

What You Feel Vs. What You Believe

Jacob's Emotions and Israel's Faith

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Which is more important: what you feel or what you believe? People today seem to feel more emptiness in their lives than ever before. In order to feel psychically and emotionally better about themselves, today's mainstream Christians are looking for “feel good” results through eastern religion meditation techniques such as yoga, with its "warrior prayer" poses designed to call demons from the spirit world.

Also the sky is the limit on the number of people from other religions and beliefs that previously professing Christian families are accepting as their spiritual leaders in their quest to find “feel good” relationships.

Very few people today read and study the Bible to prove spiritual truths for themselves. As a result, the Bible's warnings against offering vain repetitions for prayer and being unequally yoked to unbelievers go unnoticed or even ignored. Today, much of mainstream Christianity is little more than Christian mysticism, which is also referred to as contemplative spirituality.

Today's churches are producing “feelers for Jesus” rather than followers of Christ. This movement, trend, fad, or whatever you want to call it, is having a terrible influence within the churches, and in the greater churches of God as well.

Some people who attend God's church are allowing themselves to be led into a religion of contemplative spirituality, where it does not matter as much what you believe as it does what you feel. Colossians 2:8 says:

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

The elect of God must beware of Satan's counterfeit Christian religion of emotionalism. Some of you seniors might recall the old 1960's slogan: "If it feels good; do it." Sadly these words are now the measure of spiritual health and morality in this society. It has spread like wildfire through the mainstream Christian community with little or no objection from church leaders who should know better.

Statistics show that increasingly, for the last several decades, churchgoers have by and large ditched their denominations for church networks and fellowship groups, often creating a de facto denomination based, not on the absolute truth of God's Word, but rather on an "the end justifies the means" false religion, where results and relationships are everything. "Doctrine will be sorted out in God's Kingdom," some people foolishly reason.

People, more often than not, surround themselves with ear ticklers who tell them what they want to hear rather than what the Word of God says, believing that feeling good is always good and feeling bad is always bad. Today's churches are producing "feelers for Jesus" rather than followers of Christ, but does anyone believe for a minute that Jesus Christ always felt good—especially at the time of His crucifixion?

When tribulation finally comes to America, many of today's Christians will think God has turned His back on them, or that He does not exist at all having never learned that loneliness, loss, betrayal, pain, rejection, scorn, sacrifice, and suffering are all part of a faithful Christian's walk throughout their lives. The apostle Paul experienced this time and time again in his ministry and travels. He explains that we must take the bad with the good and the suffering with the relief that comes from God.

II Corinthians 1:5-9 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came

to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. [Paul is speaking here, but many of the other disciples shared in these trials as well.] Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves [he includes looking at ourselves emotionally; satisfying the feelings rather than the belief in God] but in God who raises the dead.

Faced with despair, when someone like the false prophet comes along offering an alternative to suffering, many will be deceived and follow him as their new 'Christ' because he will make them "feel" good. It is already happening today and things have not even gotten dreadful yet. Increasingly, more professing Christians are becoming ashamed to be a follower of Christ. They do not want to feel uncomfortable, they do not want to feel different. Now turn to Mark 8.

Mark 8:36-38 "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

Those who are ashamed of the teachings of Jesus Christ and God's way of life are emotionally unbalanced and from that comes "feeling bad."

When the Worldwide Church of God started moving into apostasy, there were church members who tried to justify the watering down of doctrines by saying, "God wouldn't want us to suffer in order to obey Him" or, "the doctrines of the church, under Herbert W. Armstrong, were too hard." Those people will find out one day that what they thought was contemporary Christianity was really only apostasy and that one's love for the Father and Christ is not measured by compliance to and acceptance of this sinful world and its "feel good" ways, but rather by their obedience to His Word and a willingness to lose it all for Him and His Kingdom to come.

Although this sermon stands alone, it does have elements of two of my previous sermons earlier this year: "How God Deals With Conscience" and

“Are Your Feelings Fighting Your Faith.” Conscience, feelings, and emotions are capable of throwing us off balance, even hurting our faith.

Our emotions, if affected by sin, tend to confuse us and throw us off balance spiritually. Here is a physical example: A person might have a sound, rational faith in his surgeon, the operation to be performed, and the anesthesia, but he says, “that doesn’t alter the fact that when they have me down on the table and clap the mask over my face, a childish panic begins inside me and I become afraid that I’ll choke or that they’ll start cutting me up before I’m properly under. In others words, I lose my faith in anesthetics.” The battle is between faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other.

On the basis of this secular analysis we must recognize that our moods change and we should fight against them by daily prayer, Bible study, and submission to God if we are to grow in our belief. The ancients knew this too, although they thought, for the most part, secularly. This is not a new concept. This problem with feelings have been around for millennia.

For example Demosthenes, the Greek statesman from the 4th century BC said, “Nothing is so easy as to deceive oneself; for what we wish, that we readily believe.” Ovid, the Roman poet from the 1st century BC voiced the counterpart to Demosthenes saying: “We are slow to believe that which if believed would hurt our feelings.”

Now let us take a moment to compare balance and emotion. Rabbi Daniel Lapin, at www.rabbidaniellapin.com, on his “Madam, I’m Adam” audio CD uses the eyes and ears to help us understand the principle of balance and emotion. He quotes here:

God created the spiritual and physical worlds to reflect each other. Where did God choose to place our balance mechanisms? You know, the marvelous piece of equipment that allows us to remain upright on our feet even in a moving bus or train.

Well, anyone with an engineering background would know that the obvious place for the two pieces of balancing equipment to be

placed would be our hips, or perhaps our shoulders since both places are wide and stable. But no, this equipment is found in the one part of the body that moves around better than any other. Our heads! In fact, our balance mechanism is in our ears.

Do you have any idea of how many equivalent lines of software code our brains need to cancel out our head movements? Without that each time we move our heads our brains will tell our bodies that we are falling over. We would be constantly seasick and dizzy.

Now we have another major human feature, the human eye. Amazingly, it casts an upside down image upon our retinas. Now don't you think that "evolution" would just as easily have "evolved" a compound lens in our eyes that would have thrown up a right side up image instead of an inverted one?

However, there is a spiritual reality which God is revealing through these seemingly strange biological traits. What we see through our eyes is often distorted. Just think about it for a moment. Have more men that you know gotten involved with unsuitable women as a result of their eyes or of their ears?

Or how about this, have you purchased more things that you do not really need because you saw them with your eyes or heard about them with your ears? And if you are not sure, just check whether the catalogs are big on pictures or big on words. Or home shopping networks exist on radio or television.

The balance mechanism is in the ear to remind us, that in order to have a balanced approach to any topic, we do better by hearing about it or reading about it, which if you think for a moment, is also using the ear mechanism, not the eye, instead of looking at it.

I am more emotionally manipulated by things I see than by things I hear about. And when trying to analyze truth, emotion must be kept at a distance. So information through the eyes tends to be upside

down and easy for us to get distorted pictures of; while information through the ears tends to be much more balanced and allows us to accurately process it.

So he gives an interesting analogy there of the difference between the two.

Emotions are not the only things that influence our faith and often keep us from what godly reason tells us is true, particularly in spiritual matters. Emotions are one factor, and they were certainly a factor in Jacob's strange turmoil when he was told that Joseph was alive and ruler of all Egypt. At first Jacob refused to believe it.

Genesis 45:25-28 Then they [that is, Joseph's brothers] went up out of Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to Jacob their father. And they told him, saying, "Joseph is still alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt." And Jacob's heart stood still, because he did not believe them. But when they told him all the words which Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived. [But after he had heard the full story and had looked at the Egyptian carts sent by Pharaoh, Jacob regained his composure and said,] Then Israel [Jacob] said, "It is enough. Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."

This episode is worth examining for what it tells us about Jacob. It deals with faith and since faith is a matter of concern for all believers in all ages, it is also worth examining for what it tells us about ourselves, because we are often like Jacob.

There are some ways in which any true believer is like Abraham, who was a giant in faith, and Joseph, whose life was one long demonstration of faith. But when we consider ourselves carefully we have to admit that usually these faithful giants show us to be spiritual pygmies at times, and we sense that we do not live up to their faithful stature.

Our faith is not always great. Our Christian lives are not always marked by a constant and growing trust in God's sovereignty. Jacob was different from Abraham and Joseph. And although he was a true follower of the Eternal—at

least after God had mastered him in the wrestling match at Jabbok, and he is mentioned with the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11—nevertheless, he seemed to have been up and down in his faith throughout his life.

At times he was strong in faith, giving God glory, and at other times he was weak and self-pitying, as when he complained in Genesis 42:36 that: “Everything is against me!” It is a lethargic Christian who cannot see his or her own vacillating faith in Jacob’s inconsistencies. One point in which we often resemble Jacob is his readiness to believe bad news. Are we not all like that at times, we seem to want to believe the bad news?

Demosthenes said that we readily believe what we want to believe. But in his early days, Jacob seemed more inclined to believe bad news rather than good. So, when his sons came to him with Joseph’s bloodstained coat, notice what he replied.

Genesis 37:33 [Jacob speaking here] And he recognized it and said, “It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces.”

Jacob could have held off accepting this. He could have sent someone to see if Joseph might merely have been wounded or at least to find the body, but he did not. He immediately assumed the worst and grew despondent.

We can find excuses for Jacob. We can point out that Jacob had undoubtedly had a rough life, though much of it was caused by his own failures. His father had preferred his twin brother, Esau, to him and was determined to give Esau the inheritance. After he had cheated Esau, Jacob was forced to flee from home and take refuge with his Uncle Laban in Haran. There Laban had taken advantage of him. He was cheated in his first marriage, and his wages were changed ten times, always to the advantage of Laban rather than himself. He said of those days, in Genesis 31,

Genesis 31:40-41 "There I was! In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep departed from my eyes. [Jacob is speaking to Laban here] Thus I have been in your house

twenty years; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times."

So on the way home Laban pursued him, and for a while Jacob felt that his life was in danger. Genesis 32 records how the Lord Himself wrestled with him, and his hip was dislocated. His sons killed the Shechemites, and he was then in danger of reprisal by the Canaanites. His beloved wife, Rachel, died while giving birth to Benjamin. Then, at last, he suffered what he believed to be the death of his favorite son, Joseph.

Yes, Jacob really suffered a lot, but notice: he had not suffered as greatly as Joseph had, nor as innocently, yet Joseph was not complaining; he did not ever seem to fail to have faith in God; he did not allow his battered emotions to cause him to believe bad news and reject the good.

What was Jacob's problem? It was his emotions. The clue to his frame of mind is seen in Genesis 47:9, where Jacob tells Pharaoh, "My years have been few and difficult." Difficult? Possibly, but not few! Jacob was 130 years old at this time. But that is the way he viewed his life, emotionally.

What his comment really shows is that Jacob was again feeling sorry for himself and was trying to get sympathy. Consequently he was not strong in faith at this time nor giving full glory to God, as Joseph and his fathers, Abraham and Isaac before him had done. But, usually Jacob was faithful throughout his life, so we give him credit for that. But he also lived a life that many of us live, where he had to struggle and his faith was tested on a regular basis.

To understand some of Jacob's inconsistency, let us look for a moment at feelings and moods in marriage. Husbands and wives should not emit despair and hopelessness to each other no matter how they feel. We should not let it excrete out of us without our mindfulness and control. You are the one who let it happen; now you are the one that must stop it (speaking of our feelings).

Rabbi Daniel Lapin states that: "when certain words do not exist in the Lord's Hebrew, it is a good clue that they are describing a false or non-existent idea. For instance you cannot find a word for conscience, because the Torah

never says follow your conscience. The Torah says to follow the directions of God."

Similarly, there are no words in the Torah for "mood" or "feeling." This is because we are not encouraged to shape our lives and determine our conduct based on our mood or our feelings.

"Pray to God, when you are in the mood for it?" "Be faithful to your spouse, as long as you are in the mood?" "Feed your children, when the mood strikes you?" "Go to work every day to support your family, if you feel like it?" Of course not!

No thoughtful person could ever think that he could keep a job, or be a good citizen, if he did things when he felt like them or when he was in the mood. We humans are expected to work out our obligations, not our moods and feelings.

So how does this apply to our marriages? Our behavior applies to every area in our marriages—spiritually, emotionally, and physically. We have no right to act in a negative way just because we feel like it, and, vice-versa, we have no right to refuse to act in a positive way because we do not feel like it. We must be in control our feelings.

It is a shameful excuse to say, "I can't help how I feel." That is a lie! Do not fall into that trap! If you are a Christian, God requires that you have self-control and in fact, we are to produce it as a fruit of His Spirit which dwells in us.

Modern society has it totally backward and upside down. The tenth commandment is not: do not steal things owned by other people. The tenth commandment is: do not even want things owned by other people. God wants us to control our every thought. Here in II Corinthians 10 it says:

II Corinthians 10:3-5 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting

down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ

Nothing is mentioned there about our feelings, or dealing with our feelings as far as giving in to them or trying to make ourselves happy. Knowing that we can control our feelings and mood, because we have the assurance that the weapons of our spiritual warfare are “mighty in God,” empowers us to take these God-given tools and apply them in our lives, thereby dramatically enhancing our marriage and our whole life.

A phrase that never belongs in a marriage is “I’m not in the mood,” unless you are discussing what kind of food you want. Stop feeling things that could hurt your relationship with your spouse. It is not something that is easy to do, but it is something that is simple to do. Force yourself to do what you should do. This takes determination.

So men, consider this: after a frustrating day do not carry bad news home to your wife. We men have a problem in this area. When we have a tough day, we wear it on our faces as we walk in the front door, but we should instead walk in with a smile on your face, even though inside you may be worried, irritated, and miserable. Show her by your good mood and positive tone of voice that you value, love, and respect her, and that you are glad to be home with her. Your wife will love you for it, and you will feel much better yourself. If you do this consistently, you will very likely begin to actually feel that way more often as well when you enter your home.

Now I am not suggesting that we should keep dark, deep secrets from our spouses, or that we have to pretend that everything is wonderful when it is not. We obviously must not be false-hearted. There is a time to discuss feelings, worries, and fears, but we are meant to have the control to speak about these things at the right time and place, rather than just venting them out whenever we are under the grip of those feelings, or whenever we feel like it.

Also, a wife must realize that her husband needs to know that she respects and admires him as much as he needs to breathe. And a husband must realize that his wife needs to know that he loves and cherishes her as much as she needs to drink, or sustain herself.

God intended for us to be full of good news, not bad news. He created us to be givers, not takers. In our marriages we should give whenever we wish and also even when we do not.

Now back to Jacob. He was unreasonably willing to believe bad news and probably carried it home with him. It is part of this same picture that he was also unreasonably reluctant to believe what was good. The brothers came with the report: “Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt.” But “Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them.”

Earlier Jacob had believed the bad report that Joseph was dead, although in fact that report was not true, and now he refused to believe the good report that Joseph was alive, although by contrast this report was accurate.

People today are somewhat like that when they hear God’s truth. The gospel is good news: God loves you; Jesus Christ has died for your sins; Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you and will return to receive you to Himself forever. But to the unsaved these things sound like foolishness and mere fantasies.

Think of the Emmaus disciples, Cleopas, and probably his wife, Mary, who had been in Jerusalem during the crucifixion and had no trouble believing that Jesus was dead and buried. Bad news was quite believable to most people at that time. But when news came to them, by way of the women who had been at the tomb, that Jesus’ body was no longer there and that angels had appeared and said that He had risen as He had said, they did not believe the women. And in fact, they did not even go to the tomb to investigate the reports. They continued collecting their belongings and then started out for home.

This was the best news the world has ever heard, yet they did not believe it because they were going by their emotions and feelings and by bad news,

which they were very willing to believe. The Emmaus disciples would not believe it because they had allowed their downward-crashing emotions to blot out everything Jesus had told them about His coming victory over death.

My question here: is that you? Are you so wrapped up in yourself, so disheartened by circumstances, that you cannot believe the good news as they failed to do? If so, you must turn to the Scriptures, pray that Jesus Christ will Himself reveal their meaning to you, and reveal Himself to you. Once again we will read here in Genesis 45,

Genesis 45:25-26 Then they went up out of Egypt, and came to the land of Canaan to Jacob their father. And they told him, saying, "Joseph is still alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt." And Jacob's heart stood still, because he did not believe them.

He had good news, but he could not bring himself to believe it, yet he believed the bad news. Is that not how the world receives God's truth and how even some of us receive good news? This has to do with faith and if we can just truly believe that God has told us the truth and all these things have truly happened, then our faith should be increased like the heroes of faith.

Jacob was gloom personified at times, but even though he inclined naturally to bad news, the gospel is nevertheless good news and what is true has an inevitable way of pushing itself forward and demanding belief. The good news that Joseph was alive compelled Jacob in three ways.

First, Jacob was confronted by the personal testimony of those who knew what they were talking about.

In the short time they had spent with Joseph in Egypt after he had revealed himself to them, there was much the brothers did not know. They would have been unable to learn very much about his past history, that is, the time after they had put him in slavery. They would have known little about his family, little about his relationship to the Pharaoh, little about his work in the administration of Egypt.

And on the spiritual side, they would have known next to nothing about the way God had ordered world events to preserve Joseph and place him at the

pinnacle of power in Egypt. If Jacob had asked them how it had happened, they would have had to reply simply, “We don’t know.” Nevertheless, they knew the important thing; that they had met Joseph, and they knew he was alive. Consequently they returned to their father with convincing testimonies.

Secondly, Jacob was given an account of everything that had happened. The record says, “everything Joseph had said to them,” but I cannot imagine that they were able to tell this without, at the same time, confessing their own sad part in selling Joseph into Egypt. Part of the report must have been a confession of their sin and their subsequent lies to cover up that sin.

Now there is something convincing about the confession of sin, for the simple reason that it is so unusual. Men and women do not naturally confess their sin. On the contrary, they deny it and make excuses for their conduct. Since this is undoubtedly true, does it not follow that the disciples of Christ, who genuinely acknowledge themselves to be sinners, have had something extraordinary happen that has enabled them to confess where others cannot? The record actually says the brothers reported “everything Joseph had said to them.”

Charles Haddon Spurgeon comments on this and says:

Those words of Joseph were remarkable words, for he traced God’s providence in all that had happened. He said to his brethren, ‘God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God, and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.’

Jacob knew that those words were after the manner of Joseph, for Joseph always lived in the fear and love of God. Joseph also spoke somewhat about his own position and power: ‘Tell my father,’ he said, ‘thus saith thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt.’

Joseph had also spoken to them very tenderly and kindly about their father. He would do everything for his father and his brethren, giving them the best of the land.

So Jacob would have recognized their account of what they had found out about Joseph, because Jacob would have known the character of Joseph, his personality, and disposition. Would not Jacob say to himself, “There’s something convincing about this. Those words are very much like Joseph, they sound true”?

Similarly, followers of Christ often quote His words, and you will always notice that those words have a true ring about them. If you read those words yourself as they are found in the Holy Scriptures, you will find yourself concluding, as the well-known English scholar and Bible translator J. B. Phillips concluded, after he had translated the four Gospels, that the words of Jesus are “alive with power” and bear within them “the ring of truth.” Here was a man that was very likely unconverted, but yet he still recognized the “ring of truth” in there and that there was an unusual power above and beyond in those words.

The third factor that moved Jacob from his gloomy unbelief to final joyful acceptance of Joseph’s being alive was the evidence of the carts that had been brought from Egypt.

Genesis 45:27 But when they told him all the words which Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived.

Are there spiritual parallels to these carts from Egypt? Yes, there are. The Sabbath is just such a gift. God appointed the Sabbath day to give rest to men and the very institution of the Sabbath is a “gift cart” which brings us to the Father and the Son.

God’s calling of ministers to preach His gospel is another such gift. Surely, God did not send us to speak in His name, and move us to an agony about the spiritual health of the brethren, if He did not mean to bless the brethren.

Neither of these exhausts the many gifts God sends to assure you of His love and of Christ's work on your behalf. The Bible tells us in James 1,

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

Your very life is from Him, it is a "cart" from heaven and so is your health, friendship, love, and everything else you value. God has given these precisely so that your eyes and ears may be opened and you might be brought to full faith in Jesus Christ and God the Father.

The final point is that these forces for good eventually had their way with Jacob, and he responded with positive action that can only be called the fruit of true faith.

Genesis 45:28 Then Israel [Jacob] said, "It is enough. Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."

It is significant that the Bible refers to Jacob by his covenant name of Israel at this point. Why? Because up to now his name has been Jacob. In fact, "Jacob" has been used three times in this passage: "So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan"; "Jacob was stunned"; "When he saw the carts Joseph had sent to carry him back, the spirit of their father Jacob revived." But now suddenly "Israel."

Notice the beginning of verse 28 again, "Then Israel said, 'It is enough.'" This takes us back to the story in which Jacob wrestled with the angel, who was the Lord Himself, was overcome by Him, and as a result received the name "Israel," which means "God rules," "God commands," or "God overcomes."

When Jacob is in charge we get "Jacob," a whining, self-pitying, complaining type of man. When God overcomes, we get "Israel," a true, faithful child of God. It is as "Israel" that this man draws himself together, rises to his full height, collects his numerous family members, and sets out for Egypt to see his son Joseph before he dies.

Often when a person is racked by doubt and is feeling sorry for himself, he thinks that one reason why he must not commit himself to God is that he will have to change, but humanly he wants to keep his identity. No one has ever surrendered himself or herself to God who has not been changed as a result. But what a change it is! And why not be changed? Why not believe? How can you be harmed, even though changed, by Him who has always held your own best interests in His heart?

There are not a large number of places in the Bible where God suddenly called out to a servant of His by name, but there are a few of them. One example of God's call is to Samuel when he was just a boy.

I Samuel 3:10 records that, the Lord said, "Samuel! Samuel!" When the boy eventually understood that it was God calling and not Eli the priest, he responded, "Speak, for Your servant is listening."

I will remind you here that he did not need to see God to believe, his listening was enough. Remember, what we see through our eyes is often distorted; but the balance mechanism is in our ears and in our hearing.

A second example is Paul, called Saul before he was converted. God stopped him when he was on the road to Damascus to murder Christians, saying in Acts 9,

Acts 9:4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Genesis 22:1 and 11 records that God called Abraham, Jacob's grandfather in the matter of the sacrificing his son Isaac:

Genesis 22:1 Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

Genesis 22:11 But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am."

There is a similar call of Jacob. Jacob had started down to Egypt to see Joseph, but he had paused at Beersheba, being fearful of what might lie ahead.

Genesis 46:1-4 So Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. Then God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, “Jacob, Jacob!” And he said, “Here I am.” So He said, “I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will put his hand on your eyes.”

God reassured him: “Jacob! Jacob!” “Here I am,” he replied. This revelation was all Jacob needed. The next verses picture him going on his way confidently and we do not read of his being fearful ever again.

In each of these instances there was a major crisis in a believer’s life. But there was also a word from God that made all the difference. Samuel became a distinguished leader in Israel, a transition figure between the judges and the kings. Paul became a great apostle of the gospel. Abraham grew to be a giant in faith, the father of the faithful! In this sermon, however, we are concentrating on what happened to Jacob.

The clue to understanding Jacob’s experience is to recognize that he was fearful, justifiably so from a human perspective. He was fearful of a lot of things. Jacob had come to Beersheba, the place that marked the southernmost boundary of the land that God had given to his grandfather Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants.

Each of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had lived at Beersheba for at least one period of their lives. There was an altar there at which Abraham and Isaac had worshipped. In later years the phrase “from Dan to Beersheba” was used to designate all the territory of Israel. While Jacob remained in Beersheba he was on what we would call “his own turf.” But beyond Beersheba was desert, and beyond that was Egypt. Jacob had never been beyond Beersheba.

Some of the questions he had asked himself probably went something like this: “What would I find if I started south? Would we be safe in that country? Would a move at this stage in my life really be beneficial to my large family?” Did Jacob have any anxiety about relocating to Egypt?

Let us notice a few possible causes for his concern in addition to these. First, Jacob was an old man and apart from any other considerations, a change of this magnitude at this stage of his life was difficult. Elderly people generally do not like changes, that is just a fact of life.

Young men and women can move easily from place to place and it does not seem bother them. On the contrary to the elderly, a move in youth is an adventure, it seethes with excitement. In old age a person tends to settle down, grow accustomed to the living environment, and fear changes. Remember that Jacob was about 130 years old at this time, so no doubt he was feeling quite old.

Genesis 47:9 And Jacob said to Pharaoh, “The days of the years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.”

Here Jacob was comparing himself to his father and grandfather’s longevity and his had not compared to that yet. Jacob had lived in Canaan for many years and it was a difficult for him to pull up stakes, as it is for many older people today to break with their past and follow God’s leading to a new field of service.

Another possible cause for Jacob's concern was that Egypt was a very pagan country. Jacob may not have known much personally about Egypt, but he would certainly have known its most significant characteristics.

First, it was noted for its age, prosperity, and technology. Egypt had been around as long as humanity could remember, and during the long centuries of its history it had developed a superb understanding of mathematics, architecture, astronomy, agriculture, and medicine. It was the most highly

developed and most sophisticated nation on earth at this time. But it was also pagan, its other noteworthy characteristic.

It had a pantheon of gods: Osiris, Hapimon, and Tauret, who were gods of the Nile; Nu, the god of life in the river; Geb, god of the land. There were Nephri, the grain god; Anubis, guardian of the fields; Min, deity of the harvest and crops. There were also gods in the form of animals: Apis, the bull god; Hathor, the cow goddess; Sekhmet, the lion; Khnum, the ram; Sobek, the crocodile; Thoth, the ibis; Horus and Month, the bird gods. Nut was the sky; Shu, the atmosphere. Greatest of all was Ra, the sun god, thought to be embodied in the reigning Pharaoh. Egypt was the perfect example of Paul's portrait of degenerate religion in Romans 1.

Romans 1:21-23 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

The Egyptians may not have known God at that time, but they certainly would have known of Joseph's God. Even though Jacob may not have known all the details of this debased paganism, he must have known enough about it to fear it because he would have remembered the effect on his family of the far less sophisticated sins of Canaan.

Jacob had had a difficult time keeping his family close to God there and what would happen to them in the far more dangerous environment of Egypt, an environment that was very much like Babylon? Egypt was pagan to the core.

Another possible cause for Jacob's concern was that Egypt held bad past memories for Jacob. The patriarchs remembered what had happened to their fathers and grandfathers and Jacob would have been aware of Abraham's fall when he went down to Egypt.

Abraham was human and made mistakes, especially early in his life, but as he spiritually matured he became a giant in faith, a model for his posterity.

Yet, in spite of his stature, there was a time when Abraham had gone to Egypt and there had lied about his wife, saying she was his sister for fear that the men of Egypt would kill him in order to take her.

Any of us men would probably do the same thing, we would be fearful that our wife would be taken. It would be hard to have the amount of faith needed in that situation. He did have that faith later on in his life, but at this time he did not. In fact the Pharaoh did take Sarah into his palace. The story tells how God protected Sarah, and even Abraham, but Abraham was rebuked by Pharaoh. Here is the story.

Genesis 12:10-20 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land. And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance. Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.” So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh’s house. He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels. But the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. And Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister’? I might have taken her as my wife. Now therefore, here is your wife; take her and go your way.” So Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had.

This was probably the lowest point in Abraham’s long life, and it was associated with Egypt. Jacob would know this and he would have known how easy it would be, since even Abraham had been fearful for his own family, to be carried down as well.

Another possible cause for his concern was that Jacob had been warned of future evils. Back in the early history of this people God had appeared to Abraham to say that his descendants would be sojourners and pilgrims. Genesis 15:13 tells us:

Genesis 15:13 Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.”

It may be that the old Jacob, with a discerning eye, began to suspect that this was to be the land which caused Abraham the horror of great darkness which was set forth before him as the fiery furnace and the smoking land, and so he was afraid to go down into Egypt.

This is not unlike things that make many of us fearful, especially as we grow older. It is true, that although we do not know of any specifics about any possible future personal suffering on our part, nevertheless we know enough of life to see that “man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward,” as Job tells us in Job 5:7.

Such knowledge causes people to tremble before change. In fact, God inspired wise King Solomon to record this warning, that those who have a habit of change are unstable.

Proverbs 24:21-22 My son, fear the Lord and the king; do not associate with those given to change; for their calamity will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin those two can bring?

We look at this nation and realize that even the presidency was run on “change,” and what a horrible change it has been. “For their calamity will rise suddenly.” That is an inherent penalty for the wrong kind of change. A mindset that tends toward ongoing variations in life is susceptible to disaster and destruction.

Jacob had trembled before, when he feared Esau when he had cheated him of the birthright and had been forced to run away. He had trembled again on the banks of the Jabbok when he was about to meet Esau again after twenty years, and Jacob was trembling over the thought of going to Egypt.

But he had learned something from those two earlier occasions, and it stood him in good stead. On each of those former occasions God had appeared to him: once at Bethel in the vision of the great ladder reaching from heaven to earth, and once at Jabbok when the heavenly Messenger appeared to wrestle him into personal submission. Jacob had never been the same after that.

So now, instead of waiting for God to manifest Himself to him in some new or startling way, Jacob actually sought God. The story in Genesis 46 tells us that he worshipped by offering “sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.” He probably worshipped by acknowledging God’s past blessings and faithfulness, by praising and thanking Him and by praying for guidance, as well as the animal sacrifices.

Jacob would have offered sacrifices to purge his household of any sin that might exist, as he did earlier at Bethel. He would have offered them to give thanks. After all, he was going to Egypt because Joseph, his beloved son, was alive and was there, and Joseph had asked him to come. Of course, Jacob worshipped to seek the mind of God in his relocation.

At Bethel, when Jacob was setting out for Haran for fear of Esau, God said that He would be with him wherever he would go. Those are some of the most encouraging words in the entire Bible.

Genesis 28:12-15 Then he [Jacob] dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it and said: “I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.”

All whom God has chosen have this same promise: “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” Those are powerful and miraculous words and they do miraculous things for us. But God had also been firm in telling the patriarchs that they were to live in Canaan and seek blessing there.

God seemed to be acting providentially in sending Joseph before Jacob to Egypt to preserve many people, including his own family, but how could Jacob be sure? It was time to seek the will of God and so Jacob did. He had faith, but he realized that it was not strong enough to do this alone, he needed God's strength.

Many Christians get into trouble at this point because they are confronted with change and suspect that God may be leading them, but they do not pause to ask Him whether He is or not, and as a result they often go off in wrong directions and waste precious years of their lives.

Earlier in his life, Jacob had himself wasted more than twenty years because he had humanly reasoned that he could help God out by cheating his father. But he had learned and now worshipped the God of his fathers and sought his guidance before going forward. That is the important thing for all of us, that we learn from our past mistakes.

When we are fearful or greatly perplexed we sometimes wonder if God will hear and answer us when we pray to Him. God is always more eager to answer than we are to ask. He is more eager to guide than we are to follow. This was the case here. Jacob worshipped and it was immediately after this, perhaps that very night, that God told him he was on the right track and that He would bless him even in the distant and dangerous land of Egypt.

Here are several things God's reassuring words to Jacob can teach us. First, God called him by name: “Jacob! Jacob!” in Genesis 46:2, thereby showing that He knew him and was still his own personal God, every bit as much as He was the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, before him.

It is wonderful to come from a God-fearing family, so you can say, “My God is the God of my father and mother and of their fathers and mothers before them.” The benefits of a moral and upright upbringing are not to be despised,

but should be highly valued. Still, wonderful as this is, the immediate and important thing is whether God is your God and whether you are known by Him personally, which you are if you have genuinely repented, been baptized, and received God's Holy Spirit.

The second thing God's reassuring words to Jacob teach us is that God reaffirmed His covenant with Jacob by the words, "I am God, the God of your father," there in Genesis 46:3. This was not an idle statement. If the God who was speaking to Jacob was the God of Abraham, He was therefore also the God of Isaac, both of whom He had led with absolute faithfulness. God was absolutely trustworthy with those men and He is trustworthy with the members of His church today.

God had led Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, brought him to a new land, and there preserved him in the midst of natural disasters and external threats from enemies. He had kept and protected Isaac and now, Jacob knew he could trust God's faithfulness.

What a God He is, this God of the covenant! He is Abraham's God; He was faithful to Abraham throughout his long life, He is Isaac's God, Jacob's God, Moses' God, David's God, and He is your God and my God. This very continuity should strengthen us for whatever lies ahead.

The third thing God's reassuring words to Jacob teach us is that God had a promise for Jacob. He told him not to fear going down to Egypt, and said: "for I [God] will make you into a great nation there." In our lives we may not be able to discern what individual special promise God may have given to each of us personally, nevertheless, there is at least a promise analogous to Jacob's—that God will work in us and others to build a people to the praise of the glory of His grace.

In addition, we have all the promises revealed to us in God's Word to the elect, God's own special people, which we are. We have a picture of this people in the book of Revelation, where a multitude surround the throne of God and sing out a new song to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Revelation 5:9-10 And they [the elect] sang a new song, saying:
"You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You

were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.”

Often we have a small view of what God is doing, but it will calm our fears if we can see our work as a part of His large plan and know that we are part of that great body which He calls His Family and the Bride of Christ.

God’s final word for Jacob was that He promised to go with him as he went to Egypt, to be with him even in death, and eventually to bring his body back to Canaan, the land of promise.

Genesis 46:4 “I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes.”

After Jacob’s descendants spent many generations in Egypt, Jacob’s body would be brought back to Canaan and buried in the cave where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Leah had been buried, where they await their resurrection.

Was not Egypt still a frightening place to have before him? Yes, it was and so is this nation for us. Was there not a genuine danger of spiritual decay and even physical enslavement? Yes, that too, but what a difference when the God of the covenant says that He will go with us, bless us, and bring us back again.

If God were not with us, we should fear to take even a single step, but because God is with us, we can walk through anything and come out again spiritually unscathed, because we have God’s Spirit. We have access to the mind of God and the wisdom it contains.

Apparently Jacob understood and believed this, because he responded positively in spite of the danger and his old age. Jacob had total obedience, he left, leaving not a person or possession behind. God has preserved the members of this chosen family, whose calling it is to walk with Him, to be the headwaters of a special people and to be the channel by which blessing comes to the entire world.

This truth has applications to others in similar situations. You may be on the verge of a major change, and you may be uncertain about it, even fearful. If so, do not take another step until you seek God's wisdom. Ask Him to show you the way you should go. We will end here with Isaiah 48. The caption here says: "God's Ancient Plan to Redeem Israel"

Isaiah 48:12-17 "Listen to Me, O Jacob, and Israel, My called: I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last. Indeed My hand has laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand has stretched out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand up together. All of you, assemble yourselves, and hear! Who among them has declared these things? The Lord loves him; He shall do His pleasure on Babylon, and His arm shall be against the Chaldeans. I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him, I have brought him, and his way will prosper. Come near to Me, hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, I was there. And now the Lord God and His Spirit have sent Me." Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you by the way you should go."

May you be a faithful follower of Christ and not a fearful "feeler for Jesus."