



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Growing Faith Genesis 32:1-24a

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As we've seen over the last six chapters, Jacob's story is a story of transformation. We started with Jacob, the supplanter and the back-stabber, who knew about the things of God in his head, but knew nothing of them in his heart. Jacob was selfish and when he was interested in God, his interest wasn't so much in God, but in the benefits he thought he could get from God. Gradually, over a twenty-year period, God has been turning Jacob's life around—much of the time quite literally as he's turned all of Jacob's selfish schemes back on to him. But he's taken Jacob to the bottom so that he can lift him back up. God has emptied Jacob of Jacob so that he can fill Jacob with himself. God has taken Jacob through twenty years of trials and tribulations, but through all of it, God has never stopped blessing him. Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, but Laban tricked him into marrying Leah. No one was happy about that situation except Laban. Then rivalry broke out between the two sisters as they competed for children and for Jacob's love. Finally, when Jacob was fed up with being Laban's slave and demanded to be allowed to return home, Laban conned him into another scheme to swindle him. And yet God has used all these situations to bless Jacob. Jacob has at least twelve children we know of and in continuing to care for Laban's flocks, God abundantly blesses and multiplies the rare spotted goats and the black lambs that were to be Jacob's wages.

As the story has been told, we, the readers, are well-aware that God has been at work to make good on his promises to Jacob. The problem is that Jacob, the one living through these struggles first hand, is blind to God. The times that he does acknowledge the good he has experienced, he attributes it

to his superior scheming. It wasn't until Chapter 31, when God came to him in a dream, that Jacob finally realised that God had been with him through those twenty long years and that it was God, not his dabbling in magic, who had increased his flocks. And so finally knowing that God was truly at work to bring about the things he had promised, Jacob was ready to take a step of faith. God called him to leave Haran and to return to Canaan and Jacob obeyed. Was his trust perfect? No. Jacob obeyed God, but not without cooking up a scheme to foil Laban should he try to stop him. As we saw, Jacob's faith may have been *small*, but it was nonetheless *real* faith, and that should encourage us. God has taken each of us from a point of *faithlessness* and grown us to a point of *faithfulness*. Some of us may have big faith and some of us may have small faith, but Jacob reminds us that God is in the business of growing whatever faith we have. If he can give faith to people who were once faithless, he can certainly grow small faith into big faith.

Chapter 32 shows Jacob's faith growing. He's finally acknowledge that God has been the source of his blessing and in that he's acknowledged that God is making good on his promises—that God is a god to be trusted. Brothers and sisters, you and I have all taken a similar step faith at some point in time. The first step of true faith is to acknowledge that Jesus is our Saviour and Lord: that he, in his Incarnation, in his death, and in his resurrection, has accomplished our redemption from sin and that in his divinity he is Lord of Creation. As we acknowledge who he is and what he has done for us our hearts are prepared to then *trust* in his sovereign lordship and in his saving work. But as we see so many times in Scripture and in our own lives, it takes time for our trust—our faith—to grow. Yes, we trust Jesus to provide the good we need, but all of us, to lesser and greater degrees, still trust in ourselves. We trust that with Jesus our sin was nailed to the cross, we trust that in him we are dead to sin and alive to God and that it is all of grace, but all too often we still find ourselves trying to earn God's grace through our works. And all too often we're ready to trust God with the eternal destiny of our souls, but we worry and fret and scheme

and scam when it comes to the things we need in this earthly life. Jacob reminds us that faith is a gift of grace that takes time to grow and mature as we walk with God.

In Jacob's case—and God custom tailors his gracious work to each of us, to our personalities, to our specific needs, and to our specific sins, flaws, and shortcomings—God gave him a promise of blessing. God then spent twenty years fulfilling that promise. But Jacob didn't see God at work, and so when the blessing was accomplished, God revealed himself again and opened Jacob's eyes, showing him what he'd done for him. That was what it took to get Jacob to this place of acknowledgement—to this first step of faith. Now as Jacob heads southwest and into Canaan, God comes to him again. Look at verses 1 and 2:

Jacob went on his way, 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.

This is the second time that Jacob has been met by angels. The first time happened as he was on the verge of leaving the promised land and in that vision of angels ascending and descending the stair from heaven, God made it clear that he would be with him in his exile. Now as Jacob is on the verge of returning home, angels come to him again. It's a profound way for God to communicate that Jacob's exile is over. It began with an angelic encounter and it ends with another one. But the timing is important too. Jacob didn't know what to expect as he returned home. Remember that when he left he was fleeing from Esau's murderous rage. He had stolen Esau's birthright and he had stolen their father's blessing. Esau was understandably upset and was muttering threats to kill Jacob. Jacob's got to be wondering if Esau is still angry. Does Esau still want him dead? And how powerful is Esau? Does he pose a real threat or is Jacob now powerful enough to protect himself? All of these are unknowns. Now, in the midst of all this uncertainty Jacob is met by a host of angels. The wording of the Hebrew is military language. When

Jacob declares that this is “God’s camp” what he’s saying is that he’s seen God’s angelic army camped there. The storyteller doesn’t elaborate, so we don’t know the specific meaning of all this. What we do know is that it serves as another reminder from God that he is with Jacob. I’m inclined to see this as God’s way of communicating to Jacob that there was no reason to fear—that this fierce angelic army camped on the border of the promised land was there for the benefit of God’s people and that it represented God’s protection. It’s God revealing himself again and giving Jacob reason to trust him.

Jacob may trust God, but that doesn’t stop him from making his own plans. After meeting the angelic army, Jacob sends messengers to his brother.

And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, “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, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.’” (Genesis 32:3-5)

Not only is Jacob trying to feel out Esau, he’s also trying to assure Esau that he’s not a threat. When he left, everyone seemed to think that Isaac was near death; now, twenty years later Jacob would probably have assumed that his father was dead and that having been gone so long himself, Esau would have inherited everything. So Jacob assures Esau of three things: First, he sends the message that he’s been with their uncle, Laban, for the last twenty years. He hasn’t been hiding from Esau or avoiding him and he certainly hasn’t been sneaking around doing anything underhanded. Second, he emphasises that while he’s been away he’s grown rich. He has his own livestock and servants; he’s no longer interested in the livestock and servants that Esau may have. He’s not coming as a threat and he’s not coming to lay any claim to his inheritance. And, third, he asks that he might find favour in Esau’s eyes.

Jacob—*almost*—acknowledges that he had wronged Esau in the past, twenty years ago. He’s asking, “Brother, can we let bygones be bygones?”

Jacob trusts in diplomacy, but what the messenger tells him when he returns is unsettling. Look at verses 6-8:

And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.” Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.”

For reasons we don’t know, Esau doesn’t send a reply. The messengers simply return with the news that Esau is coming to meet Jacob with four hundred men. Considering where the two brothers left off, Jacob makes the natural assumption that Esau is still angry and that he’s coming with an army to make good on his threats to kill him. Jacob immediately starts to worry. And yet, having just met God’s angelic army and having just been reassured that God is with him, this *should* be a perfect opportunity for Jacob to exercise his new-found faith. That’s exactly what Jacob does—and doesn’t—do.

The first thing Jacob does is act out of fear. He hears that Esau is coming with a small army so he divides his people and livestock into two groups and separates them. Jacob’s scheming again. He’s thinking that if he divides the camp, Esau will find one of them, destroy it and leave, thinking that he’s taken care of his swindling brother. At worst, Jacob will still have half his wealth and he can skulk off somewhere and hide from Esau. Of course, if Esau’s really out to get him, he’s not going to stop at destroying or stealing Jacob’s property. No, he’s going to hunt down Jacob and kill him. Maybe Jacob realises this. After quickly coming up with one of his usual schemes and

realising that he’s still in dire straights, Jacob *finally* resorts to prayer.

And 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 kindred, that I may do you good,’ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and 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 and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’” (Genesis 32:9-12)

Having reached a point where he can no longer rely on himself, Jacob finally reaches out to God in prayer for the first time. Jacob begins by calling out to the God of his father and grandfather. To those men who had known God and who had walked with him, he was the Lord God, *Yahweh* God. But for all God’s work with Jacob and for his direct revelation to him, God is still effectively a stranger to Jacob. Jacob doesn’t call out to him as the Lord *my* God; he’s calling out to the God of his fathers. He’s like many people whose first cries to God begin the same way: “God, I don’t know you, but you knew my mother and my father.” “God, you’ve never heard from me before, but my grandmother trusted you. I thought she was weak and foolish, that you were her crutch, but now I’m at rock bottom and I need your help.” Again, faith has to start somewhere. For Jacob it begins with the realisation that God has been at work in his life and now he recalls just how real God was for his fathers. He cries out and as he does so he remembers God’s promise at Bethel. “God if you really meant all that stuff about taking care of me, well, here’s your chance.” And Jacob is at his best in verse 10, as he throws himself on God’s mercy: “God, I’m not worthy of everything you’ve done for me. I’ve been a cheat and a swindler. You’ve

been blessing me over and over, but I've not only failed to trusted you, I've been taking all the credit for your work myself." And so he pleads, "God you made a promise to take care of me, please—please, please, please!—take care of me now. My brother's on his way here with four hundred men. May I remind you that you promised to do me good and to make my offspring like the sand of the sea? If Esau kills us all that's not going to happen and you're not going to look very good."

Jacob's prayer is uncertain, it's a prayer of desperation, and it's a prayer of last resort to a God he barely knows—but it's a prayer and it's a prayer made in faith, even if that faith is small and hesitating. It's faith, even though it's a "what's in it for me" faith rather than a faith that seeks first the kingdom and righteousness of God. But this is exactly where faith begins for many of God's people. The key is that Jacob's prayer reflects an immature faith. As he walks with God his faith will grow. The same should be true for us. We may start our walk with God by crying out to him in desperation and in uncertainty, but as we continue to walk with God and see him at work, he should always be becoming more and more certain of his presence, his promises, and his ways. For now, though, Jacob's faith is young. He came up with a scheme to split his people and livestock into two camps and the realised that it might not work, so he cried out to God in desperation. But then it seems that as he says "Amen" a new scheme suddenly comes to mind. For just a few minutes we saw a new Jacob, but now we see the old Jacob. Look at what he does the next morning in verses 13-21:

So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took 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 calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me and put a space between

drove and drove." He instructed the first, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.'" He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him, and you shall say, 'Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me." So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp.

Jacob prepares a gift for Esau: 220 goats, 220 sheep and rams, 30 camels plus their young, 50 cows and bulls, and 30 donkeys. This is no small gift. We have documents listing the tribute paid by towns to the kings that had conquered them and they barely reflect half the wealth that Jacob sends to Esau.¹ This is enough to make Esau himself a rich man. Jacob even describes it as a "present". The Hebrew word is one that describes a "sacrifice"—a sacrifice made in the hope of finding favour. Jacob thinks to himself at the end that all this will "appease" Esau. The Hebrew word there, in verse 21, is connected with the idea of paying a ransom. Jacob is trying to makeup for the wrongs that he did to Esau; he's trying to ransom himself and his family. He's also likely to be thinking about the four hundred men with Esau. They were probably mercenaries whom Esau hired and promised a portion of the spoils. Jacob's messengers had, after all, told Esau how wealthy their master had become in his exile. These men were out for spoils and would be paid one way or another; better for Jacob to provide the payment and avoid the violence!

¹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 200), p. 65.

But that's not all there is to his scheme. He breaks up his gift into five parties. If Esau were planning an ambush, these five parties would wear him down. He might ambush the first party, but seeing that Jacob was missing, he'd then have to set the trap again for the next party—and the next, and the next, and so on. By the time Jacob arrived, Esau would probably have given up. In sending his gift this way, Jacob's also buying himself time and making it harder for Esau to ambush him. As each party enlarges Esau's band of men, he'll be slowed down. And with a growing number of animals in tow, making all their usual noise, Jacob will hear Esau coming from a distance. And, also, as Esau takes in each of the five parties sent by Jacob, he adds Jacob's men to his own ranks. Could they be spies? Would they sound the alarm when Esau's forces got close to Jacob? Esau wouldn't know and might be suspicious. Again, this is classic Jacob, scheming at his best.

And yet despite all his preparations and despite his prayer, verses 22 and 23 paint a picture of man who is still so troubled and worried that he's unable to sleep.

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had.

The text doesn't tell us why Jacob did this. It certainly doesn't seem necessary to his plans. The Jabbok is a fast-running river and fording it in the middle of the night was a dangerous thing to do, but for whatever reason, Jacob sent his family across while he stayed behind. Everything was setup. There was nothing more he could do but hope his plan would work and trust that God had heard his prayer. But did he really trust God? After all the reason God had given him to trust and after all the assurances that God had given that he was with Jacob, verse 24 paints a vivid picture of the situation from Jacob's perspective:

And Jacob was left alone.

Was Jacob truly alone? Of course not. God was with him just as he had been all along, but in his desperation Jacob *felt* very alone. And you and I all too often find ourselves feeling just like Jacob. The problem is that what we *feel* doesn't always reflect the *reality* of our situation. God has told us that he is and always will be with us. That's reality. And yet how often do we doubt his presence because we're so absorbed in our own fears, as Jacob was, that we lose a sense of his assurance? God has promised to provide what is best for us in every situation. How often do we find ourselves doubting that promise and questioning his wisdom when life fails to meet our expectations? God has filled us each with his Spirit and promises that where we are gathered, there he is in our midst. But how often do we judge his presence in our worship based on our feelings instead of his promise, thinking he's not with us because we don't feel a certain way? Jesus has accomplished the work of our redemption. As he died, he declared: "It is finished." And yet how often do we doubt that we have been forgiven and made whole? In all these situations and so many more, our problem—just as it was Jacob's problem—is immature faith.

The solution to our doubts and our lack of assurance is to let God grow our faith. The writer of Hebrews tells us: "Faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). To grow a faith that gives us assurance and conviction of God's faithfulness, we need to walk with God, we need to know him, we need to know his ways, we need to have seen him at work. Some of that is simply a matter of time and experience, but much of it is a matter of taking advantage of the means of grace that God has given to us. In the Scriptures he leave us the record of his revelation to the apostle and prophets that we might know him. In the Scriptures he gives a record of his past faithfulness to his people. In the Sacraments he gives us gifts that assure us of his grace and of the new life that is

within us. And in the Church he gives us the sacramental gift of membership in the body of Christ, where we gather to share with each other the gifts he has given, where we share with each other a common experience of grace and of God's faithfulness, and where we build one another up in faith. Jacob's faith was small, but Jacob also lived largely apart from all these means of grace. He had no Scriptures to tell him of God's past faithfulness; he had only the witness of Abraham and Isaac. He bore the covenant sign of circumcision as a pledge of God's faithfulness, but he had no Eucharist in which to partake of God's grace. And Jacob had no Church to be a part of—no place in which to share a common experience of grace; at best he had a half-pagan family. And yet if Jacob could have the small faith we see here in Genesis while living without the great means of grace God has given to us, how much greater should our faith be? Brothers and sisters, let us exercise our faith. Let us actively seek to grow it by steeping ourselves in Scripture as we come to know God and his faithfulness from his own history and as we learn his character and his ways; let us find assurance of his presence as we come the Table where he offers us his own self; and let us truly live as his body, sharing his grace as we build up and encourage one another in love and good works. If we will walk with God, if we will avail ourselves of his grace, he will make our faith strong, he'll deepen our fellowship with him, he'll give us a greater understanding of his love for us, and he'll give us a powerful witness to those still walking in darkness.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, build our faith we pray. Where our faith is weak, make it strong; where it is strong, make it even stronger. Open our eyes that we might see your faithfulness as you work in the world around us. Give us a desire to study and know your Word that we might know you. Fill us with assurance of your steadfastness as we come to your Table. And build our faith as we share the common experience and knowledge of your grace together as your Church. Teach us each day to trust more in you. Show us the areas in

which we've held thing back and give us grace to give release them to your care. And in all things let our faith seek not our benefit, but your glory. We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.