

When Life Distresses Us
By Senior Pastor Tom Harrison
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Jacob's name literally means "grabby." He was a thief from the beginning. His brother, Esau, was a real doofus who was easily doofed (I just made up a word). First, he swiped his brother's birthright ("*Hey, he wanted to sell it for a bowl of Wolf Brand chili – I can't help it if he's that stupid!*") and then his mom coached him into the big heist – Esau's blessing. He donned his favorite Halloween costume ("rough and hairy") and deceived his brother. Knowing he was dead meat, his colluding momma kissed him goodbye and told him to run like the wind. Years later, he's "greatly afraid and distressed" because he's going to meet the brother who swore he would kill him. Jacob thinks this could be the end, so he throws himself to his estranged brother's mercy. There have been times when I have been very frightened, unsettled and tremendously insecure. When I came to Asbury to be your senior pastor in June of 1993, I followed Bill Mason. He was legendary. Some ministerial colleagues told me I would be an interim until they could find someone who could handle the job. The great fright happens when we are overwhelmed and out of our league. Fear builds upon itself. "What if?" becomes our constant companion. The rear-view mirror is repeatedly checked. Like the Apostle Paul (Philippians 1:19), I'm convinced I will make it because of the presence of the Holy Spirit and because of the love, acceptance, and forgiveness of Jesus and the empowerment of the church—these help strengthen me. Psalm 88 is what I read in "the pit" in Jerusalem, while Psalm 91 gives a better response to "the terror of the night." Ecclesiastes 12 describes the aging process using the "T" word. "Terror" is a type of extreme distress and can be a catalyst for change, too. When angels show up in the Bible, people are usually "sorely afraid" (King James Version language). Jesus had His own experience with this emotion. **APPLICATION:** How about you? When have fear and distress been part of your life? I don't mean to stir up bad images, but I'm genuinely curious what your story could be. Can you finger it? Was it physical, emotional, relational or spiritual? What were your resources? Who helped you? How might the Lord redeem your distressing experience?

07/29 Genesis 32:1-8 07/30 Psalm 88 07/31 Psalm 91 08/01 Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 08/02 Mark 14:32-42 08/03 Philippians 1:18b-30

President **JFK** was answering questions at a news conference when he said: "**Life is Unfair.**" JFK illustrated how unfair and uneven good and ill fortune are distributed among people and in an individual life. He had all the advantages of a

privileged upbringing in a politically and financially powerful family. Yet, his life was marked and ended in tragedy. "Life is unfair" is a hard truth we must wrestle with.

People are stressed from beginning to end in the **Bible**. From Adam and Eve all the way through Revelation, all in the Bible had some type of distress. Stress and distress are part of **our lives**, too. If in school, you will be distressed. If you have a job, you will be distressed. If you don't have a job, you will be distressed. If single, you will be distressed. If married, you will be distressed. If young, you will be distressed. If middle-aged or old, you will be distressed. If you have faith, you will be distressed. If you don't have faith, you will be distressed. Everyone has limitations, disruptions. Sometimes it's someone's fault (them, us or me). Sometimes there's no one to blame – things just seem to happen.

Jim Stovall started losing his sight in high school and by the time he was about 20 and was at ORU, he was completely blind. That is distressing. But if you drive past ORU today on 81st Street, you will see the Stovall Entrepreneur Center. He gave \$1 million to help fund it. The man has been incredibly successful. He has also led a very significant life. We will have Jim with us next Sunday night at 6:00. I anticipate it being one of the most meaningful events at Asbury in 2019. Please bring a friend – maybe someone who is going through some distress in their lives. I hope you've read the sermon starter in the bulletin. In Genesis 32, we see **Jacob's response** to his distress.

*Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ² And when Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp!" So, he called the name of that place (MAY-huh-NAY-im) Mahanaim. ³ And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴ instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. ⁵ 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.'" ⁶ And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are 400 men with him." ⁷ 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, ⁸ thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and **attacks** it, then the camp that is left will escape."*

1.) **PLANNED**. Jacob has one basic plan – survival. He's shrewd schemer. Let's commend him for thinking ahead. Good leadership anticipates a variety of outcomes. He desired reconciliation, so he would make restitution to his brother for swindling/stealing Esau's birthright and blessing, the 2 most important thing in Esau's life, by bribery or paying a ransom. His plan was disrupted when messengers said Esau was approaching with 400 men. Jacob has no fighting men.

He assumed the worst would happen – Esau would kill him. Jacob is a middle-aged man surrounded by his wives, family, servants and herds – but is still a frightened boy groping for courage. He’s been gone for 20 years. He had a lot of anxiety. His brother was coming to kill him. What could he do? He was not PARALYZED. Jacob acted. He wasn’t passive. He did something. He refused to let fear and anxiety prevail. He knew he couldn’t outrun his brother or outwit him, so he divides his camp into two. That’s a good defensive maneuver.

Most things we stress about never happen. Most of the bad things that happen aren’t as bad as we thought. Many of the bad things that hit us could not have prevented. Many times, the “bad things” actually turn out for good. Jacob’s son, Joseph, later tells his brothers – “*What you meant for evil, God meant for good.*”) It is easy to let fear and the “What If’s?” become chronic anxiety. Worry about what might happen can become a vicious cycle and a bad habit. When we are so concerned about tomorrow, we stop living in the moment. Worry/fear can shut us down.

Here’s a plan: Learn the Bible + Learn it in community (w others). 2 ways – we have “Adult Discipleship Communities.” They do 3 things: fellowship, study the Bible, serve. Also, it is not too late for you to attend the preview session for Disciple Bible Study –Tuesday + Thursday night. This Bible survey will help you assemble the border pieces to the Bible. Some distress because they think everyone else knows far more about the Bible. Worthwhile things are always hard. This takes some effort on your part. It will cost some time and some money. But learning the Bible will increase your faith and your confidence in God probably more than anything. Asbury is about Helping Others Follow Jesus. Worship attendance and Bible study are right at the heart of how we go about this.

2.) When Jacob learned of Esau’s 400 men, he was so desperate he **PRAYED** Vs. 9-12 is the longest prayer in Genesis. He poured out his heart before God and admitted he was afraid. People often prayed in the Bible.

David prayed when he faced a leadership challenge: *David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.* (1 Samuel 30:6) How did David strengthen himself? He didn’t have a Bible. I doubt his faith community was strong. But he prayed. He sang. He didn’t let people become bigger than God. He recalled God’s faithfulness. Remember what David said to Goliath: *that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand.*” 1 Sam 17:46-47

Jesus had bad circumstances, too. *And he took with him Peter and James and John and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch."* (Mark 14:33-34) Prayer reminds us of someone bigger than our giants, whether Esau, Goliath, Gethsemane or someone or something else. It's easy to let people be bigger than the Lord in our minds. Prayer helps put things in perspective. The Bible's message = there is a God. He is good. We can trust Him. Even though we will die, God has given us Jesus to be with us now, take us to heaven and to comfort us in our grief. Before, during and after anything happens to us in this life – we are people of good news. People + circumstances may indeed be big – but they are never bigger than God. Sometimes we become so afraid of *"what will they think or say?"* that we shut up or fail to show up. Prayer reminds us of good news. Join us tonight at 6:00 in the chapel for "United in Prayer."

3.) Jacob plays Santa Claus and starts sending gifts to his brother to atone. Vs. 20: ***"PERHAPS*** *he will accept me."*

Jacob did the one thing I tell couples who are about to marry: *"Lower Your Expectations – Raise Your Commitments."* (Not your standards. But it is our expectations that seldom are accurate and often become the source of grumbling and complaint.)

Sibling rivalry started with Cain killing his brother Abel, but we see it through Genesis with Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Jacob's son, Joseph with his brothers. Sibling rivalries are part of family dynamics. In his defense, his parents did one of the worst things in parenting – they each had favorites. Esau was loved by his dad and Jacob was a momma's boy. Esau was intimidating. He was a rugged outdoorsman. He was all brawn and no brain. I think of Jacob as cowering before his brother and being ignored by his dad. Jacob was a homebody (all brain and no brawn). With his mother's direction, the only way Jacob could get his father's blessing was to steal it from his twin brother by deceiving his father. His birthright and his father's blessing were virtually all Esau had. Esau wanted to kill his conniving brother, so his momma convinced Jacob to run away to her brother in a far country. As the fugitive flees, he knows his identity - a thief and a deceiver. Jacob's uncle Laban also took advantage of Jacob. He humiliated Jacob. Jacob married, had 12 sons and a daughter with his 2 wives and their 2 handmaidens. Then he deceived Laban and ran away from Laban's place. He returned home to face the music with his brother. He was terrified. He may have had a lot of "stuff," but he had never really felt blessed. Jacob was far from perfect; he is not a pillar of virtue, but God uses him to start a nation.

I think forgiveness is our greatest need. We've been mistreated. We've mistreated others. When Esau realized Jacob had stolen his blessing, he cried out

to his father, “*Bless me, bless me also, my father.*” He only received a paltry blessing from his dad. Jacob also craved that blessing from his dad. He stole to get it.

When we feel we have never felt blessed, resort to other tactics to grab the blessing. We lie, cheat, steal OR we just try to amass a lot of stuff hoping it will take away the sorrow and emptiness within. We want to be blessed. When they fail to do so, we are distressed. There is a hole in us. This is bad news. But our good news is we can still find that blessing. It is **the life of Jesus** in us. This is why Asbury’s mission is “Helping Others Follow Jesus.” Jesus is our treasure.

Remember who our treasure is. *But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.* 2 Cor 4:7-12