

When Fear Challenges Faith

Genesis 15

In 1996, Jon Krakauer was one of an expedition of eight who made it to the top of Mt. Everest, the tallest mountain in the world. This is an extraordinary accomplishment, one that few people have ever achieved. You might think this would be cause for great celebration. That is what Jon had thought before he made the climb.

His book, *Into Thin Air*, describes his feelings upon reaching the summit, "I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, actually standing on the summit of Mt. Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care." He writes, "Reaching the top of Everest is supposed to trigger a surge of intense elation... But the summit was really only the halfway point."

The fact was Jon still had to get down the mountain. He did get down. However, he was the only one. The rest of the team died on the mountain when a rogue storm blew in. Sometimes our greatest challenge doesn't come in getting to the summit, but in coming down.

Abraham knows this feeling well. In Chp. 14, he made it to the top of a great mountain. With only 318 men, a little skill, a little strategy, and a whole lot of faith in God, Abraham pursued the combined armies of 4 kings for 150 miles, successfully attacked and defeated them, and he rescued not only his nephew's family, but everyone and everything that had been taken from the five cities of the plain. Abraham also has a spiritual mountain top experience. He has a time of worship led by the mysterious priest, a foreshadowing of Jesus, named Melchizedek. He avoids becoming entangled with the king of Sodom. Time for a big party, right? Time for the ticker-tape parade and a key to the city. Time for Abraham to build another altar in praise to God.

What we don't expect are the opening words of Genesis 15. "*After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid' Abram.*" We are not told exactly what happened, but from what God says to him we know what's going on in Abraham's heart. Our hero of faith is afraid. He's scared. The Hebrew word translated *afraid* here simply means "fear, dread, terror." This isn't just a little anxiety. My Hebrew dictionary says this word is, "an emotional and intellectual anticipation of harm, what one feels may go wrong for him."

Here is our great hero of the faith cowering in the corner of his tent and his knees are knocking together. Instead of thanking God for the victory, instead of worship, he is afraid.

This might not be what we expect from a hero of the faith, but we understand Abraham don't we? His reaction really isn't all that unusual. In fact, it is the same way we sometimes feel after we reach some pinnacle in our lives. It is the very nature of faith to take us where we are afraid. To follow Jesus we must sometimes follow him to places we otherwise would not want to go. The journey of faith leads out of our comfort zone places where we must trust God. When that trust wavers, when we wonder and doubt, it opens the door to fear.

Abraham is not alone in his fear and neither are you. Some of our greatest battles with fear happen after our greatest victories. The same David that faced down a giant, later fled to Philistia in fear of Saul. The same prophet Elijah that bravely won a showdown with 800 prophets of Baal, turned around and hid in the desert in fear of Queen Jezebel. The same apostle Peter, who had the faith to get out of the boat and walk on the water, became fearful of waves and began to sink.

It happened to Abraham. It happened to Elijah. It happened to David. It happened to Peter. It happens to us. But why? Why was Abraham afraid? What was he afraid of?

I. Three Fears of Abraham...and Ourselves

There are three things that could have made Abraham afraid, and each of these things connects to a deeper fear that we all share.

A. Fear of Reprisal from the Invading Kings

The first thing Abraham could have been afraid of was the fear of reprisal from the invading kings. He just attacked and defeated one of the most powerful kings in the world. Sure, he may have caught him by surprise, and sure God may have delivered victory into his hands. But what's going to happen once the king reorganizes and gets his act together. He's going to be ticked and he'll be coming after me. What will I do if he retaliates?

Though I don't think any of us have attacked and defeated a powerful army lately, this connects to a deeper fear that we all share. That fear is this: ***What have I gotten myself into?*** I've bitten off more than I can chew. I'll never be able to follow through with this. Here are some times this fear might pop up. You finally popped the question, and she said yes. You're been accepted into a university several states away. You're going into a degree program that stretches you to your limit. You accept a new job that and now you're not sure you're up to the challenge. You just found out you're having a baby. You just quit your job so you can stay home with your children and provide a godly influence. You just started a new ministry. You just answered the call to teach

a class, to help with VBS, to be a youth sponsor. You prayed. You thought about. You sought Godly counsel. You sought God's will, but now that you've done it, you feel fear break over you like a white-capped ocean wave and your heart cries out, "What have I gotten myself into?"

B. Fear of Having No Heir

As scary as the thought is of having an enraged tyrant and his armies wanting to make Swiss cheese of your derriere, that is not what scared Abraham the most. What filled Abraham with the most fear was the thought that he would have no true heir. In Genesis 12, God promised Abraham that he would make his name great and make him into a great nation. From Abraham's point of view, in the context of his ancient near eastern culture, there was no way that could happen, if he didn't have any descendants to carry on that name. Look at verse 2 and what Abraham said to God after God told him not to be afraid, "*But Abram said, 'O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?'*" He's saying my accomplishments will mean nothing, if there is no one to carry on after me.

Again Abraham's fear reflects deeper fears that linger in our own hearts. One of them is ***what will be my legacy?*** What difference does my life make? After I spend my 70, 80 or 90 years here what will I leave behind? We want to know that our life amounts to something, that we have a purpose here, and that we fit into God's plan. We fear that our life won't matter.

But there is a deeper, more sinister fear lurking in Abraham's words. Years have passed since God made his promise and he still has no children. He left everything to follow God's call, he trusted everything to God's promise, and now he wonders if God can deliver.

The deeper fear that we share is this- ***Will God keep his promises?*** Will he really do what He said? Are my sins really forgiven? Is there really a heaven? Can God really get me through this? Will he really not let me be tempted beyond what I can bear? Has he really gifted me? Has he really called me? Am I really created in His image?

C. Fear of Having No Reward

Another reason Abraham may have been afraid is that he had a fear of having no reward. In chapter 14 Abraham relinquished all claim to the spoils of battle. He gave everything back. He had great wealth and political power within his grasp and he gave it all up. Now he fears he has nothing to show for it. We see this fear in verse 8, "*O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will*

gain possession of [this land].” He wants to trust God for his reward, but there is no sign of it yet. Maybe Abraham is thinking, “I just gave up a sure thing, now what am I going to do. I can't believe what I just gave up.”

Again this connects to a deeper fear we all share. ***What do I get out of this?*** Sometimes as Christians we give up what seem like sure rewards in this life, to sacrifice and do what God wants us to do. Later, fear causes us to feel like we have nothing to show for it. We look around and it seems like non-Christians who do whatever they want and get to have it all.

I know Christians who have turned down job offers or promotions because of the price their spouse and family would have to pay. They want to honor them and honor God by being the husband or wife, the father or mother God calls them to be. But then later they think, “Man, I just gave up \$10,000 dollars a year. What did I do? I've worked for that position my entire career. I just passed up a dream.” After we give up something because of our relationship with Jesus we'll be tempted to wonder if it was worth it, and our fear will be that it isn't.

These fears aren't unusual. We aren't the only ones that have them. Abraham struggled with these same fears, yet his faith was able to overcome them. We don't need to give up when we have these fears. In fact we should expect them. They are a part of a growing faith.

II. Three Reasons We Face Fear after Victory

A. Body Chemistry

Let me give three reasons why we face these fears after victory. The first reason is physical, and then there are a couple of spiritual reasons. Part of this is just how God created us. It's a basic function of body chemistry. God created human beings to be remarkably resilient under pressure. People are amazed by what they can do when they have to. You've heard stories of amazing feats of strength and incredible endurance in a time of crisis.

I'm a history buff, and one of my favorite history books is *1776* by David McCullough. It chronicles the darkest days faced by George Washington and his Continental Army after independence was declared from England. They suffered multiple crushing defeats as the British drove them from New York. They were forced to retreat time after time. Sickness and disease decimated their ranks. Dejected soldiers were defecting from their ranks on a daily basis. Public opinion turned against them as growing numbers signed papers to accept King George's offer of a pardon. They had no warm clothes as they headed into winter. Many of them had no shoes. They

were forced to march mile after mile as they retreated across New Jersey with little to no food to eat.

Finally, when all hope seemed lost, when it seemed nothing would stop the British from reaching America's largest city, Philadelphia, George Washington tried one last desperate gambit to turn things around. On Christmas night, with temperatures plummeting, facing snow and ice, Washington was going to take his bedraggled army across the Delaware in a surprise attack. They were going to cross in three groups. Unfortunately, two groups were unable to cross because of ice. The group that did make it was hours behind schedule and had lost the cover of darkness. Even worse, they were unable to get most of their cannon and horses across. Yet despite all of these odds, they were able to rout a much superior force. There was no way they could win, but it's amazing what people can do when they have to.

After the crisis, when the adrenaline rush has let down, we just feel overwhelmed by everything. Emotional lows naturally follow emotional highs. Fear is only a natural feeling in this circumstance. This isn't all about spiritual maturity. There is basic body chemistry going on.

B. God Gives Grace for the Moment

There are also spiritual reasons for why we face fear after victory. One of them is that God gives us grace for the moment. God gives us the grace to face challenges as they happen. He gives us just what we need when we need it. Under regular circumstances say we only need this level of God's strength and support, but in a time of crisis we need this level of grace.

Under regular circumstances we could never deal with that crisis, but God supernaturally and spiritually sustains us and enables us to get through it. Afterwards, when things are back to normal, we look back and realize just how in over our heads we were. We realize we had no business making it through, but we did. This realization can make you feel very weak and vulnerable, because you think, if something like that ever happens again, there's no way you could make it a second time.

C. Satanic Attack

A third reason we face fear after victory is Satanic attack. Satan doesn't want to see you grow. He doesn't want to see you become more Christ like. So when you have a victory in your life, he's going to come after you. He's going to try to undo what God has done in your life. He knows

that after such victories that you are physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausted and he will try to take advantage of that.

III. God's Promise

God understood Abraham's situation. He knew he had stepped out in faith and risked everything. He knew that Abraham had unselfishly given up the best pasture land to Lot. He knew that he had rescued his ungrateful nephew. God also knew that Abraham had refused to identify with the world's system and get tied up with the wicked king of Sodom.

God understood Abraham's feelings. He understood Abraham's fears. And so God responded to Abraham and reassured him. God repeats and expands his promise of becoming a great nation. He promised descendants as numerous as the stars. God also repeats and expands his promise of giving him the Promised Land.

The greatest part of God's promise, however, was that he offered himself. God gave Abraham his promise, *"I am your shield, your very great reward."* God is saying, "I am your protection. I am your provision." This assurance is given with the command, *"Do not be afraid."* It is the first time this command is given in God's Word, but it is to be repeated dozens and dozens of times. God says it to Gideon, Moses, Joshua, Mary, to the twelve and to Paul. *"Do not be afraid."* God is saying "Fear not, Abraham, you have me."

If you read through the rest of the chapter you'll read about what seems to us to be a very strange ritual that God goes through with Abraham. He has Abraham sacrifice some animals, a heifer, a goat, a ram, dove, and a pigeon and cut them in half and then God passes through them in the form of a smoking firepot and a flaming torch.

God is acting out an ancient covenant. Ancient parties would bind themselves to each other in a treaty where they would walk between the dismembered parts of sacrificed animals. It was a dramatization of a promise and curse. It was a way of saying, "I will keep my promises, and if I don't, then may I be dismembered just as these animals are." It's God who walks through these carcasses. It is God who offers himself, and puts himself on the line. There has been much speculation as to why God represented himself as a firepot and a torch, although fire is a frequent symbol for God in Scripture. Anything I say is nothing more than conjecture. The important thing here is that God offers himself to Abraham. God is saying, "Abraham, you don't have to be afraid, because I'll put myself on the line for you."

God has put himself on the line for you as well and in the greatest way possible. It wasn't just the symbolic act of walking through the divided remains of sacrificed animals. It was His own Son on the cross. It was His own blood that was spilled. It was His own flesh that was ripped apart. Part of what God was saying on the cross was this, "I am facing your deepest, darkest fears myself, so you don't have to face them. I am taking your sin and guilt and shame and all that might haunt you in your darkest times. I am taking that on myself. I am taking it to the cross. I am bearing its burden there, so you can be free. I am facing your worst enemy. I am taking on death and the grave, so you will have nothing to fear ultimately in life. I will journey through the valley of the shadow of death, so you only have hope of eternal life. Jesus is saying "Fear not, you have me."

Genesis 15 contains another first in Scripture. It is the first time belief in God is mentioned. Verse 6 says, "*Abram believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness.*" What it's talking about here is faith. Abraham believed God, and it wasn't just a sort of mental agreement, like Abraham was saying, "Yeah, that's a nice idea." No. He took God at his word and he acted on it. He believed him enough that it changed his life. The New Testament makes a big deal out of this verse and holds it up as a model for our own lives. Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23 all quote this verse and use it as an example for how we should believe God. What do you believe in the most in life? Is it your fears, or do you believe in He who has conquered your fears?