.

A Wall Street Journal article several years ago surveyed people to discover what they were most afraid of. Surprisingly death was number three. Numbers one and two were fear of failure and fear of loneliness.

(Larson Living Beyond Our Fears p7)

A couple of years ago USA Today ran an article on people’s greatest fears.

53% having cancer

50% inadequate Social Security

49% not enough money for retirement

35% getting Alzheimer’s

32% inability to pay current debts

23% losing a job

USA Weekend August 22-24, 1997

Psychologist Erik Erickson in his book Childhood and Society writes of the stages of social development. He describes the crisis that must be overcome at each developmental stage of life. I have paraphrased them.

Infancy/Early Childhood – fear of abandonment (someone is taking care of them)

School age – fear of inferiority (they are able)

Adolescence – fear of rejection (they are accepted)

Young adulthood – fear of isolation (they are close to someone)

Adulthood – fear of failure (they can succeed and provide)

Maturity – fear of uselessness and dying (they have succeeded)

These are real fears and obtuse is the person who hasn't experienced one or more of them.

Fear is a natural and spontaneous reaction to a threat.

It is not wrong to have fear.

The issue is how we respond to fear.

For the Christian, we are invited to have faith in the face of fear.

Faith is not the absence of fear but the proper response to it.

You don't know faith until you have known fear.

Trust is unnecessary when there is no fear.

As Alexander Maclaren wrote, "Fear is the occasion of faith and faith is fear transformed..." (Maclaren in [Classic Sermons on Overcoming Fear](#) p133)

How do you respond to fear? Do you respond with faith in God?

We sometimes blithely, carelessly, claim that we will not fear because we have God's protection - we are trusting in God.

We tell our child that she can safely travel to school alone now because God will protect her.

What do we mean and what does she think we mean?

And how do she and we respond when her little Christian friend is injured by a car on the way to school?

Did God not protect her and will he really protect me?

What do we mean when we say God is our protector and what do we expect from God's protection?

The mortality rate is the same for Christians as non-Christians.
The same percentage of Christians as non-Christians dies prematurely from certain diseases.

Except for alcohol related incidents, I suspect as high a percentage of Christians as non-Christians dies in automobile accidents.
I further suspect the same percentage of Christians as non-Christians died in World War II or any of the wars our nation has fought.

Did these Christians or their families not pray for protection or did God simply not protect them?
We pray asking God for intervention in circumstances that threaten our income, our health, our relationships, or our lives – what do we expect and how do we respond?

In Genesis, chapter 31, the man Jacob finally determines to leave the place where he had been living and return to his homeland.

Twenty years earlier, he had fled from his hometown, because his brother was threatening to kill him for the things Jacob had done.
Now twenty years later, he is something of the same predicament.

During a lot of years of hard work and frustration he has gained a large family (12 kids) and a great deal of wealth but he is leaving in fear.

Jacob's father-in-law, Laban, had cheated him at every turn and in the process had become a wealthy man, at Jacob's expense.
But by God's intervention, Jacob turned the tables on old Laban and Jacob became a prosperous rancher with his own large flocks and herds while Laban's wealth decreased.

It had always been Jacob's intention to return to his own country and now everything was in place to do so.

In chapter 31 we pick up the story at the point that Jacob is beginning to hear threatening scuttlebutt about Laban's sons and even Laban himself.

It seems that the brothers-in-law are building up a head of steam about their inheritance now being in the hands of Jacob.

Even Laban himself, seems to have changed in his attitude toward Jacob.

Jacob assumes it is only a matter of time before they take action against him.

Succeeding no other way, would they simply take his animals by force?

Would Laban forbid his daughters, Jacob's wives, and their children to leave with Jacob?

Sensing that very real threat, Jacob pulled his wives aside and carefully built the case for leaving. A very real fear existed that they wouldn't want to leave.

But having witnessed their father's unfair dealings with their husband, feeling misused themselves by their own father and having seen God's hand bringing about both their large family and their wealth, they agreed to leave.

So Jacob waited for the opportune time to leave, when Laban was three days away, shearing his flocks.

In case they had to make a run for it, he put his family on faster moving camels and then, as much as is possible with thousands of head of cattle, he sneaked out of the area.

Three days later Laban hears what Jacob has done and so he gathers up his men and chases after him.

Seven days later Laban finally catches up with Jacob.

I've watched enough old "westerns" on television to have some sense of what that scene must have been like.

Laban and his men cut off Jacob's escape route and then move in.

If Jacob was afraid before he left, imagine his fear now.

So what does Jacob do with his fear and what does God do?

Before we look at that I want you to see the next situation in Jacob's life.

No sooner does Jacob escape the situation with Laban than he faces the next and even greater threat – a very real threat on his life.

It is recorded in chapters 32 and 33.

Jacob was heading home. And home meant a brother who had threatened to kill him.

Knowing the very real danger that lay ahead, Jacob sent messengers to his brother Esau to tell him he was coming and that Jacob was a wealthy man, implying his ability to be very generous to Esau.

The response Jacob got was that Esau was coming with 400 men to meet him.

Our text says (Genesis 32:7-8) “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 thought, ‘If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.’”

After a night like no other in his experience, which we will look at next week, (Genesis 33:1) “Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men.”

If the threat from Laban was real, imagine the fear that Jacob and his family felt with Esau and his men approaching.

So what does Jacob do with his fear and what does God do?

Throughout my study of these stories I had to make a decision about Jacob.

Is he a faithless schemer trusting in his own cleverness instead of trusting in God?

Or is he a faithful man acting shrewdly in a manner Jesus commended as being “wise as a serpent”.

Are his the actions of fearful faithlessness or the actions of faith in the face of fear?

Or is it both?

Meaning, is it possible that like me, and maybe you, Jacob found himself in that terrible tension of both believing and not believing at the same time?

Of calling out to God but not being certain that God would do what needed to be done?

Of trusting God but not fully trusting him?

I think what Jacob experiences is that God is there and that God is controlling things for Jacob's good – that is, Jacob's good from God's perspective.

God was giving Jacob two more experiences from which he and his descendants would learn that God can be trusted to keep his word.

These two stories teach us that God is in gracious control of our lives and will allow only those things into our lives that will result in our ultimate good – so that we slowly learn to trust him no matter what.

In both stories I see the same four elements:

1. Jacob experiences fear – real fear.
2. Jacob responds to God.
3. Jacob plans shrewdly.
4. Jacob experiences God's intervention.

In the story of Jacob running from Laban, Jacob rightly feared for his livelihood and family.

He responded to God by obeying God – God had told him to leave that country and return home – obedience to that was very risky.

Jacob could have easily been paralyzed by fear and done nothing.

He could equally have been complacent in his faith and announced his departure to Laban.

Being neither paralyzed by fear nor complacent in faith, Jacob develops and carries out a plan of getting enough of a head start on Laban that he might get safely away.

Now here is where I can't quite tell if Jacob's confidence is more in God or in his own plans but I have already suggested it is probably a mixture of both.

At least he trusts God enough to obey.
And what does Jacob experience?

That his plan is not sufficient.

Laban catches him and Jacob is at God's mercy.

After threatening Jacob, Laban had to admit that God had come to Laban in a dream and told him to not harm Jacob.

God intervened! God was there with Jacob just as he had promised he would be.

In the story of Jacob meeting Esau, we see the same four elements.

First of all, Jacob rightly fears for his own life and the life of his family.

Secondly, Jacob responds to God by praying.

And quite a prayer it is – most notably it calls on God to keep his promises to Jacob – God had said Jacob would return to his homeland and Jacob reminds God of that.

Thirdly, Jacob acts shrewdly.

He sets up an elaborate scheme of sending four separate herds of cattle and wealth ahead of him to meet Esau so that Esau would get all these incredible gifts before he got to Jacob and his family.

The hope was that Esau's anger would be mitigated by Jacob now making up for having stolen from Esau 20 years earlier.

But fourthly Jacob experienced God's intervention.

When Esau and his 400 men finally met Jacob, rather than slaughtering him, he ran to Jacob, threw his arms around him and wept.

Esau had refused all Jacob's gifts but God had changed Esau's heart.

What was the lesson for Jacob and his descendants in all of this?

What is the lesson for us?

Is God promising to protect us from all negative experiences in life?

God's promise to Jacob, reiterated over and over again, was that God would be with Jacob everywhere he went and through every experience of life,

AND that God would make certain that God's good purposes for Jacob would be fulfilled.

The point of the stories is **not** that Jacob escaped death at the hands of Laban and then Esau **but that God was with him**, actively intervening, controlling to accomplish God's purposes in his life.

Jacob would yet face many difficult and even tragic circumstances in his life but he was learning that through it all God was with him.

John Calvin wrote, "For God does not promise that he will be present with us, for the purpose of removing the sense of our dangers, but in order that fear may not prevail, and overwhelm us in despair."

Calvin in Genesis p189

So what does God's protection mean?

It means he will steadfastly refuse to allow anything to come into our lives that does not come with his permission and with everything that he does allow into our lives, he is there to walk through it with us.

Some would say this is a foolish "faith" for it makes no difference in the end – we all die.

Ah, we say, it makes the greatest difference in three ways:

1. When threatened with the loss of life (as we all eventually are) we do not despair because we know this life is not all there is.
2. Secondly, we do not fear what may come after this life – for we know we will be with our God.
3. And as Jacob's experiences teach us, we know that in the fears of this life even in the fear of dying God will be with us every moment and step of the way.

An old story tells of a woman who was deathly afraid in a violent story.
She asked her husband why he wasn't as afraid.
He took a knife and held it to her throat and asked if she was afraid.
She said no.
He has why.
She said because the knife is in your hand.
Her husband said, so it is with the storm, I know who holds it and us.

Two months ago one of our elders Tom Bayless witnessed one of the most powerful demonstrations of the kind of faith experience we are describing here – the presence of God in the face of fear.

Several of us had gone to Kremmling, Colorado to wait with former members Aldo and Sharon Classen as they waited for word on the search for their son Matt who had capsized in a kayaking accident.

When word came that his body had been found, confirming their greatest fears, the father, Aldo, walked outside to be alone and, with the kind of grief hardly imaginable, raised his hands to heaven and cried out, "My son, my son."

Then almost unbelievably he added these words, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

In that moment Tom (and the rest of us vicariously) witnessed a most awesome demonstration of the presence of God.

No man could say those words in that situation unless God was there, with him at that very moment, confirming that this was not the end of the story.

God calls us not to faith in certain happy endings but to faith in him!
I want to learn through Jacob to trust God that way.