

[OPENING SLIDE]

Prayer as Life

"Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said ... 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God ... this is the gate of heaven.'"

Introduction

The story's been told that one day God was looking down on his creation and saw all of the bad behavior that was going on. So the Lord called upon one of the angels and sent the angel to Earth. When he returned, he told God, "Yes, it is bad; 95% are misbehaving and only 5% are not."

God thought for a moment and said, "Maybe I'd better send down a second angel to get another opinion." So He called another angel and sent him forth, but the angel returned with the same report. "It's true," the angel said, "Creation is in decline; 95% bad, and only 5% are being good."

The Lord was grieved, so He e-mailed the 5%, so that He might *encourage* them ... to spur them on and keep them going. Do you know what the e-mail said?

"I was just wondering; I didn't get one either."

Of course, there are two ways of taking that story: first, if you didn't get that memo, it's time for confession and forgiveness (last week's message) ... however, if you think the Father's encouragement may have missed you because you think the Lord misplaced your address, then, this Sunday is for you.

Main Point: On the run, full of questions, and at times tripped up by sin, we, as was Jacob, are met by the living Lord. His gracious intervention – ascending and descending by way of His grace – transforms us into children of faith – faith expressed in a life of prayer. Beginning with His promises, breathed out in faith, and in real time, prayer is worship.

PRAYER IS LIFE

Amen.

+++

2- GOD MEETS US WHERE WE ARE

Jacob is on the run ... in full on flight mode from his brother Esau whom Jacob (and his mom) had tricked out of his brother's birthright. Now, running for his life, would the Lord, the God of Abraham and Isaac protect him as he passed through the hostile lands? Would he find a good a favorable end to what he was seeking? What about his brother-Esau's threat on his life? (Adapted from Wilch, *CPR*, 10:2, 13)

All-too-familiar concerns. One's that may surface in our own sometimes raw conversations with God. Yes, who of us has not prayed intently for the Lord's presence or protection? Who has not prayed for some favorable outcome? Who of us has not prayed for – or probably more *about* – some enemy at our gate?

10 Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. 11 And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep.

Weary from running, and exhausted, God is glad to meet us there.

For Jacob it “is a supreme display of divine grace, unsought and unstinted.” Unsought, because Jacob was not looking for God to intervene. Unstinted, because when God meets Jacob, He doesn't scold him for his unbelief. He only reaffirms His assurances to be His God, and to see Him safely home. (Adapted from Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 158)

Yes, wherever it is we are heading, and from whatever it is we may be running, with great faith or little, our heavenly Father is glad to meet us there.

For Jacob, it's in a dream ...

*12 And he dreamed, and behold, there was **a ladder** (or stairway – Jesus¹) **set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven.** And behold, **the angels of God** were **ascending and descending on it!***

For us, it is in the gift of prayer, where, the Lord reaffirms for us – as He did with Jacob – that we are not alone in our times of need. Ascending and descending in grace, our heavenly Father assures us that He truly seeks fellowship with his people. (Adapted from Wilch, 14) That if we earnestly seek Him, He will be found. (Isaiah 55:6; Matthew 7:7-8; Acts 17:26-27)

Where, we discover that ...

¹ And [Jesus] said to [Nathanael], “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:51)

3- PRAYER IS ROOTED IN PROMISE

13 And behold, the Lord stood above (beside) [the ladder] and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. 14 Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Before our prayers ascend, God’s promises come down. Where He may or may not bless you materially, but according to His will He makes this promise:

15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”²

All to say, your heavenly Father can be trusted and called upon. He is all in, when it comes to His gracious will for our lives. Who, with regards to the gift of prayer, makes some startling promises:

4-FIRST, the Lord who commends His children to pray, promises to listen to and hear their prayers (1 Kings 8:28-29; Psalm 66:19; Isaiah 38:5; Luke 1:13; Acts 10:31)

5-SECOND, promising to hear those prayers, our heavenly Father also vows to answer them (1 Kings 18:24; Job 38:1; Psalm 4:1; Jeremiah 42:4) – though not always affirmatively ... but third ...

6-FINALLY, He who promises to answer our prayers *will* always answer them in a way that is for our good (Romans 8:28) ... who’s answer will always be right as rain.

Prayer begins with His promises, and secondly:

7-PRAYER IS EXPRESSED IN FAITH

16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” 17 And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

“Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life.” (Jonathan Edwards)
Prayer is faith. Prayer is faith ... breathing. And Jacob is breathing – heavily.

² Wenham notes that this is the first time God ever said to anyone: “I will be with you,” a promise that will be repeated to many.

In ... out: **8-IN**, as we inhale the awesome reality of who it is we are talking to ... IN as we inhale the love of God who holds out the golden scepter, bidding us to enter into His chambers ... IN as we inhale the Savior's deep and abiding love for us ... (and) ... **9-OUT**, as we exhale our anxieties and worries ... OUT as we exhale out doubt and unbelief ... OUT as we commit everything to His good and gracious will for our lives. *"His will be done."*

Yes, prayer is rooted in God's grace, expressed in faith ...

10-PRAYER IS SPOKEN IN REAL TIME

18 So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

It is true, we can pray at any time or in any place. But if we follow Jesus' way, prayer needs space: a secluded mountain, special room, family altar, or sanctuary.

Prayer also needs a posture: standing (Genesis 18:22; 1 Kings 19:11; Mark 11:25) or kneeling (1 Kings 8:54; Daniel 6:10; Mark 1:40; Acts 9:40), hands outstretched (Psalm 63:4, 77:2, 141:2; 1 Timothy 2:8) or folded, eyes uplifted (Psalm 123:1-2; Mark 7:34; John 17:1) or cast down. The Bible doesn't prescribe a *single* stance. The mood will often dictate the method. Shoes off and prostrate (Genesis 17:3; Exodus 4:31; 2 Chronicles 2:18; Psalm 66:6, 72:11; Nehemiah 8:6; Luke 5:12, 8:47) ... the method or place is not as important as the act, of taking the time, evening, morning, throughout the day to commune with our heavenly Father. Where, finally ...

11-PRAYER IS WORSHIP

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 22 and **this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you** (speaking directly to God) **give me I will give a full tenth to you."**

It is a fledgling faith that prays this way, but it is a faith that flows out of worship. Yes, we may not always get the words right, but so long as they are directed to the Lord, prayed in Jesus' name, and according to His good and gracious will, God will hear them. Yes, Jacob may be young in the faith, but God is still listening, so that when he passes back this way years later (32:24-30), his faith will have come to full flower. His trust of the Lord will be transformed into a full-fledged worship.

Yes, such a vow, as the one Jacob makes that day, was not the fruit of doubt that God *might* keep His promise. No, his vow/prayer was the expression of thanksgiving for the help God promised to provide. (Adapted from Alders, *Genesis (II)*, 108)

Conclusion

12-In Frederick Buechner's story of Jacob, *The Son of Laughter*, his take on this event brings Jacob to reflect upon what he has just seen. In wonder Jacob says: "Heaven *has* to do with earth ... and earth with Heaven. As prayers and offerings rise, the God descends. The end is light." (95)

In our lives of grace and divine acceptance, we still suffer. In this valley of sorrow, we must bear many crosses and endure many temptations. "But as we do ... our stairway is none other than Jesus Christ ... the sole way to the Father. He is our Bethel, our house of God." Where, "come what may, nothing can separate us from this divine stairway, this divine Bethel, for we are in him and he is in us." (Bird, *CPR*, 13:2, 14)

Beginning with God's promises, breathed out in faith, and in real time, we are given to the gift of prayer ... prayer as worship ...

13-PRAYER IS LIFE

Amen.

[Friday E-mail:] Several years ago, I was asked to bring God's presence and Word to a grieving couple and their family. They are good friends of ours whose daughter appeared to have had some sort of a sudden medical emergency, and who has now joined Jesus in heaven. Needless to say, we desired to join them in their grief. Our goal was simply to be there, pray, and if necessary, speak.

It was a profound moment of deep-diving into prayer. Where, even among the heartiest Christians, we sometimes harbor the silly notion that if we act like good Christians, follow the 10 Commandments, do our devotions, and, for the most part, keep our "spiritual noses clean," we have an in with God. We may not say this aloud, but at times we believe it. Or at least, we *hope* that it will be true.

But then ... *something* happens! Not necessarily the run of the mill stuff. It could be a life-altering word from the doctor, a miscarriage, car accident, or major disappointment that takes us for a ride. And immediately we begin to ask ourselves "OK, what did I do? I mean, I must have royally messed up, or God wouldn't allow this to happen. You only get what you deserve." "*Consider now, who, being innocent, has ever perished?*" Job's fake-friend Eliphaz once "counseled." "*Where were the upright ever destroyed?*" He enquired." Some friend!

But as Philip Yancey, in his book, *The Question That Never Goes Away*, writes: "Not once do [we] see Jesus lecturing people on the need to accept blindness or lameness as an expression of God's secret will." To Jesus we are not some example of what not to do/be, when something goes wrong. What did He do instead? He invited folks into communion with Him. Forgiving their sins, touching them, healing some. That is to say, He had compassion on those who were "*helpless and harassed.*" He taught them to pray, "*Thy will be done,*" where He promised to meet them in their need.

Child of God, what do you need? For what questions are you seeking answers? Where, the season of Lent seeks to move us back to the center, back to the Gospel, back to the Cross, and to the Savior who willingly went there *for you*. He is also waiting for you ... to come to Him. To lift up your prayers to Him. To seek Him, morning, noon and night. Where, it was the church Father Ambrosiaster who said: "If [Christ] died for His enemies, just think what He will do for His friends!"

Our friend's child (Caitlin) now beholds such a glory. By grace through faith in Christ alone, so shall we. Where, until that time, the Lord cherishes your conversations with Him, where He's promised to listen. He *will* answer, with an answer that will always be for your good. Wow! What a Savior! SYOS