

FREEDOM FROM FEAR

by Steve Zeisler

Jesus once likened himself to a physician, a healer who brought health and hope to broken and needy bodies and souls. On one occasion he forgave the sins and strengthened the legs of a paralytic man who was lowered through a hole in the ceiling, so great were the crowds following our Lord. Jesus was a wise physician who knew exactly what his patients needed. The critical first step for the doctor in a treatment program, of course, is a correct diagnosis. In the case of the paralytic, Jesus knew that healing the man's limbs and forgiving his sins would set him on his feet again.

This morning we will look at an incident when Jesus took a very different approach to healing. On this occasion his diagnostic insight led him to conclude that a certain individual with whom he was involved needed to be crippled in order to be made well. We are referring, of course, to Jacob the patriarch. As he journeyed back to Canaan, Jacob had a nocturnal wrestling match with the pre-incarnate Jesus. In that encounter our Lord permanently separated the hip of Jacob in order that he might bless him and give him life.

Why would the Great Physician choose to break Jacob's leg in order to heal him? We have already looked at the twenty years which Jacob spent with his uncle Laban in Haran. During that time he had married, fathered children, and become wealthy. He had finally come to realize that God had not forsaken him, but rather had supplied all of his needs. Thus he determined in his mind to leave Haran and return to Canaan, the place where God wanted him to live and raise his family. That was the first step in his becoming who he was meant to be.

Throughout all of those adult years, as we have already seen, Jacob struggled with fear. A day never went by without his feeling fearful and fretful. But if ever there was a man who should not have known fear, that man was Jacob. In the vision which he had at Bethel God had promised him that he would go with him on his journey to his uncle's home, that he would provide for him there and that he would one day bring him back to Canaan. Jacob had no need to fear, and yet he was continually defeated by fear. And he countered his failure by becoming a deceiver, a manipulator and a runaway.

During all those years in exile Jacob never had to fight with armed foreigners, unlike his grandfather Abraham. Jacob's battles were fought with members of his own family, primarily with his brother Esau and his uncle Laban. And, contrary to his own analysis, he never needed to fear these men either. When he finally came face to face with Esau, he discovered that the fear, which had haunted him during all those years in Haran, was unfounded. Esau had long since forgiven him. His uncle's manipulation of him and ill will toward him never accomplished anything either. Even the fourteen years of labor he had to put forth in order to gain his wives Leah and Rachel, both extraordinary women, were well worth the effort. In the remaining six years in Haran God used the time to make him a wealthy man. So he lost nothing, but rather gained by the experience. Jacob had no need to fear, to manipulate and run.

Let us try to make application of Jacob's story to ourselves. Some among us have good reason to be fearful. The things they fear are fearsome indeed. There are those who know each morning when they awake that they face a long day of physical pain and suffering. Others are living or working in situations where they face the reality of persecution and affliction. But there are others, like Jacob, who have no need to fear, yet they are still dominated by fear. Their fears are illusory, yet they are nonetheless undone by them.

For instance, I know a man who is insanely jealous of his wife. His attitude is destroying his marriage. His jealousy has no basis in fact, yet he battles with fear every day. Some women suffer from anorexia nervosa and are starving themselves. They regard themselves as fat and ugly when in actual fact they are quite thin, even

dangerously so. Yet they are embarked on a process of self-destruction. Others live in fear of their employers. They insist on working themselves to a frazzle, despite the fact that they are very competent and are consistently assured of that. They respond by redoubling their efforts, fearful that they will lose their jobs. Some single people who long to be married are so convinced that no one could possibly care for them they live in fear of being rejected. No matter that they are just as attractive and eligible as any married person around, their failure to believe that has stunted their lives.

In the long run, I suppose, it doesn't really matter whether what one fears is real or not. Fear that is based on an illusion is still fear. It is still a crippling problem. Those who live in fear, therefore, have need of a physician, as Jacob had need of a physician, to minister to them and heal them. That is what the Lord determined to do: to make Jacob well, to free him from the fear which had dominated him for so long. Let us see how God went about setting him free.

We pick up the patriarch's story in Genesis 31:17-32. Jacob has taken his first, faltering steps on his way to becoming well: he is returning home.

Then Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; and he drove away all his livestock and all his property which he had gathered, his acquired livestock which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's. [Such idols were used by families to divine the future, and were a symbol of power and authority. Rachel knew that her father would be coming after them, and by removing the idols she hoped to limit his ability to discover their whereabouts.]

And Jacob deceived Laban the Syrian, by not telling him that he was fleeing. So he fled with all that he had; and he arose and crossed the Euphrates River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, then he took his kinsmen with him, and pursued him a distance of seven days' journey; and he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead. And God came to Laban the Syrian in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad." And Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead. Then Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob.' And now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?" Then Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I said, 'Lest you would take your daughters from me by force.' The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself." For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

As God's influence grows in his responses, Jacob is beginning to be healed. A fearful, manipulative man who was prone to running when faced with pressure, he has finally turned the corner on his way to wholeness. The first step in his recovery, as we have pointed out, was his decision to return to his home, to the place where God wanted him. But he is not yet fully healed. Rather than confront Laban with the news of his departure for Canaan, he sneaks away, driving his family and flocks before him in a mad dash as far as Gilead. That is where his uncle finally catches up with him.

Notice that even in this situation Jacob once again had no need to be fearful. Laban was told in a dream to not say anything one way or another to Jacob; to not threaten him, hurt him or take advantage of him. He could not sugarcoat some demand or other, some deceptive offer, as he had done so often in the past. Despite the fact that Jacob was pursued and caught by the kinsmen of his uncle, God had already in place a fence about him to protect

him. Once more the hand of God had intervened in his behalf.

Laban's speech is a self-serving masterpiece. This man was a blusterer, a whiner, a threatener. Here he appears in all his dubious glory, posturing and posing before Jacob.

First, the wounded father routine. "Woe is me," he says, "you have taken off with all my loved ones, my daughters and my grandchildren. Why didn't you tell me you wanted to leave? I would have had a going-away party for you, with music and dancing. How could you be so hardhearted?" Leah and Rachel, however, were wise to his tricks by now. They stared back impassively at their whining father, unmoved by his pleadings. The women were already well aware of the price Jacob paid to acquire them. Laban should properly have used that money to provide a nest egg for them and their children, but instead he spent it all on himself. We can see further evidence of the sisters' lack of regard for him in the fact that Rachel stole the household idols. She didn't want to return home with Laban, and she took the strongest action she knew to prevent his discovering their whereabouts. So much for Laban's lament. Nobody was buying that line.

So Laban next becomes the menacing desert chieftain. "It is in my power to do you great harm," he boasts. Following this threat to gain their attention, however, he has to admit that that is not an option for him. God had told him the night before to keep his hands off of Jacob and his family.

Laban next takes on the guise of a victim: "Why ever did you steal my household gods?" he whines. "What shabby treatment of the father who loves you and has provided for you all these years." What a manipulator!

At last, Jacob stands up to Laban and answers his uncle with openness and courage. He was unaware that anyone in his entourage had stolen anything from Laban, and he forthrightly offers his uncle permission to search through his possessions. He even admits his own fear of his uncle: "because I was afraid," he says in Gen.31:31. For her part, Rachel is able to conceal her ill-gotten gains with a ruse of her own. She had learned a few tricks from her father.

Jacob, however, demonstrates that he has made giant strides in the healing process in his confronting of the very man he most feared—at least the man he feared most in Haran. Jacob is getting well. There is honesty and strength where earlier there had been lying and fear. But he is not yet healed. He must yet choose (not be forced) to face the person whom he fears most. We must realize at this point, of course, that it was God who had given Jacob the courage to stand up to Laban. Before long, however, he must come face to face with the dreaded Esau. We will come to that confrontation in the next chapter.

Jacob had taken advantage of his twin brother Esau when they were youths. And then he had run away and spent the next twenty years far removed from Esau, in Haran, at the home of his uncle. Now it was time to go back to Canaan and face the music. Gen.32:1-24:

Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. So Jacob said when he saw them, "This is God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim. Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my Lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; and I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.'"

And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; for he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape." And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who didst say to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' I am unworthy of all the loving-kindness and of all the faithfulness which Thou hast shown to Thy servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I

pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me, the mothers with the children. For Thou didst say, 'I will surely prosper you, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. And he delivered them into the hands of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on before me, and put a space between droves." And he commanded the one in front, saying, "When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?' then you shall say, 'These belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present sent to my Lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.'" Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, "After this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him, and you shall say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob is also behind us.'" For he said, "I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me." So the present passed on before him, while he himself spent that night in the camp. Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. And he took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

Here we see evidence of Jacob's tremendous growth in faith since he first decided to stand up to Laban. But there is also evidence of what remained to be dealt with in his character. First, the positive signs. It was Jacob who initiated the initial contacts with Esau. Earlier, he would never have deliberately sought to make such contact. Esau was not now living in Canaan but was settled in the land of his Ishmaelite wives, the territory which would later become known as Edom. Jacob was coming from the north and could have returned to Canaan without ever making contact with him. But he knew he had to face his adversary sometime; he had to overcome his fear. Thus he set about doing so right away upon his return.

A second very positive note about Jacob in this chapter is his prayer. What a beautiful recital of praise to God and of the certainty of God's promises! But Jacob's plans, unfortunately, are far from praiseworthy. Although he sincerely means every word of his prayer, he is still not ready to discard his plans for his own protection. He assumes the worst, and acts accordingly, dividing his entourage into two companies in an effort to get some of them through to safety.

The second part of his plan that falls far short of an act of faith is his scheme to appease Esau by buying him off with gifts. As we will see in our next study, Jacob owed a debt to Esau. When they were younger, he had lied to him and taken advantage of him; thus he owed him a great deal. But he is not repaying that debt by giving these gifts of livestock. He is merely trying to buy off and forestall what he assumes will be Esau's wrath when they meet. For protection, he places several herds of livestock as buffer zones between Esau and himself. Then he sends his wives and children packing across the Jabbok. But, once again, Jacob has no need to fear. If only someone had told him...

Most of us suffer from irrational fear of one kind or another, and no matter how much others reassure us to not be fearful their words don't seem to help much. What they are saying is true, and they mean what they say, but we don't find their reassurance helpful. The reason we are not helped by their words, of course, is that we are ultimately unwilling to trust God. That too was Jacob's problem, and that was why he took careful precautions to divide his flocks, creating safety zones between himself and his brother. Then he sends away his closest family members so that they might reach safety. Jacob is left all alone in the dark Middle Eastern night to contemplate what lies ahead.

Suddenly a hand grabs him, and he begins to wrestle with an unknown assailant. How often God does wonderful things for those who will spend time alone with him in the desert! How often does the clamor and the pace of our

lives come in the way of our wrestling with him, our learning from him.

All through the Scriptures we have example after example of people who went out alone to come face to face with God. Abraham spent nights alone in the desert with God. Moses was sent out to the desert to learn how God wanted him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. David, both as a shepherd boy and later as a fugitive, spent years of nights in the desert. That is where he wrote many of his beautiful psalms in praise of God. Elijah ran to the mountain in the desert and saw the earth quake and heard the still small voice of God. Jesus himself went into the desert to do spiritual battle with the forces of evil and thus qualify for his ministry. The apostle Paul spent three years in the Arabian Desert learning from the Lord in preparation for his ministry to the Gentiles. Each of these men learned tremendous lessons during his time alone with God.

This suggests to me that it may be critical to not only have Christian fellowship and communication, but also to have time when God alone can say to us and do to us what is necessary for us. We perhaps need time alone with the Great Physician so that he can prescribe the exact medicine we need. We may be paralyzed and need to have our legs strengthened; or we may need to have our legs broken. But He knows what is best for us.

There is something very beautiful about the fact that Jacob and this man wrestled all through the long desert night. Gen.32:24-31:

Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. And when he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel and he was limping on his thigh. Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip.

A wrestling match! How appropriate for Jacob. Wrestling brought into play all of this man's natural instincts. All throughout his life, Jacob's response when confronted by a fearful circumstance was to run away. But that is not an option when your adversary has an arm-lock on you. In any other kind of test of strength Jacob could have run for the hills. But not wrestling. Someone had a hold of him, so running was out of the question.

Furthermore, wrestling is not so much a matter of overwhelming an opponent by superior strength as it is a matter of stealth, of keeping an opponent off balance by using his own strength against him. It is a matter of tricking an opponent, making him think you are going to do something and then doing something quite different. Manipulation and deception, therefore, are the essence of wrestling. And that was Jacob's strong suit, of course. When he could not run he reverted to what he was good at—tricking and deceiving. Here, however, he is confronted by an opponent on whom he cannot use his tricks. After a night of wrestling, a night when Jacob can neither run away nor deceive, the patriarch is forced to face the fact, at least inwardly, that all of his wiles are useless in dealing with this mysterious opponent.

If the report of this wrestling event had been written by a sports journalist, we would have to conclude that it was really bad reporting. It would never make it on the pages of any modern newspaper. Identification of the participants, the winner of the bout, etc., all of these important facts are set out in the first paragraph of any modern sports report. But a careful reading of this account in Genesis still leaves you in doubt about the winner, or even who was fighting. While it may be bad reporting, it is a wonderful account of a mysterious happening, however, one which will be of great benefit if properly understood.

We could say that Jacob both won and lost this all-night wrestling match. His antagonist clearly possessed all the

advantages. When the time came for the bout to end, the mere touch of his hand dislocated Jacob's hip. Clearly the other man was the superior wrestler. But a good case could also be made for saying that Jacob won. At the end, even when his hip was broken, he refused to let go his grip of the man.

It's amazing to recall that Jacob, who for so many years was defeated by fear, on this occasion put his fears aside and continued to hold on to his opponent, saying he wanted something from him. What he wanted was the man's blessing, his respect and approval; then he would let him go. Jacob faced the toughest battle he would ever face. His coming confrontation with his fearsome brother Esau will be nothing by comparison. And he succeeds in getting what he wants from this man: he is given a new name. His old name, Jacob, means "deceiver," but his new name, Israel, means "the one in whom God strives." He is given the name of a warrior. He has earned the respect of his opponent. Thus we could say that Jacob both won and lost this nocturnal wrestling match.

Who, then, was Jacob's mysterious opponent? He was a "man," according to the text. But before the night ends it is obvious to Jacob that this is no ordinary man. When Jacob asks him his name, the man replies, "Why is it that you ask my name?" thereby inviting Jacob to think for himself about his identity.

The man may be saying, in effect, "Jacob, don't be afraid to draw the obvious conclusion. You know who I am." Perhaps this occasion needs to retain some mystery as a signpost to the great events to come, when God would become a man and fight a more terrible fight on our behalf. In any case, when Jacob reflected on what had occurred that night he came to the conclusion that he had wrestled with God. That is why he named the place Peniel ("the face of God").

Jacob needed to both win and lose this confrontation. He had lived a life of fear—irrational fear as it turned out—because he more than anyone had no need to fear. He responded to his fear, then, by living in a deceptive and manipulative fashion, devising plans to mask his great failing as he went along. On the night when this mysterious antagonist wrestled with him, God did two things for Jacob. First, he broke his leg so that he could never run away again. He would forever lose what was for him, given his philosophy of life, his most useful attribute—his ability to run when things got tough.

The second thing God did for Jacob was give him a new name, a new identity which declared that he had survived the most fearsome battle he would ever face in life. Jacob was a warrior now. He would never have to fear again. If God so valued and respected him—and he had promised to be with him all the days of his life—then he would never have to fear anything. The Great Physician had determined that he needed a broken leg and a heart transplant. As we will see next week, Jacob responded by limping ahead of his wives and children to meet his brother Esau, confident in his new identity which had come from the hand of God.

Fear is a spiritual problem. Left to ourselves, we will never learn how to deal with it. All we will succeed in doing is masking and hiding what we fear. The only way to finally overcome our fears is to allow God to separate us from what we feel is our strength, and to fear him instead. Then we will never again have to fear anything.

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Steve Zeisler
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