

Jacob Prepares to Meet His Brother Esau

Genesis 32:1-21

Genesis 32:1-21 - *"So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ² When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp." And he called the name of that place Mahanaim.*

³ Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴ And he commanded them, saying, "Speak thus to my lord Esau, 'Thus your servant Jacob says: "I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. ⁵ I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.'"

⁶ Then the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." ⁷ So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies. ⁸ And he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape."

⁹ Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. ¹¹ 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 and the mothers and the children. ¹² For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

¹³ So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother: ¹⁴ two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵ thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten foals. ¹⁶ Then he delivered them to the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves." ¹⁷ And he commanded the first one, saying, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?' ¹⁸ then you shall say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us.'" ¹⁹ So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, "In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; ²⁰ and also say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he said, "I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me." ²¹ So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp."

Background Notes

After Jacob and Laban made their peace and Laban headed back to Haran, Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau. Esau was now living in the land of Seir, southeast of the Dead Sea. Esau was the father and founder of the nation of Edom. The rock fortress city now known as Petra was located in this area, and this may have been Esau's headquarters.

Jacob was hoping for a peaceful meeting with Esau, but he was very afraid when he heard that Esau was on his way to meet him with 400 men! He thought, "That's a small army! Esau must be out to kill me!" Twenty years earlier Esau had threatened to kill Jacob when Jacob tricked their father, Isaac, into blessing him instead of Esau. Jacob had to run away, putting 500 miles between himself and Esau for the next 20 years. Although their mother, Rebekah, thought that Esau's fury would subside and Jacob would be away for only a few days, she was mistaken.

What did Jacob do when he heard that Esau and 400 men were coming to meet him? He did what we all would do if we thought our lives were in extreme danger! Jacob prayed in desperation - and God answered his prayer.

Doctrinal Points

1. God takes care of His children by the means of guardian angels.

"Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ² When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp." And he called the name of that place Mahanaim." When Jacob left home, he saw the angels of God in his dream at Bethel, and when he was returning home he saw them again. Whether he saw them in a dream, or a vision, or even literally saw them, we don't know. And we don't know if Jacob was the only one who saw the angels, or everyone in the company saw them. In any case, Jacob didn't see just a few angels – he saw a **host** of angels! There were so many angels that Jacob called the place Mahanaim, meaning "double camp" or "two camps" - Jacob's camp, and a camp of protecting angels.

God was taking care of Jacob and protecting him by the means of guardian angels. The Bible teaches that the use of angels is one way that God protects his children. Hebrews 1:14 says, *"Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?"* And in Matthew 18:10, the Lord Jesus said of the little children, *"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels [guardian angels] in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven."*

Normally angels are invisible, but sometimes people are allowed to see them. Elisha's servant was permitted to see the hosts of guardian angels who were protecting them from the Syrian army (2 Kings 6). But we don't usually see angels. I've never seen an angel (at least I've never recognized an angel)! But that's OK, because we shouldn't be looking for angels.

Our focus should be on **the Lord!** However, it's nice to know that God can and does use invisible holy angels to care for us and minister to us.

When our son, Ron, was a preteen, we were backpacking together in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State. One night while we were asleep, a bear came into our camp. We were sleeping in a lean-to with an open front (protected only by our sleeping bags!), so we tried to scare the bear off by making a lot of noise. But instead of running away, the bear turned and charged straight at us. Right at the last moment, the bear veered off and bounded into the woods. Why? I don't know. But I do know that God was protecting us. Was the bear was confronted by guardian angels? I like to think so! In any case, God cares for his children, and he can protect them by the means of guardian angels.

2. God takes care of His children by the means of answered prayer.

In verses 9-12, Jacob prayed out of fear and desperation - but at least he prayed! This is the first time we read of Jacob praying. Twenty years before at Bethel, he had made a vow before God, but that wasn't a prayer like the one here. Now Jacob was really "between a rock and a hard place." Esau was coming with 400 men, and Jacob had nowhere to turn but up. Let's look briefly at Jacob's prayer, because it's a model prayer.

1. He addressed God directly (v9): *"O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you.'"*
2. He prayed in humility (v10): *"I am not worthy of the kindness and faithfulness which You have shown Your servant..."*
3. He prayed specifically (v11): *"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 and the mothers with the children."* That's a very specific prayer!

Notice that Jacob prayed on the basis of what God had already revealed and what God had already said. We should always pray on that basis. Verse 9: *Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you..."* And also verse 12: *"For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude."*

Jacob prayed on the basis of what God had revealed and said. We should pray that kind of prayer - and not just when we're in trouble, but all the time! God answered Jacob's prayer, and He can answer our prayers as well. Prayer is one of the means that God uses to take care of us. God cares for His children by the means of answered prayer.

3. God takes care of His children by the means of common sense.

Besides praying, Jacob did a few other things to prepare for meeting Esau. Before he prayed, he divided his camp into two companies, so if one group was attacked, the other group could escape. After he prayed, he sent a large gift of animals to Esau to hopefully appease him - and Jacob sent them in successive droves so as to magnify the gift.

Commentators on Jacob's life differ in their views of Jacob's actions here. Some find fault with Jacob for not trusting God more, but some say Jacob was just using his God-given common sense. I tend to take a middle of the road position here. God had specifically told Jacob that He would bring him safely back home, so Jacob certainly didn't have to worry that he would be killed, nor did he need to divide his camp. Furthermore, as we'll see in chapter 33, Jacob should not have played favorites with his family to protect his favorite wife, Rachel, and his favorite son Joseph, possibly at the expense of the rest of the family.

On the other hand, sending Esau a gift to help pave the way for a peaceful meeting was common sense. Proverbs 18:16 says, *"A man's gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men."* So it was certainly not wrong for Jacob to send Esau a gift, especially in view of how Jacob had cheated his brother in the past. It was common sense! As Christians, we depend on God to take care of us, but we shouldn't kiss our brains goodbye! Our common sense is one way God takes care of His children.

Practical Application

What does God have to do to get us to pray?

In Genesis 32, we finally see Jacob praying - but it took a life-threatening situation to get him on his knees. What does God have to do to get us to pray? Do we pray for our families and our fellow-believers **before** they get sick, or **before** they get into trouble? Do we pray for our marriages **before** there are problems?

Or does God have to allow serious illness or trouble or tragedy to come into our lives before we'll come humbly before Him in desperate prayer? What does God have to do to get us to pray?