



REAL COURAGE

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

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This guide is to be used in conjunction with *Real Courage: Where Bible and Life Meet* by Thaddeus Barnum (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2016).

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CONTENTS

About This Study	4
Week 1. Why Won't Faith Come?	5
Week 2. Through the Lens of Fear	7
Week 3. Prayer and Desperation	9
Week 4. The Wrestler and Me	11
Week 5. When Courage Comes	13
Week 6. Faith Bigger Than Fear	15
Week 7. Be Strong and Courageous	17



ABOUT THIS STUDY

Thaddeus Barnum's book, *Real Courage*, focuses on the life of Jacob from the time he left his Uncle Laban, until he reached Canaan. As you and your group members study these seven sessions, you will discover that the Jacob who ran from Esau in fear, became the Jacob who limped toward Esau in faith and returned home.

This practical study challenges your group participants to see their own lives through the lens of Scripture that unfolds God's relationship with Jacob. They will face their fears, their weaknesses, and their times of sagging faith; but they will also face God, see His faithfulness and strength, and draw closer to Him.



WEEK 1

WHY WON'T FAITH COME?

Psalm 34:7

TO THE FACILITATOR

Introduce yourself to the group. Let everyone know you want every group session to be enjoyable, so you will welcome and respect their questions and comments. Have everyone state his or her name and birthplace.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Fear is not a stranger to any of us, is it? We may fear advancing age or ill health, the possibility of a job loss or sagging finances, a difficult family situation or the threat of terrorism or some unforeseen calamity. Jacob feared for his life when he was returning home from Uncle Laban's place. He heard that his brother Esau and four hundred men were on their way to meet him (see Gen. 32:6–7). Although God's angelic army had met Jacob, he reacted in fear instead of responding with faith. He set a plan in motion that he thought would at least save half of his people and flocks (v. 7), and *then* he prayed (vv. 9–12). Why hadn't faith come?

Surely Elisha's servant should have had faith when the Syrian army surrounded him and Elisha at Dothan. Instead of asking, "What will God do?" he asked Elisha, "What shall we do?"

Of course there was nothing two men could do against the Syrian army, but the army was not too big for God to handle. Elisha answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And then the prophet prayed that God would open His servant's eyes to see the vast angelic army "full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:16–17).

Faith saw victory at God's hands!

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Read Genesis 27:27–37. Why should Isaac’s blessing of Jacob have prepared Jacob to meet Esau courageously?
2. How do you explain Jacob’s lack of faith even though angels had met him?
3. Jacob hatched a plan by which half his family and livestock would escape Esau and his men. Have you relied on cunning instead of God to get you out of a tough situation? What happened?
4. How does worrying about a difficult situation make the situation worse?
5. Jacob prayed after hatching his plan. What’s wrong with praying after planning?
6. Read 1 Kings 18:36—19:3. After demonstrating courageous faith at Mount Carmel and experiencing amazing victory over the prophets of Baal, what lapse of faith did Elijah show? How do you explain that lapse of faith?
7. Why do you agree or disagree that a lapse of faith often occurs after a major personal victory over the Enemy?
8. Why do you agree or disagree that Elijah contributed to Elisha’s faith?
9. How has a fellow believer contributed to your faith?
10. Based on Elisha’s experience at Dothan, do you think spiritual forces assist a godly nation when it is under attack? Explain.

WRAP-UP



Ask a few volunteers to tell what challenges they will meet with courageous faith this week.



WEEK 2

THROUGH THE LENS OF FEAR

1 John 4:18

TO THE FACILITATOR

If your group is large, you may wish to divide it into smaller groups for the Focus on Life discussion, and then have the groups summarize their answers for the entire group.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

On page 67 of his book, *Real Courage*, Thaddeus Barnum writes: “Everything distorts when we look through the lens of fear.

“We look back on our past—people, conversations, events—and it all changes. All gets reinterpreted. The longer we keep the lens on, the more it affects how we think, how we feel, how we act and react in everyday life. It affects how we see ourselves. Eventually, fear defines us. It defines everything.”

Jacob looked back on his past and saw how he cheated Esau and lied to his father Isaac in order to steal the birthright (see Gen. 27:5–29). He even implicated the Lord in the deception (v. 20). When Esau learned that Jacob had lied and tricked his father into giving him the birthright, he sought to kill Jacob (v. 41).

When Jacob heard Esau was approaching, he remembered the past and, instead of looking to the Lord to protect him, he looked to his own devices. He divided his family and flocks into two camps. He reasoned one camp could escape while Esau attacked the other. If he had looked at God's promises instead of at the presumable threat, he would have responded to Esau's approach with

courageous faith instead of cowardly fear. God had promised to give Jacob and his descendants the land of Canaan, and had also promised: “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land (28:15).

We should not make past experiences hitching posts, but instead make them guideposts. We can look back to times when the Lord’s presence encouraged us and His power enabled us to overcome temptation and trials. Therefore, we should love Him supremely and trust Him implicitly. First John 4:18 assures us that “perfect love casts out fear.”

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. What factors cause us to look through the lens of fear?
2. Read Genesis 27:20. How did Jacob implicate the Lord in his deception of Isaac?
3. How might a believer implicate the Lord in a plan to deceive another person?
4. What parental favoritism do you see in Isaac’s family?
5. How might a parent cause trouble by favoring one child over another?
6. Why do you agree or disagree that Jacob acted prematurely to obtain the birthright?
7. How did the Lord show grace to Jacob when Jacob was away from home?
8. The Lord promised to be with Jacob at all times. Read Hebrews 13:5. How does this promise encourage you to face a specific challenge with courageous faith?
9. Laban said to Jacob, “May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are absent from the other” (Gen. 31:49). Why do you agree or disagree that this verse is often misapplied?
10. How does perfect love drive out fear?

WRAP-UP



Have a few volunteers share experiences in the past that demonstrated the truth that God keeps His word.



WEEK 3

PRAYER AND DESPERATION

Psalm 142:1–2

TO THE FACILITATOR

Jacob prayed desperately to the Lord for deliverance from Esau. However, he did not leave the matter in the Lord's hands. He took matters into his own hands. Likely, every member of the group believes in prayer, but also believes in taking matters into his or her own hands. This session is designed to boost the group members' faith in the Lord as the prayer-answering God.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Although God had promised to protect Jacob and multiply his offspring (see Gen. 28:13–15), Jacob believed Esau might attack him and his people. His prayer was one of desperation that included both some reliance upon God and uncertainty. He recalled God's promises (32:9), but he seemed uncertain that God would fulfill them. So he tried to placate Esau's anger by sending gifts intermittently to Esau. He instructed each group of servants bearing gifts to refer to him as Esau's servant (vv. 13–21).

The Bible records other prayers of desperation. For example, when the Assyrian army threatened Jerusalem and sent a haughty letter to King Hezekiah, Judah's king, Hezekiah spread the letter before the Lord in the temple (see 2 Kings 19:9–14). He prayed for deliverance, acknowledging the Lord's sovereignty and also the Assyrians' devastation of other countries and their destruction of the gods of those countries (vv. 15–18). He prayed for deliverance so that "all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, O LORD, are God" (v. 19).

The Lord dispatched the prophet Isaiah to tell Hezekiah that the Lord had heard his prayer and would protect Jerusalem (vv. 20, 32–34). That night the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (v. 35).

The prophet Jonah offered a prayer of desperation from the belly of a great fish. Jonah recalled: “I called out of my distress to the Lord, and He answered me” (Jon. 2:2). He acknowledged that God had disciplined him by casting him into the sea, but he remembered the Lord and prayed toward the Lord’s holy temple (vv. 3–7). When Jonah recommitted himself to do the Lord’s will and exclaimed, “Salvation is from the LORD,” the Lord ordered the monster of the deep to vomit Jonah onto dry land (vv. 9–10).

The Lord still answers desperation prayers that honor Him!

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. What recent situation prompted you to offer a prayer of desperation?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that very few Christians experience desperate situations?
3. How did a promise or promises from Scripture help you survive a desperate situation?
4. Do you think most desperate situations come from God? Why or why not?
5. How does the story of Genesis 32 show us Jacob’s ongoing tendency to rely on his own wits?
6. What evidence of divine grace do you see in the story of Jacob?
7. How does your life reveal God’s grace?
8. How did Jacob’s prayer of desperation show some reliance on God?
9. How do our actions occasionally contradict God’s promises?
10. What kind of parental example did Jacob’s actions set for his children?

WRAP-UP



Have the group sing, “Standing on the Promises” by Russell Kelso Carter.



WEEK 4

THE WRESTLER AND ME

1 Peter 5:6–9

TO THE FACILITATOR

Jacob needed to change. So God wrestled with him and subdued him. From that memorable night on, Jacob was different—for the better. Your group members will learn in this week’s session how God changed Jacob. They may see areas of their own lives where God wants to change them too.

FOCUS ON GOD’S WORD

Jacob had a busy day, scheming to placate Esau and putting plans in motion, but he would also have a tiring, eventful night. After sending his two wives, two maidservants, his eleven sons, and all his possessions across the Jabbok River, he was alone, and it was dark (see Gen. 32:22–23). Perhaps he thought the darkness of night would hide him from Esau, so he must have startled when a man engaged him in an all-night wrestling match (v. 24). Was it Esau?

Jacob put up such a struggle that the man had to dislocate Jacob’s hip (v. 25). But still Jacob held on through the night. At daybreak the man said, “Let me go,” but Jacob answered, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (v. 26).

The man asked, “What is your name?”

“Jacob” came the response (see v. 27).

This was a moment of confession. Jacob’s whole life had been filled with deception. Now the man named “heel-catcher” had been caught. The man who had wrestled with him changed his name to Israel, likely meaning “God fights.”

Blessing would follow his confession (v. 29), and Jacob would understand that the man who had wrestled with him was God (v. 30). Why had God wrestled with Jacob? He wanted to subdue him and change him from a self-reliant trickster, to a man who relied on God to lead him.

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Do you find fault with Jacob for trying to protect his family and possessions from Esau? Why or why not?
2. How do you think Jacob felt when he was alone at night?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that God's previous promises to Jacob never got from Jacob's head to his heart?
4. How can believers demonstrate trust in God's promises when they feel alone and threatened?
5. How long did Jacob's physical strength survive the wrestling?
6. What significance, if any, do you see in the fact that the wrestler dislocated Jacob's hip?
7. Read John 1:18. How do you reconcile Jacob's statement that he had seen God face-to-face with John 1:18?
8. Have you wrestled with God in prayer? If so, what resulted from the experience?
9. What do you find significant about the change of Jacob's name to Israel?
10. What do you think was God's ultimate purpose in wresting with Jacob?

WRAP-UP



Lead the group in offering prayers in which they express their need for God's guidance and protection.



WHEN COURAGE COMES

Hebrews 12:1-2

TO THE FACILITATOR

Try to draw out the quiet members of your group by calling their names and asking them what they think. Also, establish the rule that the same person cannot answer more than two questions in a row.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

When the sun arose over Peniel, a new Jacob arose as well. He had a new name and a new walk. On page 217 of *Real Courage*, Barnum writes: "The Lord put His name into Jacob's new name. He is 'El,' a shortened version of 'Elohim.' 'Isra-El,' in its first meaning, is 'El rules' or 'El prevails.' But given to Jacob, the meaning expanded. The character and nature of 'El' now resided in him. He is 'Isra-El.' The Jacob's reign had ended. El's reign had begun. Jacob no longer had to strive against God or any human being on his own. To say it as the Bible would later say it, he could do all things through El who strengthened him (Phil. 4:13)."

Every step Jacob took must have reminded him of his encounter with God and the change God brought to his life. Jacob walked with a limp because God had dislocated his hip. He had touched Jacob, and Jacob would never be the same. He certainly was no match for Esau now that he was injured.

Christians, too, have been changed. God has forgiven our sins and created us brand new in Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:19). We are no longer lost sinners. We are now God's children. He has written his name into us. We are Christ-ians. He has also given us a new walk and removed fear from us.

Second Timothy 1:7 assures us: “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and discipline.” We recognize that it is foolish to put confidence in our own strength, because we can find our strength in the Lord. Paul encouraged Timothy: “You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” We can “do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. The nation Israel has God (El) in its name. Why do you agree or disagree that God has protected the nation that bears His name?
2. Why did the name Israel have special meaning for Jacob?
3. How should our having the name “Christians” affect our daily lives?
4. How would you respond to someone who calls Western nations “Christian nations”?
5. How well do most contemporary believers reflect the true meaning of the name “Christians”?
6. Do you think Jacob felt confident about meeting Esau because God had changed Jacob’s name to Israel? Why or why not?
7. Why should Christians be courageous?
8. How can Christians communicate their courage to unbelievers?
9. How might a Christian overcome worry?
10. How does prayer feed courage?

WRAP-UP



Give each group member a slip of paper and a pencil. Instruct every participant to write on the paper something he or she fears. Challenge everyone to apply God’s, “fear not,” to what he or she wrote on the paper.



WEEK 6

FAITH BIGGER THAN FEAR

Isaiah 44:8

TO THE FACILITATOR

The closer we get to God, the farther we get from fear. Pray that your group members will be inspired in this week's session to draw near to God and put fear far from them.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Esau was fast approaching. What would Jacob do? He looked up and saw Esau and his four hundred men drawing near (see Gen. 33:1), but he did not scheme this time. He had seen God face-to-face and survived, so why would he fear seeing Esau face-to-face?

Jacob lined up his family, putting Rachel and Joseph in the rear, while he led the procession and bowed to the ground seven times as he approached Esau (vv. 2–3). As Thaddeus Barnum points out on page 258 of *Real Courage*, Jacob “had faith now—faith bigger than fear. He had courage now to let the Lord’s will be done—no matter what happened next.”

Now that Jacob had seen God’s face, he would no longer run from Esau; he would go to him. However, before he could reach Esau, Esau ran to him, embraced him, and kissed him (v. 4). The brothers wept.

Jacob’s bowing before Esau was likely a gesture of humbly asking for forgiveness. Perhaps Esau had sought Jacob to kill him. After all, he took four hundred men with him. But God softened Esau’s heart somewhere along the way so that he forgave Jacob and expressed his love for him.

Jacob’s heart had softened too. He called himself Esau’s servant (v. 9), in spite of the fact that God had said, “The older shall serve the younger” (25:23). Further, Isaac’s blessing of Jacob had

pronounced him “master” over Esau (27:29, 37). Jacob also honored God by identifying his children as gifts from God (33:5).

And then Jacob insisted that Esau accept the gifts he had sent to appease him (vv. 8–10). He could have taken back the gifts, since Esau said he didn’t need them, but Jacob was acting now in faith and love, instead of in fear (v. 10–11).

Esau offered to accompany Jacob to their home, but Jacob declined. He argued that his group was too young and frail, and the animals needed urgent care (vv. 12–13). He promised to meet Esau in Seir (v. 14).

When Jacob arrived at Shechem in Canaan, he built an altar and called it “El-Elohe-Israel,” meaning “God, the God of Israel” (vv. 17–20). Jacob would worship the God who had not only changed his name, but also had kept His promise to bring him back home (28:15).

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. How did Jacob show faith instead of fear when Esau approached him?
2. How have you overcome a fear through faith in God?
3. Read Psalm 27:1. How does this verse relate to Jacob’s meeting Esau?
4. How do you explain Esau’s change of attitude toward Jacob?
5. How would you encourage a believer who wants to reconcile with an offended sibling?
6. How might a parent help to alleviate a child’s fear of darkness?
7. Why do you agree or disagree that fear does not always indicate a lack of faith?
8. Why do you agree or disagree that Jacob was not acting in fear when he declined Esau’s invitation to travel with him?
9. How would you answer someone who expressed the fear that terrorism will destroy our nation?
10. God kept His promise to bring Jacob safely home. What promises has God kept in your life?

WRAP-UP



Lead the group in singing, “All the Way My Savior Leads Me” by Rich Mullins.



WEEK 7

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

Joshua 1:7, 9

TO THE FACILITATOR

Because this is the final week of the *Real Courage* study, do not miss the opportunity to thank the group members for attending and participating in the sessions.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

God commanded Jacob to return to Bethel and settle there (see Gen. 35:1). Bethel was the place God had appeared to Jacob when he was fleeing from Esau. At that time, Jacob feared Esau. Now, he would settle at Bethel fearing only God. He was commanded to build an altar there. He would worship God and remember God's promises to him at that spot. He would also recall how God had fulfilled those promises. As Barnum states in *Real Courage*: "Everything was about to come full circle" (p. 308).

While living at Uncle Laban's, Jacob observed pagan religion. Laban and his countrymen worshiped idols. That idol worship had invaded Jacob's family, so he instructed his people to get rid of the foreign gods they had carried with them. He also instructed them to purify themselves and change their clothes. Only then, would they be prepared to go to Bethel, where Jacob would build an altar (vv. 2–3).

The people handed their foreign gods to Jacob, and he buried the idols under the oak at Shechem (v. 4). And then they all traveled to Bethel without any altercations with the people of the towns around them. God had caused the towns to fear Jacob (v. 5).

At Bethel, Jacob established an altar and called it El-bethel, meaning "God of God's house." He changed the name Bethel to El-bethel. Apparently, he remembered keenly that God had kept

His promises and had revealed himself to him there more than twenty years ago. El meant everything to him.

Jacob not only worshiped at El-bethel, but he also mourned there because Rebekah's nurse died. She was buried under the oak near Bethel (v. 8).

Again, God appeared to Jacob and blessed him (v. 9). He repeated the name Israel and once again promised him a great legacy that would include kings. He also promised him the land of promise (vv. 9–12). In response to God's appearance and blessing, Jacob constructed a stone pillar and poured a drink offering and oil on it (v. 14).

FOCUS ON LIFE



Use the following to lead group discussion.

1. Why was Bethel significant in Jacob's life?
2. Why did adding El to the name Bethel show spiritual growth in Jacob's life?
3. Why are idolatry and worship of God incompatible?
4. How can idolatry slip into a believer's life?
5. What idols do some Christians still cling to after becoming believers?
6. Read 1 John 5:21. How can a believer keep him- or herself from idols?
7. Why do you agree or disagree that unbelievers fear believers in some respects?
8. If a believer were to build an altar, what should he or she place on it first?
9. What helps you remember God's faithfulness?
10. Why do you agree or disagree that a father should assume responsibility for the spiritual development of his family members?

WRAP-UP



Ask volunteers to share ways this seven-week study has helped them develop courageous faith.