

In 2006 Barry and Deanne Doyle were 62 years old and looking forward to a comfortable retirement. They owned a home in Townsville valued at \$450,000, had \$640,000 in superannuation and no debt. Then they went to Storm Financial for advice. They were advised to cash in their superannuation and borrow \$360,000 against their home which they did. They put all their money into negatively geared investments.

Then came the global financial crisis. In 2009 the couple was left with just a mortgage on their home of \$456,000. From looking forward to a comfortable retirement they ended up with nothing. It was a complete disaster.

In life disaster can strike us in many different ways: financial, career, relationships, health and so on. Life can look so good only to quickly go belly up. How do we face a crisis of this sort? Where is God when our world turns black?

1. Jacob's Crisis

In our reading Jacob was facing a disaster of this proportion. Everything looked good for him. He was returning to the Promised Land a wealthy man. He had left home with nothing. He worked for Laban 20 years. Now he is returning with two wives, two concubines, eleven sons, many servants and large flocks of sheep, goats, camels, cattle and donkeys. He is rich.

But he receives a message that Esau was coming to meet him - with 400 men! This is his older brother whom he had cheated out of the birthright and his father's blessing, the older brother who had sworn to kill him. Now it looks like here he is on his way to get his revenge.

"7 In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. 8 He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape." (32:7-8)

This is strong language "*great fear and distress.*" Jacob is terrified of the absolute worst. He is afraid that everyone with him will be slaughtered. He divides all he has into two groups hoping at least save some.

2. Jacob Prays

Then he prays a very humble prayer. He prays to the God of Abraham and Isaac - the God who had made covenant promises to his father and grandfather.

He admits he is unworthy: *"I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camp."* (32:10)
He acknowledges that all he has is God's gracious gift to him.

He pleads with God to save him. *"Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children."* (32:11)

And he reminds God of the promises God has made to him.

"You have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" (32:12)

Remember when Jacob had the dream of a stairway to heaven? There God had promised, *"I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."* (28:13-15)

You have to ask - with promises like this was there any need for Jacob to feel such fear? Where was his faith? God had shown he was with Jacob over the last 20 years. It was God who had given Jacob all he had as he well knew. And right at the beginning of our passage today we read, *"Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him."* (32:1) God was always with him. Why such fear?

What about us when we face difficulties? Do we focus more on the circumstances of life, the problems or on God's promises?

3. Jacob Acts

Jacob's next step is to try to appease his brother. He sends ahead a series of enormous gifts, five herds of animals. Each gift is sent with a message in the most humble terms. Jacob calls himself "your servant" and addresses Esau as "My lord". (32:18) He was treating Esau as the firstborn. He is trying to restore the correct relationship.

4. Jacob wrestles with God

Then comes the night. Jacob sends his family across the Jabbok ravine. He is left alone on the northern side.

Only he is not alone. A "man" is there who wrestles with Jacob. This is a strange event and the Bible doesn't explain it. So we need to figure it out for ourselves. The man turns out to be God and afterwards Jacob says, *"I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."* (32:30)

Why is God wrestling with Jacob? Is it to change him? God sees that he is not winning so he injures Jacob's hip. But Jacob hangs onto the "man" demanding that he bless him. But God's blessing must involve a change in Jacob, a change which involves a change in his name.

His old name is "Jacob" points to his underhand dealings, meaning "Supplanter" or "Deceiver". Right from the beginning he was grasping his brother's heel as he was born. He tricked his brother out of his birthright and his blessing. That is why he is in the pickle he faces at the moment. If he hadn't cheated his brother and his father he wouldn't be facing this dilemma.

Then he has struggled with Laban for twenty years. Laban was also a deceiver but even with him Jacob came out on top in the end.

So God says, *"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."* (32:28)

Jacob was a DIY man. Not the sort you would find in Bunnings on Saturday buying hammers, nails and timber. He was a self-made man who relied on his own scheming to get ahead, even if it meant trampling on others.

Here he was learning that true blessing only came from God. That he had to depend on God. Indeed God already has a plan to bless Jacob. Jacob is just concerned for his own blessing. God's plan involved the blessing of all nations through him and his descendants.

He is given the name Israel. Israel becomes the name by which the whole nation is called and Jacob's twelve sons become the twelve tribes of Israel. Today nearly 4000 years later that nation still called Israel. All nations have been blessed through a descendant of Jacob, through Jesus salvation is offered to everyone.

All this is a much greater blessing that just being saved from Esau's anger. It is the blessing God had already planned to give Jacob. It is a blessing Jacob could never achieve for himself. It is no DIY blessing. For these blessing to come Jacob and his descendants must rely on God and serve him.

The "man" wants to go before sunrise presumably because Jacob must not actually see God. After blessing him the "man" disappears and the sun rises.

5. Jacob meets Esau

There has been a change in Jacob. He now boldly goes in front of his family to meet his brother. He continues his humble approach. He bows to the ground seven times before Esau acknowledging Esau's lordship.

But his brother runs up, warmly greets Jacob and hugs him. There is no anger, all is forgiven. He doesn't even want all the gifts Jacob has sent on ahead.

Esau invites Jacob to come to his home in Mount Seir in the land of Edom but Jacob goes to Shechem in the land promised to Abraham, the land his descendants will inherit. Jacob is blessed.

6. Learning from Jacob

Can we learn anything from this about how we can face a crisis in life? Some people say that this is an example of wrestling with God for an answer to prayer, that if we persist then God will answer our prayer.

But in this case it is God who comes to wrestle with Jacob. Jacob may be demanding a blessing from God but God has a much bigger purpose for Jacob. God has already promised to give Jacob the things he promised to Abraham and to protect him. God has already given Jacob all he has and shown that he is with him. Jacob looks only at the threat from Esau. But if he looked at God's promises he didn't need to be filled with terror.

We also can take great comfort from the promises of God's word. Jesus promises to be with us always. Scripture shows God is for us not against us, that nothing can separate us from his love.

There are many other great promises God has made to us. Do you know his promises? Can you recall them in a time of trial, in heat of the crisis?

Certainly we need to pray earnestly, persistently and humbly but remember we are praying to a God who is all powerful, a God who has our best interests at heart. He loves us. He has a purpose for our lives.

There is an old tradition. Someone who was not sure if their partner loved them would pick a daisy and pull on petals one by one saying, "He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me" The last petal would give the answer, yes or no.

With God we are not guessing. We don't need a daisy. He has promised his love and presence and many other wonderful things to us.

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)