



FALSE FACE

SERIES: WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE

By Scott Grant

Covering up

When the first man and woman rejected God, they became peculiarly aware of their nakedness, according to the account in Genesis. So they hid from each other, covering themselves with fig leaves. Humans have been hiding from each other ever since, covering themselves in various ways. We learn to present to our world a false version of ourselves because we've become aware of the true version and we're not sure it will be accepted.

In Genesis 32:1-23, Jacob begins to come out of hiding. In connecting with his story, perhaps we can do the same. Jacob is afraid of his brother Esau. We may begin by asking ourselves who—or what—is the Esau in our lives? What is it that we're afraid of?

Having finally extricated himself from Haran, Jacob prepares to re-enter Canaan. The Lord enabled him to defeat Laban, Jacob's adversary in Haran. He's on his way home, but he's not home free. In Haran, he stared down an uncle who wanted to keep him enslaved. In Canaan, he'll have to face a brother who has wanted to kill him.

Together, Genesis 32 and 33 constitute a literary unit. The two chapters feature many parallels between Jacob's encounter with a visitor and his encounter with Esau. The first meeting is a precursor to the second.

Angels meet Jacob

Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. Jacob said when he saw them, "This is God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim. (Genesis 32:1, 2)

Earlier in his life, Jacob encountered some angels as he was leaving the Promised Land on his way to Haran (Genesis 28:10-22). Now, as he approaches the Promised Land, he meets angels once again. When the angels met him before, the Lord promised that he would bring Jacob back to the land.

The angels "met" Jacob, just as Esau was coming to "meet" him (Genesis 32:6, 33:4). In Genesis 28, Jacob was running from Esau but running into Laban. In Genesis 32, he's running from Laban but running into Esau. The angels prepare Jacob for his meeting with Esau and his return to the Promised Land, just as they prepared him for his meeting with Laban and his sojourn in Haran.

When Adam and Eve were driven from the garden in Eden, the Lord stationed cherubim, angelic beings, at the east entrance to the garden, to prevent humanity from returning to it. Now, as Jacob returns from the east to the Promised Land, which is portrayed in the Scriptures as something akin to the new garden in Eden, angels meet him, not to guard the way but to prepare the way.

Jacob is thus pictured, as are others in the Scriptures, as the new Adam, and as carrying the promised seed of Eve (Genesis 3:15). He brings with him the family that would give birth to the 12 tribes, which would give birth

to the Messiah and the 12 disciples and the church of Jesus Christ. In other words, he brings with him the future of humanity. Angels often appear at such crucial moments in the history of biblical revelation.

And here, the reappearance of the angels reminds Jacob of the Lord's promise to bring him back to the land and of his vow to make the Lord his God if the Lord fulfilled his promise. After the appearance of the angels, Jacob makes an observation similar to the one he made after his previous encounter. He said in Genesis 28:17, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." This time, he says, "This is God's camp."

Jacob camped in this place (Genesis 31:25). The appearance of the angels causes Jacob to conclude that it's not just his camp. It's also God's camp. In Genesis 28, he named the place where angels appeared to him Bethel, which means "House of God." He names this place Mahanaim, which means "Two Camps."

Now, Bethel was in the Promised Land, Jacob's home, which would be the place of God's dwelling, where the Israelites would build the temple, the house of God. Jacob's stay outside the Promised Land is just temporary; therefore, he sees the place not as God's house but as God's camp. This place is similar to any number of locations in the wilderness, where the Israelites pitched the tabernacle of God, which was the forerunner of the permanent temple in the Promised Land.

As mentioned before, Jacob calls it "Two Camps," perhaps because he sees that both he and God are camped there, along with members of each camp, Jacob's party and the God's angels. The name may also foreshadow the two camps into which Jacob would divide his party, and the two camps that would meet each other—his and Esau's (Genesis 32:6-7).

Jacob's response shows that this encounter causes him to remember another time and another place—another border crossing. He was running from his past then, and heading into an uncertain future. God met him and made promises. The years since have been hard, but the Lord has kept his promises. Once again, Jacob is heading into an uncertain future, but he has seen the faithfulness of the Lord. This time, he's not running from his past; he's facing into it.

The angels, appearing upon Jacob's departure from and return to the Promised Land, mark the time, and the faithfulness of God. The Lord wants Jacob to know, once again, "I am with you." The poetry of the Lord, sending angels to Jacob in a similar time and place, strengthens him for the journey ahead.

God's preparation

Just as God prepared Jacob for his encounter with Esau, he prepares us to face our fears as well. Who knows how many angels he's sent our way? He has been bringing us along. But just as we entertain angels without knowing it, we often don't recognize God's provision. Just because we don't realize that he's prepared us doesn't mean he hasn't prepared us. You may be more ready to face into your fears than you think you are.

It may seem that you have to face your fears alone, but it's not true. Whatever camp you've arrived at, remember that it's God's camp, too. In the place where you and God are camped together, can you see that he has been faithful to you? Has he brought you to a place that reminds you, in a poetic way, of some desperate moment from earlier in your life that further reminds you of how far he has brought you? If so, maybe it's time to stop running from your fears and face into them.

One of the fears I had to face was the fear of marriage. Marriage—and a fear of it—is easily avoided until you meet the right person. I didn't meet *her* until I was 41 years old. When I did, I was quite surprised by the fears the prospect of marriage unleashed. But the Lord prepared me, often in poetic ways, to face those fears.

Upon the recommendation of a friend, in the summer of 1997 I went to see the movie *Contact*. (Not very often have I gone to a movie theater by myself, but this was one of those occasions.) One scene captivated my

attention for its portrayal of courage. The character played by Jodi Foster is in the cockpit of a kind of space ship. It looks as if the ship is on the verge of breaking apart, and Foster's character, who has lost contact with those in the control tower, assumes that they are on the verge of aborting the mission. She tries to communicate to the leaders that she wants to continue the mission, even though it looks as if she might be killed. She desperately speaks into her head set, hoping someone will hear, "OK to go. OK to go. OK to go." She repeats these words over and over again. That scene lingered in my mind as I left the theater. I went for a walk in Memorial Park, across the street from the theater. I walked around the duck ponds and through the open-air amphitheater.

I was 39 years old that summer. I had been single all my life and, for the most part, content. But a few years earlier, I had begun to feel a deep desire for a wife that only intensified in the ensuing years. Not knowing what else to do, I had finally begun praying that God would give me a wife. The words "OK to go" echoed in my mind. Somehow, I connected those words to my status. I made those words my own and turned them into a prayer. In walking with God for so many years, and in wrestling with him over my desire to be married, I had come to more fully trust him with my longings. With tears flowing, I told the Lord, "If you want me to be single, OK to go."

Two summers later, I met a woman. We went to lunch, and there was a connection. Among her interests were hiking and Shakespeare. We made plans to go for a hike the next Saturday. The day after our lunch, I read the morning paper while eating breakfast and noticed in the entertainment section a story about a free "Shakespeare in the Park" performance of "A Comedy of Errors" that Saturday night. Later that morning, I went for a walk by the bay, and it struck me: The location of the upcoming Shakespeare performance was Memorial Park, the same park I walked through after seeing *Contact* two years earlier.

I asked Karen if she would like to cap off the hike with Shakespeare. She said yes, so after our hike, we enjoyed the performance together, in the same spot I offered up my "OK to go" prayer two years earlier. In the coming months, Karen and I continued to spend time together and felt more drawn to each other. Six months after our first date, we were engaged. A year later, we were married.

I told God, "OK to go"—meaning, it was OK if he wanted me to be single. Two years later, God told me, "OK to go"—meaning, it's OK to get married. I think the Lord, in a very poetic way, was encouraging me to move toward Karen. As we moved toward marriage, my fears surfaced, but remembering the Lord's "OK" encouraged me to keep moving.

Jacob's prayer

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; 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."'" 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."

Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your 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, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. For You said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.'" (Genesis 32:3-12)

The word translated “messengers” in verse 3 is translated “angels” in verse 1. Angels function as God’s messengers. The Lord sent his angels/messengers to Jacob, and now Jacob sends his messengers to Esau. The Lord, after sending his messengers, will meet with Jacob (Genesis 32:24-30). Likewise, Jacob, after sending his messengers, will meet with Esau.

The land and country of Esau’s residence, Seir and Edom, evoke Jacob’s conflict with Esau, which began in Genesis 25:19-34. Seir is a play on the word “hairy,” and Edom is a play on the word “red.” Esau’s hairy body and red appearance, not to mention the red stew he purchased, were featured in Genesis 25. Also, the word “country” is the same word that is translated “field” in Genesis 25:27, 29. The impending meeting with Esau fills the horizon of Genesis 32.

Jacob refers to Esau as his “lord” and identifies himself as Esau’s “servant.” From birth, the Lord destined Esau to “serve” Jacob (Genesis 25:23). This was confirmed through the blessings given by Isaac (Genesis 27:29, 40). Jacob, having stolen the blessing and clung to it, now appears ready to release it. Abraham made a similar decision in his conflict with his relative, Lot (Genesis 13:1-12).

In his first move toward Esau, Jacob doesn’t offer any of his possessions, but he lets his brother know about them. Evidently, he wants to discover Esau’s strength and intentions before offering a gift outright.

His purpose in sending his messengers to Esau is to find favor in the sight of Esau. Never before has Jacob sought favor in Esau’s eyes. He only sought to take what belonged to Esau, first his birthright and then his blessing. Perhaps because his options are limited, but perhaps also because he is beginning to trust the Lord, Jacob seeks Esau’s favor, not his possessions. After all, Jacob is returning to the land in obedience to the Lord.

Literally, Jacob seeks favor in the “eyes” of Esau. Jacob was able to steal the blessing by posing as Esau because his father’s “eyes were too dim to see” (Genesis 27:1). Jacob, who hid behind animal skins to steal the blessing, appears to be coming out in the open to offer the blessing back to Esau.

Jacob sends the messengers “before him.” The words “before him” or “before me” appear four times in Genesis 32:1-23. Jacob sends every one and every thing ahead of him. He will be left alone, at least temporarily, for a fateful encounter with a strange visitor.

The messengers’ report that Esau is coming to meet Jacob with 400 men, which is the same number of men that followed David in military conquest (1 Samuel 22:2, 25:13, 30:10), heightens the tension in the story. Is Esau bent on reconciliation or retaliation? Jacob takes the report as possibly indicative of hostile intentions. He is “greatly afraid and distressed,” and he divides his people and livestock into two companies in the hope that at least one will survive if Esau attacks.

He also does something that he hasn’t done in the narrative to this point: He prays. Predicaments have marked Jacob’s life, yet never is he reported as turning to the Lord in prayer because of them. The fact that he does so now may be indicative both of desperation and growth. Jacob, the strong one, falls to his knees.

Jacob’s address is reminiscent of the way God first identified himself to Jacob at Bethel 20 years ago and connects with the Lord’s faithfulness to Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 28:13). He also invokes the Lord’s recent command to return to the Promised Land, although he interprets the Lord’s promise to be with him as a promise to prosper him (Genesis 31:3). Jacob, then, connects with the Lord’s history of faithfulness but understands his current predicament as originating from his obedience to the Lord. He therefore bases his appeal on the Lord’s faithfulness.

For at least the first 40 years of his life, Jacob would have considered himself a self-made man. He was given few advantages, but he climbed his way to the top by shrewdness and strength of will. His words in verse 10 are all the more remarkable in this light. Jacob confesses his unworthiness, identifies himself as a servant of the Lord and attributes his success to the Lord.

What changed Jacob? Well, in a word, Haran. His ill-gotten gains in the land of Canaan earned the wrath of his brother, so he fled to Haran and started over. In Haran, he couldn't outmaneuver Laban the way he outmaneuvered Esau. He toiled in hardship for at least 14 years before the Lord's appearance to him in a dream enabled him to advance.

He now sees that the Lord is responsible for his success. He also sees that his unscrupulous methods of advancement make him unworthy of the Lord's care. Haran has taught him that he is unworthy and that the Lord is faithful. When he sees that the Lord is faithful in the face of his unworthiness, he is a changed man.

Fearing Esau, Jacob asks for deliverance, both for himself and his family, and he reminds the Lord once again of his promises concerning the future. The Lord promised Jacob descendants like the "dust of the earth," but in recollecting the promise to be as the "sand of the sea," he traces the promise back to Abraham (Genesis 28:14, 22:17). Jacob sees the Lord's promises as coming to naught if Esau annihilates his party.

Prayer of desperation

Like Jacob, we want a full and accurate scouting report. What exactly are we going to be facing? What are the intentions of the other party? How will he, she or they respond to me? What are the risks? What will I have to give up? One way or another we send out our messengers. If you're a teenager, you might send someone from your posse over to the other side to find out how you would be received. If you're an adult, you may be more sophisticated, but not much. Regardless of our preparations, sometimes what we have avoided becomes avoidable no longer. You have to face the Esau in your life.

Do you sense that you have withheld something? Can you identify within yourself a desire to release it? Do you think that maybe you can bring a blessing into an arena that terrifies you? Have you been hiding and do you want to come out into the open?

You may answer "yes" to these questions and resolve to move forward, but then something like an unfavorable report from the messengers seizes your soul. Maybe you've prayed before, and maybe you've prayed for as long as you can remember, but you haven't sensed a need for God the way you need him now. For the most part, you've managed to get by. Now you cry out with a desperate down-on-your-knees "I-am-not-worthy" prayer for deliverance.

In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, a desperate George Bailey, having lost \$8,000 and facing arrest, enters Martini's bar to mull things over. These words come out of him: "Dear Father in heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me, show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way, O God."(1) Desperation is often the beginning of faith.

Your desperate plight plays a part in the formation of this prayer. So too does your time in Haran, so to speak. Haran is the land of relational and vocational heartache, where our dreams turn into nightmares, but where the Lord demonstrates his faithfulness by showing us ourselves and showing us himself. Paradoxically, broken dreams teach us that we are unworthy but that he is faithful. When we see his faithfulness in the face of our unworthiness, we become the kind of people who pray Jacob's prayer.

Jacob seeks to appease Esau

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. He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on before me, and put a space between droves." 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 also is 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. He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. (Genesis 32:13-23)

The words “he spent the night there” were also used in Genesis 28:11, when Jacob spent the night in Bethel. Angels, and the Lord himself, appeared to him that night. By use of the same terminology, the narrator alerts us that this may be no ordinary night.

Jacob spent the night there, but it doesn’t look as if he did much sleeping. Having discerned that Esau may have hostile intentions, Jacob makes arrangements for a rather impressive gift. He instructs his servants to approach Esau with the gift in three waves so that it appears all the more impressive. All of the servants are instructed to inform Esau that Jacob is behind them. They are now specifically instructed to call Esau Jacob’s “lord” and Jacob Esau’s “servant.”

In this way, Jacob hopes to appease his brother—literally, “cover his face.” Only then, after Jacob has sent waves of gifts to Esau, will Jacob “see his face” with the hope that Esau will, literally, “accept my face.” Jacob sends the gift, literally, “ahead of his face”—that is, Jacob’s face. Jacob fears a face-to-face encounter with Esau. Before he sees the face of Esau, however, he must see the “face” of an even more fearsome visitor (Genesis 32:30).

What are we to make of Jacob’s plan? Jacob asks the Lord to deliver him; however, the schemer within springs into action. His elaborate preparations reveal a lack of trust. Jacob is hiding behind the gift just as he once hid behind animal skins. He who always sought to move to the front of the line moves to the rear when his life is in danger. As it turns out, all his preparations proved unnecessary; his prayer was all that was needed. However, the Lord isn’t through with Jacob, and the night is not over. Before the sun rises, Jacob will gain new insight into the Lord, himself and his conflict with his brother.

Jacob takes his family, bringing all his possessions with him, and crosses the Jabbok, a tributary of the Jordan River. The Jabbok was seen as a sort of border to the Promised Land (Numbers 21:24, Deuteronomy 2:37, 3:16; Joshua 12:2; Judges 11:13, 22). In the narrative, it’s seen as the last major barrier keeping Jacob and Esau apart.

After seeing his family safely across the river, Jacob separates himself so that he is alone. Twenty years ago Jacob left the Promised Land alone, with neither family nor possessions. He is now returning with a large family and many possessions, but before he returns, he spends the rest of the night alone and without possessions (verse 24). Upon his return to the Promised Land, he in some way re-enacts his departure from it, connecting with a time when he had nothing to place between him and an uncertain future.

He can’t go back. He made a deal that he would not go back to harm Laban. And besides, to return to Haran would be to submit to Laban’s harsh rulership again. The Lord says his future is in the land before him. But Esau, the brother who had wanted to kill him, is coming out to meet him, appearing as if he’s bent on revenge. His family and his possessions have gone before him and Jacob has reached the point of no return. He spends one last night alone to ponder his fate. Twenty years earlier, when Jacob spent the night alone, angels and the Lord himself appeared to him. Angels have appeared to him again on his return trip. Will the Lord show up this night? What goes through Jacob’s mind?

Removing the false face

So you've decided to confront your fears. You've cried out to God for deliverance, but you're not so sure you can trust him so the schemer within springs into action. You fear face-to-face encounters. You fear that the real you will be unacceptable. You wish to cover the other person's face so that he or she can't see you, so you present a false face so that people will receive you. The *real* you—who you are, what you think, what you feel—will remain hidden.

You might even be able to pull it off, because your false face is just as impressive as Jacob's gift. You've had a lot of practice. In one way or another, you've been doing it your whole life. You really don't have to think about it anymore. You instinctively present a false self in order to protect yourself.

A December HBO film, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, was based on the premise that the actor became so good at inhabiting his characters that he lost his identity. Early on, when his ordinary appearance was hindering his Hollywood career, Sellers used his gift of mimicry to convince a casting director to give him the part of a crippled old man. In one of his most famous films, *Dr. Strangelove*, Sellers played three different characters, flawlessly moving between them. "We have a protagonist who has no self-awareness, and cannot for a moment be clear about who he is," said Stephen Hopkins, who directed the film.(2)

Is Peter Sellers simply an extreme version of us? Is there a private you and a public you? Have you been putting on the false face for so long that you can no longer be clear about who you are?

If we've lost ourselves, how can we find ourselves? If putting on the false face has become second nature, how can we stop doing it? Well, just as the Lord was not through with Jacob, he is not through with us. In other words, the night is not over.

Some of us may have to reach something like the point of no return in order to seriously consider changing. That point is often reached when we face an encounter that is no longer avoidable. The Lord leads us to these places, just as surely as he led Jacob to the banks of the Jabbok. Like Jacob, we may have to remove ourselves from comforting distractions, feel our nakedness before God, reconnect with his faithfulness and meet with him alone, without the false face. And we may have to do so repeatedly, for although Jacob's experience this night will change him, he will soon revert to his old ways.

Authentic community

God does in our lives what he did in Jacob's life. He prepares us to face our fears. And, like Jacob, we must go to our own place of desperate prayer, distancing ourselves from distractions and feeling our nakedness before God.

We can help each other by both sharing our authentic selves and accepting the sharing of others. Such authenticity and acceptance in a community is contagious. When you are accepted, you are encouraged to continue opening up. When someone else sees you opening up, he or she is encouraged to open up.

Last fall the Young Adults Fellowship began a study of the Psalms. We were struck by the raw authenticity of the psalmists. In response, about a dozen members of the fellowship wrote their own psalms and then shared them with the community one Sunday in December. One by one, they opened their hearts to us. In so doing, they gave courage to others to think that maybe they could share themselves in a similar manner.

Here's one written by Troy Ussery, a self-described quiet man, who spoke of having feelings at one time for a woman who seemed unaware of him:

Feelings are such silly things.

*They come without permission,
demanding my submission,
to lift someone to inner fame;
someone who does not even know my name.
Feelings are such silly things.*

Someone came up to me after our meeting and told me, “Every man in this room knows what he’s talking about.” And everyone, man and woman alike, was enriched.

NOTES:

- (1) *It's A Wonderful Life*, © 1993 Republic Pictures Corp.
- (2) Associated Press, December 5, 2004.

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