

In the Beginning, Part 59:

Jacob's Prayer—A Closer Look

Genesis 32:9-12

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Preface

This is just an excerpt from this morning's sermon text, so I don't have to do or say much to establish the context. Jacob, who is scared and shaking in his boots over his impending meeting with an Esau who he presumes to be hostile, as well as armed and dangerous, prays. As already noted, it's a prayer that stands out in the book of Genesis—an underrated prayer, one that I confess to overlooking until my studies this past week, and one worth zooming in on as we ourselves prepare to pray as a congregation.

Scripture Reading

[Genesis 32:9] And Jacob said, "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,' [10] 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. [11] 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. [12] 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.'"

Introduction

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this prayer is as instructive as it is encouraging. It teaches how to pray when you know the God of Scripture, when you know the God of Jacob for yourself, when you know him as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. You are given a basis for prayer that is confident and powerful, such that you can find help in time of need, like when you're afraid—overcome by it, as Jacob is here. You are given a recourse in your God, one who will come through, who will not let you down—both for his glory and your own good.

Covenant Warrant

It's *Jacob's Prayer—A Closer Look*, a closer look at a prayer that comes with covenant warrant to believe that you will be heard, that our heavenly Father will answer from heaven. Covenant Presbyterian Church, notice with me, briefly, two things.

I. First, Prayer Grounded upon a Right Relationship

Brothers and sisters, how does Jacob address God according to v. 9? He identifies him as the God of his father Abraham and of his father Isaac. This is not some generic deity, whose nature and character are vague, if not completely unknown. This is the one, living, and true God who has revealed himself not only by virtue of his creation but by means of speaking in and through his Word. This is the God who is the real deal, who makes all the decisive first moves, taking the initiative to draw near to his people, calling and reconciling them to himself. This is the one Jacob calls out to by name, calling him LORD, in all capital, upper-case letters in English, signifying that in the original Hebrew the reference is to the covenant God, *Yahweh*. This is the God who is not only sovereignly ruling over all things but brings his chosen, special people into intimate relations with himself. This is the personal God who seeks personal relationship with Jacob and with the likes of us. This is the God Jacob has made his own, embracing for himself the God of his fathers. And this is also the God who would go on to disclose himself most fully in the face of his Son Jesus Christ.

You need a right relationship with this God to pray to him with any level of assurance. You have no rights before him unless he opens the door—unless he draws you to himself and breaks through to you, effectually calling out to you, so that, like Jacob, you make him your God—your functional God, and not just the God you cry to in troubled times while otherwise ignoring him. Come to this God, repenting and believing the good news of the gospel, for a right relationship, through Jesus Christ, the only atonement for human sin upon the cross, nearly 2,000 years ago, as he the innocent one would die for the guilty, though it would be nearly 2,000 years after Jacob, who would only know of Christ before his coming in more shadowy ways. And yet he is the one who, having now come, having died, having risen again, having been exalted to the Father's right hand to intercede for his sinful people, those like you and me, is our righteousness before God, whether we're Jacob there and then or us here and now.

This God's provision, realized in Christ, is the pre-requisite for a right relationship with him, something that is foundational to the life of prayer.

II. Second, Prayer Grounded upon Guaranteed Pledges

Guaranteed Pledge #1: The Promise of God's Blessing upon Obedience....

Brothers, sisters, Jacob is already making good on his vow back in chapter 28:21 to make the LORD his God. He is stepping out in faith, seeking to live a life of commitment to the LORD. He is trusting and obeying God's renewed call in 31:3 to return home. Here he is, answering the call, to which condition, now fulfilled, God has attached the promise to be with him. Jacob even repeats this back to God, reminding him at the end of v. 9 of what he would earlier say to Jacob: "Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good."

There is no merit or secure footing in our imperfect obedience, of course (that is to be found in the active and passive obedience of Christ and Christ alone, which is perfect—make no mistake about it). And yet the fact that God promises to bless our obedience as his children is something to hang our hats on. It is a guaranteed pledge to stand on.

So do you seek to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, to live a God-honoring, God-pleasing life, though you're still going to fall short, though there will be defects in the best you give to God? Nevertheless, God smiles upon it, cleansing your obedience through Christ. So bring it to him, bringing to God in your prayers his covenant promise to bless your obedience.

Guaranteed Pledge #2: The Promise of God's Steadfast Love and Faithfulness....

Brothers and sisters, what Jacob goes on to say here proves that the obedience of a child of God is without merit before him. Plus what he adds here gives you comfort if you haven't been very obedient of late, if that's something that grieves you. It takes the pressure off of you, yourself—still giving you grounds to make the strongest of appeals, to even ask for the Spirit's enabling and help that you might learn obedience, that you might put away your disobedience and rebellion as something belonging to your old life, as having no place in your new. What grounds? The grounds of God's steadfast love and faithfulness—which exclude anything in you or your character or your life's offerings—past, present, or future.

Jacob clarifies this, in v. 10: "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." In other words, he is saying: "I am not worthy!" "I am not worthy of the least good." Jacob says whatever blessing he has enjoyed is all owing to the sheer, unprovoked grace of God. He would leave home with just a staff, crossing the Jordan as he would depart. And now he has become two camps—with wives, many children, much in terms of livestock. He has not only survived but thrived—while sinning throughout, liable to be punished for his sin, even at the hands of Esau. It would not be unjust should the LORD God allow it to happen, to allow Jacob's older brother to execute him, to slaughter him. Jacob is a recovering ex-con, spiritually speaking. He has a rap sheet, a record. He has nothing by which he can commend himself before God in his prayers. And neither do you—and neither do I. Unworthy sinners, one and all—that's what we are, when left to ourselves.

Still, in the face of it all, God gives his covenant people the opposite of what they deserve, as with Jacob here, who points to God's character as put on display through his "steadfast love" and "faithfulness"—to Jacob—to you and me—in union with Christ. The terminology of "steadfast love" translates the Hebrew word *chesed*, which encapsulates a concept and a reality so rich that no one word in English will do. It is also translated at times as enduring love, as mercy, as covenant faithfulness, as loving loyalty, and the list goes on. Listen to how commentator Dr. Bruce Waltke explains *chesed*: "*Chesed* relates to a superior who out of kind character meets the need of a covenant partner who cannot help himself or herself." We are helpless, like Jacob is here, as we will express of ourselves in our prayers, having nothing but need, and God consistently comes to our aid, helping the helpless. Under no inherent obligation, he nonetheless binds himself—voluntarily placing himself under obligation to us in the terms of the covenant, the promise of the gospel.

The second term, *emet*, translated "faithfulness," can also be translated as firmness, truth. God is firmly, unswervingly true to his Word. Listen again to Waltke, as this time he explains *emet*: "*Emet* signifies that, although the superior has no [absolute] obligation to meet the need, the superior can always be counted on." Like Jacob, you and

I may at times, through various seasons, forget God, providing unreliable. And yet he will never forget us. He can call out to us, and we pay him no heed. And yet, when we call out to him, he will always pay heed and hear and answer us—doing what is best, what serves his glory as well as our well-being, no more and no less.

III. Guaranteed Pledge #3: The promise of God's Commitment to His Church

Beloved, check out what Jacob lays hold of in v. 12, again calling God to account, on the basis of what God himself has said, has sworn even: ““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.””” Jacob doesn't know what God's plans are—they may include his life being extended, his life being preserved—or they may include Esau killing Jacob, slaying him, paying Jacob back as his older brother takes his revenge. And yet Jacob knows that God's covenant promise demands that the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob go on, that they be multiplied. He knows that the promise would be given in this form to Abraham and Isaac, when his grandfather back in Genesis 22 would raise the knife to offer a blood sacrifice in his son, in the form of Jacob's father—only to have the LORD intervene and say, in effect, “You've passed the test—and I reaffirm my covenant promise—in fact your offspring will become as innumerable as the sand of the sea.” Jacob, knowing all that, while he does plead for deliverance, is above all saying, “I'm expendable—I can be taken out—but LORD, you must ensure the survival of my seed.” “They must live and inherit the promises.”

We read this through New Testament eyes and can expand on it—they must live on and lead to the seed (singular) coming into the world, the Messiah, the Christ, that he might crush the head of the serpent, though it will mean him being wounded in the process, that he might bring about the salvation of God's people, the church. And this church is so innumerable that it cannot be contained to one nation, to the physical sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob alone. It spills over and in Christ, in its enlarged form, encompasses Gentiles as well. It includes Jew and Gentile, all who believe. And this church will never pass from the earth, but Christ will build it and never be without a testimony in this world. We can pray for the church that boldly, you see, recognizing it to be God's ancient promises to coming to pass in Christ, recognizing that Christ and his church are central to all of history, though it may not be recognized in the headlines, the news, offered up through secular media.

We can pray for the kingdom, knowing that its cause is so near and dear to God's heart, knowing that our prayers along such lines captivate him, ensuring that he is listening, that he will act!

Conclusion

Dear brothers and sisters, prayer along these lines is a privilege that comes with knowing the God who is, knowing him in and through his Son Jesus Christ—a God who welcomes us when we are afraid, when we are in abject need. He wants us to know that, that as we pray in such accordance with his will, with our praises and thank offerings and cries and petitions being inseparably tied up with his eternal counsel and purposes for this world, we can without hesitation bring our anxieties—we can cast our cares upon him—we can tell him our fears.

It's for our benefit, as we unburden ourselves upon him, like Jacob does here, in v. 11: "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." He's saying, "Lord, so much hangs in the balance—I've got family, and with it so many responsibilities—and I'm afraid—so I turn to you." Let that be you and me as well, as followers of this same covenant God—let that be us tonight, and throughout all our days.
Amen!

Prayer

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