

Holding Fast to God's Promises
 Genesis 32:1-21
 Tampa Covenant Church
 15 June 2025

Proposition: Because God remains faithful to his children, we are called to hold fast to his covenant promises in prayer.

FCF: In the midst of uncertainty, we often rely more on ourselves rather than trusting in the covenant promises of God for our future.

RHF: Through his death, burial and resurrection from the dead; Jesus Christ is fulfillment of the eternal covenant promises of God.

(#1) Series Introduction:

Today marks the beginning of our OT summer series, entitled "*Prayers of the Old Testament Saints.*" While the Psalms are recognized as the prayer book of the Bible, Scripture provides other prayers outside the Psalter that are equally as rich and instructive. Because if we're being honest, we all tend to fall into prayer ruts where we focus on petitions for family, friends, various situations and circumstances. Thus, the hope of this series is that these prayers will put more prayer tools in our tool bags in helping us to draw nearer to God in our relationship with him.

Additionally, we'll see how these prayers are situated in God's unfolding story of redemption and ultimately find their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus, we'll look back at the prayers of these Saints and also look forward with gratitude in discovering how Christ is the answer of every longing, plea for mercy, and every expression of hope we have in this world. So, whether we're struggling with guilt, rejoicing in deliverance, seeking wisdom, or crying out in suffering, may these prayers help us to see that everything we experience in this life can be brought honestly and boldly before the throne of grace.

Text Introduction:

Today we're looking at Genesis 32. And Jacob is finally headed back to Canaan; the land God promised him. But going back means facing Esau, the brother he deceived and fled from. This means Jacob has to face his past before moving forward. So, we'll walk through this tension filled narrative and discover how it calls us to hold fast to the promises of God in our prayer lives. And how it serves renew our trust in our Covenant keeping God.

Jacob Plans for Esau: *Plans out of fear (vv.1-8)*

Life hasn't been sunshine and roses at this point in Jacob's life. Twenty years earlier he deceived his father Isaac and stole his brother Esau's blessing who was the firstborn. After the incident, he took his mother's advice and sought refuge with his uncle Laban. But instead of finding peace, Jacob and Laban feuded repeatedly. When the tension finally reached an all-time high, the LORD appeared to Jacob and said in Gen 31:3, "*Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.*" Jacob obeyed but played according to his rules. He outwitted Laban and slipped away, taking his family and livestock without notice. When Laban finally caught up to him, Jacob poured out his frustration in recounting years of mistreatment. He acknowledged that if the God of Abraham and Isaac hadn't been

with him, he would've left empty-handed. Nonetheless, by God's mercy, what could've turned into a hostile situation, ended in peace. The two men made a covenant and parted ways.

(#2) Now we pick up in v.1, Jacob is enroute to Canaan. As he goes, we're told, the angels¹ of God met him. He sees them and exclaims *"This is God's camp"* and names the place Mahanaim.² Likely referring to his family camp and the LORD's camp. In other words, throughout his years of hardship; the LORD has remained by his side. But truth be told, Jacob is still relying on his clever ways despite the lessons the Lord has been doling out over the years.³ Case in point, Jacob knows that to enter the land, he must face Esau who's now settled in Edom.⁴ **(#3) So, he puts** out a feeler and sends Esau a carefully crafted message: He referred to Esau as his lord, explains where he's been for the last 20 years, and lists all of his possessions as a kind of peace offering. What's Jacob doing? He's trying to appease his brother's wrath;⁵ assuming Esau wants him dead. **(#4) Here in v.6,** the messengers return with some ominous news. Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men at his side. You can sense the walls are starting to **(#5) close in on** Jacob. V.7 says, *"Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed."* He's hemmed in by fear and the burden of unresolved guilt and shame, stemming from his past.

(#6 Blank) Some of us may be able to identify with Jacob; we've made poor choices in the past or decisions that we thought we could walk away from but at some point down the road they caught up with us: Could be the same as Jacob (sibling rivalry), or another fractured relationship, something we said that hurt another or a lie that caught up with us or waiting to catch up with us. Whatever it was or is, God's providential hand has a way of bringing us back to a place or situation where we have to deal with what we thought was far behind us.

In 1989, I asked Aida to marry me and she said yes. The wedding was a year away so I took a part time job stocking shelves at a local grocery store to save for a bigger ring. Not long on the job, I got in with the wrong crowd and started participating in the Friday night beer runs. We would take the beer from the stock room; throw it over the wall of a neighboring apt complex then someone would retrieve it after our shift. On this particular night, I was the pick-up man, so I got the stash, put it in my car and drove off. But later a resident came to the store and reported the theft. The next day, I was called in, questioned and I lied repeatedly; claiming I acted alone. But the gig was up and I was fired on the spot. I walked out thinking, *"Glad that's over; time to move on."*

Fast forward 7 years later, Aida and I are now married, living in GA; the family is growing. We visited Tampa one weekend and my mother handed me a flyer to attend a men's breakfast at a well-known local church. So, I took a friend and when we showed up, there he was, the store manager who fired me. I would love to say, I ran up to him, apologized and shared the good news I was now living for Jesus. But I kept a low profile and we ducked out right after the guest speaker said amen. Bottom line, I was riddled with so much fear, guilt and shame from the past incident; I couldn't seize the opportunity to make things right. I couldn't face that man.

Jacob Prays to the LORD: *Holding fast to the promises of God (vv.9-12)*

That's where Jacob is right now attempting to make things right. Stricken by fear, guilt and shame, he can't turn back to Laban or duck out; he has to face his brother (#7) and he goes into survival mode. He divides family, flocks, herds and camels into two camps and hopes for the best: *"If Esau attacks one camp, then whatever is left will escape."* Well, as we would say in the military, hope is never a plan but prayer is always a good start. This is what we're all called to do in the midst of uncertainty; pray! The prayer may have been brief⁶ given the crisis but he (#8) doesn't waste any words: *"O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,'"*

Jacob begins by addressing God as the God of his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac. In so doing, he appealed to God's covenantal faithfulness; calling to mind how God made his covenant promises known to his family.⁷ Now, in this prayer, Jacob places himself in that same line of promise and reminds the Lord of his words: *"Lord, you told me to return to the land of promise where you would bless me."* Church, God wants us to recite his word back to him in prayer, not because he's forgetful but because it shows that we remember and believe what he's promised. And when we echo his promises, we're not seeking to manipulate him; we're aligning our hearts and minds with his plan and purposes for our lives.

(#9) Next, Jacob confessed, *"I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps."* After all these years of conniving to get ahead in life, Jacob says something profound: *"I am not worthy."* In this moment, he recognizes God's character and he's humbled. (#10) This is important, John Calvin writes in his institutes, *"man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty."*⁸ Think about it, when was the last time you declared yourself "unworthy"; not in the sense of self-loathing but in light of another person's character. We rarely do that because when we compare ourselves with others it usually leads to jealousy or insecurity but not humility.

(#11 Blank) It's different with God. He's holy and we're not; his love is perfect and his faithfulness unwavering. And when we begin to grasp the absolute beauty of his character; we see the lowliness of our condition before him. Many people struggle with this idea because we live in a culture that celebrates self-worth, self-improvement, and self-esteem. There's nothing wrong with having a healthy view of self but it doesn't earn us right standing with God. That's not the gospel; we don't come to God because we're worthy; we come because he's gracious, merciful, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Recognizing our unworthiness opens the door for us to truly receive the grace of his abiding presence in prayer. That's what makes grace so amazing; it's always lavished on the unworthy.

(#12) Knowing this, Jacob now makes his petition, *"Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children."* The word "deliver" means to snatch away from danger and in this case, the danger is very real: Esau is coming with 400 men, and Jacob is terrified for he and his family. (#13) So, he once again reminds God of his word, *"But you said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"* Some would say that (#14 Blank) Jacob is trying to put God between a rock and

a hard place here.⁹ As if to say, *“Look Lord, if Esau wipes us out, then Your promise can’t come true.”* If Jacob’s emotions were mixed, I’d say it’s a good display of the frailty of our humanity before God. Because the truth is clear, God is under no obligation to act in accordance with our will but in accordance with his. Jacob is scared senseless and he’s being brutally honest with God, *“Lord, I’m terrified, and if You don’t deliver us, we’re done.”* This kind of raw emotion is welcomed in prayer. All too often, we exhaust ourselves trying to maintain our composure in so many differing settings that it sometimes bleeds into how we talk to God. Church, God knows our hearts; therefore, why pretend? Give voice to the emotion: Anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, disappointment and fear. Tell it to the one who knows you, loves you, and remains faithful to you no matter the circumstance.

Holding Fast to the Promises of God: *As fulfilled in Christ (vv.13-21)*

Jacob has prayed a fine prayer: Reminded God of his promises, confessed his unworthiness, pleaded for deliverance, expressed his fear and closed by reminding God of his promises. With that, the only thing left to do is sit back and leave the situation in God’s hands, right? But this is where things get complicated. After saying amen, Jacob springs into action by preparing a huge gift of 550 animals (goats, sheep, camels, cattle and donkeys). Next, he divides the animals into 5 separate groups and entrusts each group with the same message when (#15) asked about the herd: *“They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.”* (#16) Verses 20-21 gives us insight into Jacob’s mindset; he’s still seeking to appease Esau’s anger. Thinking to himself, after Esau is overwhelmed by the successive waves of my generosity, I’ll see Esau’s face and finally be accepted. So, as everyone files out, Jacob stays the night in the camp and waits it out.

(#17 Blank) Now, if I’m writing this story, Jacob would’ve done all the planning first, then bathe it all in prayer, then deliverance and close. However, that’s too myopic because Jacob’s story is part of a bigger gospel story that God is writing according to his plan of redemption; not just for Jacob but for the nations. In this season of redemptive history, Jacob is being formed; he’s learning to hold fast to the promises of God and eventually see the bigger picture. And the same is true of us. We’re living in this tension too: We pray, but then we plan. We cry out to God, then we secure a backup. We pray for healing then we schedule the doctor’s appt. There’s wisdom in planning. But underneath all our planning must remain a bedrock of trust that enables us to see the bigger gospel story. That God is working out his redemptive purposes in our lives and also in the world for his glory. And when we’re tempted to believe everything depends on us; we remind ourselves that his promises aren’t secured by our effort but by his steadfast love and faithfulness to us and to all he’s calling to himself.

(#18) We read from Ps. 105, which is a call to praise by remembering God’s faithfulness in keeping his covenant promises. The Psalmist exhorted the community to give thanks, seek the Lord and proclaim his wondrous works. It recalls God’s covenant to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in giving land and offspring. And years later, this covenant community is looking back and praising God for remembering his covenant forever that he commanded for a thousand generations to these Patriarchs. Even to Jacob in the midst of his fear, guilt, shame, planning, prayer and more planning. And in this season of redemptive history, the Psalm calls us to look back in praise and thanksgiving to God because through Christ we share in this great heritage.

Because the very promises that Jacob clung to have been ultimately fulfilled (#19) in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes, *“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.”* Jesus Christ is the true offspring of Abraham, the better Jacob and the better Israel. He’s the one to whom they all point, the promised seed of Gen 3:15, who would ultimately crush the head of the evil one. And the one who secured our redemption in bringing us into the family of God. In so doing, he delivered us from something more ominous than the Esau’s of this life. He delivered us from eternal death and separation from God. His punishment has brought us the blessing of peace in this life and his resurrection from the dead promises us the gift of eternal life in the world to come.

(#20) Conclusion:

Whereas Jacob prayed with hope in the promises of God; we now pray with thankfulness and gratitude that they’ve been fulfilled in Christ. And so, we continue our sojourn to the eternal presence of our Savior and know he’s with us every step of the way through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. And no matter what lies behind and whatever lies ahead, may we trust in the steadfast love of the Lord and hold fast to his promises in prayer. The grace that called us will keep us and will continue to lead us safely home. And may the Lord strengthen our hearts toward that end. Amen.

¹ מלאך (mal'āk); Aram. מלאך (mal'ak): messenger; angel. A messenger; often a supernatural emissary sent by God to deliver a message or carry out a task. This word literally means “messenger.” It can refer to human messengers (e.g., Gen 32:3), but slightly over half the time in the OT, it refers to a divine messenger and is then typically translated “angel.”

² Mahanaim appears 13 times in the Bible, all in the Old Testament (Gen 32:2; Josh 13:26, 30; 21:38; 2 Sam 2:8, 12, 29; 17:24, 27; 19:32; 1 Kgs 2:8; 4:14; 1 Chr 6:80; and possibly Song 6:13). Brian Neil Peterson, “Mahanaim,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³ Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12–50: From Abraham to Joseph*, ed. J. A. Motyer and Derek Tidball, *The Bible Speaks Today* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 132.

⁴ The Bible makes 38 references to Seir, most of them occurring in the Pentateuch. The earliest appearance comes in Gen 14:6, which describes the Horites as living in the hill country of Seir. Seir often appears to be synonymous with Edom (Hebrew: “red”). Esau is said to have settled in Seir (Gen 32:4), and his descendants, the Edomites, continued to reside there (Deut 2:4). Dougald McLaurin III and Amy L. Balogh, “Seir, Hill Country of,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁵ Douglas Mangum, Miles Custis, and Wendy Widder, *Genesis 12–50*, *Lexham Research Commentaries* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), Ge 32:1–33:20.

⁶ Jacob’s prayer is actually the longest recorded prayer in the book of Genesis.

⁷ Baldwin, 135.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 & 2, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 39.

⁹ Commentator John H. Walton argues that v.12 finds Jacob sounding as if he has to hold something over God’s head to persuade him to act on his behalf. (John H. Walton, *Genesis*, *The NIV Application Commentary*, [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001], 604.) contra Kenneth Matthews who argues, Jacob’s subsequent word of confidence (v. 12[13]) relied solely upon the Lord’s former promise at Bethel of an expansive progeny (28:14; cf. 13:16; 15:5; 16:10), which must mean the preservation of his children.” (Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B, *The New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005], 552.)