

Genesis 32:22-30 (Luke 18:1-8) “Pray Relentlessly”

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Jacob had reached what seemed like the end of the line. After years of making his fortune by his wits and charm, the game was over. For most of his life Jacob had cheated and defrauded friends and family alike. He was a survivor but now his past was about to catch up with him.

The story begins with Abraham and Sarah who had finally had a son in their old age according to the promise of God. His name was Isaac. Isaac's wife was Rebekah and for many years Isaac and Rebekah had no children because Rebekah was barren. So Isaac prayed on behalf of his wife and the Lord answered his prayer and his wife became pregnant with twins. Those two brothers, Esau and Jacob, were destined to be rivals. The fighting began even before they were born. They wrestled in the womb, each one struggling to be born first. When they were born, Esau came first, but Jacob followed right after, his hand clenched tightly around Esau's foot.

The rivalry and the struggle continued and it spread to the parents. Esau was always Isaac's favourite. Rebekah doted on Jacob. One day Esau came home from a hard day's hunting, hungry as only a teenager can be. Jacob was in the kitchen and what he was cooking sure smelled good. Jacob looked at his hungry brother and looked at the pot of stew and said, “Want some? Let's make a deal!” I will give you some of this delicious and mouth-watering stew, and you give me your birthright. Let me be counted as firstborn. Now Esau thought more of his stomach than his inheritance and agreed, but there was one more thing Jacob had to do. He had to deceive his father into giving it to him.

Isaac was old and grey and his eyesight wasn't what it used to be, so Jacob and his mother devised a plan. Jacob would pretend to be Esau, go to his father, and steal the blessing. While Esau was busy preparing a meal for his father, Jacob dressed up in his brother's clothes, disguised himself to look like Esau, went to his father's room and received the blessing intended for Esau. Scarcely had Jacob left the room when Esau returned, only to find out that his brother had just left. In his anger Esau vowed that one day Jacob would pay for what he had done. Meanwhile Rebekah made plans for Jacob to leave town and go live with his uncle where he would be safe from the wrath of Esau.

So Jacob journeyed to the land where Laban lived and after about a month there, Laban asked him, “What can I pay you for working for me?” Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel, and love had blossomed between Jacob and Rachel. So Jacob said, “I'll work for you for seven years in return for beautiful Rachel's hand in marriage.” Laban agreed and the seven years flew by. When the time came, they prepared for a wedding feast to celebrate, but when the wedding night came, Laban deceived Jacob. When Jacob awoke from the wedding night, it wasn't beautiful Rachel in bed beside him. It was Leah, the older daughter, the one who was “hard on the eyes.” Jacob had married the wrong girl. He got what he deserved. The deceiver was deceived. The con artist got conned. The trickster got tricked.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Laban explained that it wasn't right for Rachel to get married first and leave Leah behind as an old maid. Here's what we'll do. After your honeymoon week is over with Leah, you can marry Rachel. Then you can work for me for another seven years. Jacob agreed. After that seven years were over, Jacob wanted to return home, but Laban had another deal for him. You can't go home empty-handed. Work for me for another seven years and at the end, we will divide the flocks and herds and you can go home rich. Jacob and Laban spent the next seven years trying to out-smart and out-con, and out-do each other. Laban kept changing the rules and Jacob prospered in spite of it. But the irritations grew in Laban's household and Jacob's prosperity was looked at with resentment by Laban's own sons. It was time for Jacob to leave. His only choice was to go back home to Canaan and his father's house. He gathered up his wives and children, his servants and possessions and tried to leave town without so much as a goodbye but something surprising was happening. Laban caught up with Jacob and wanted to give him his blessing.

There is something happening in the background. What is God doing? God had told Laban not to harm Jacob but let him go in peace. Years before, God had told Isaac that Jacob, not Esau, would be the one through whom the promise of a Messiah would be fulfilled. Years before, Jacob had been given a glimpse of God's amazing grace when Isaac blessed him and sent him on his way. Now he was getting another glimpse of that grace from Laban, who blesses him and sends him on his way. So, as we come to our text today, Jacob and his wives and children, his servants and flocks and herds are making their way back to Canaan. And Jacob was worried. How would he be received when he arrived back home?-he

didn't have to wait long to find out. Partway home Jacob received word that his brother Esau had learned that they were on their way back. So Esau set out to meet him and he was bringing a welcoming committee. He had four hundred armed men on horseback. That night Jacob tossed and turned. Everything he had done to Esau came flooding back into his memory. What would tomorrow bring? Everything was going wrong. There were no more options, no more con games. My sins have found me out. Esau will get his revenge. Jacob had done everything he could think of to prepare for the worst. He had divided his family and possessions into two groups so that if one group was attacked, the others might have a chance to escape. Beyond that, there was nothing else he could do.

He had lived his life relying on his wits but that was all about to come crashing down. He had also seen and experienced God's gracious care and blessing. On his way into exile Jacob had had a dream about the angels of God ascending and descending on a great stairway between heaven and earth. On that night God was showing his heart to Jacob. I am not far away. I am not disconnected from my creation. God was near him. God was with him. God would stay with him and bless him. Now as Jacob is brought to a second crisis point in his life, he prays. He prays like he had never prayed before. He is at a point in his life where there is nowhere to turn and nowhere to go. It was time to pray.

Now, that may not be a good reason to pray, but it is a reason. Is that the only time you pray? Does prayer only come to mind or cross your lips when you have exhausted every other alternative? Do you think of prayer as a last resort? At the end of Jacob's night of prayer, he woke up with a limp. It was a physical sign of something we all have, something we are all born with and struggle with. We're born broken. We're born thinking and believing that we can get through life relying on our wits, without help and without God. I can be my own God! It is only when the storms of life confront us that we learn the truth that only God can make this come out right and that we can trust him to do what is best for us from the viewpoint of eternity.

Jacob prayed, and what sounds like a prayer of desperation, was, in reality a prayer of faith. Lord, I am willing to go ahead to whatever lies before me tomorrow in the confidence that you are with me and that you will go with me. But just do this one thing, bless me again. Reassure me of your promise. Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief. He wasn't the first person to pray that prayer, and he won't be the last. The good news is that God did help him in his unbelief. Do you remember what Isaac did when Jacob set out to leave home? Isaac blessed him. God told him to do that. Do you remember what Laban did when Jacob set out to leave that place? Laban blessed him. God told him to do that. Each time Jacob was leaving because of his sin, and each time God brought him a message of grace to cover his sin.

Here's what you need to see. It's not just our hopeless situations that lead us to pray. Hopeless situations often lead us to despair. When we look back on life and remember the taste of grace, we are not led to despair, we are led to pray. Time and again Jacob had tasted grace and that taste of grace led him to pray this time also. I won't let you go. I want you to bless me. I need you to bless me. So Jacob wrestled with God all night. He wouldn't let go, he wouldn't give in, he wouldn't give up without a blessing, without a glimmer of light. He trusted that God would give him that light and that blessing.

Who really won that midnight wrestling match? God showed His power over Jacob with a mere touch that produced a limp but God also let Jacob have a winning hold on him. It wasn't a full nelson or a half nelson or a choke hold. It was the hold of faith. And as a sign of that victory, God gave Jacob a new name. He would no longer be Jacob the deceitful one. He is now Israel, the one who won't let go of God and the one God won't let go of. This new name points to the faith that takes hold of God's promises and will not let go. It is a faith that insists God keep His promises and do what He said He will do. This is the faith that God works to grow in his people, a persistent faith. When you pray and earnestly ask God to do as He has promised, He delights to yield. It is those very promises that bring forth the response of faith.

In the first instance, Jacob had deceived his father and stolen his brother's birthright but later, as he was about to flee for his life, his father blessed him again. And in that second blessing Isaac was not deceived. Isaac knew who he was talking to and it was in that blessing that Isaac spoke of the covenant God had made with Abraham. God had promised Abraham many descendants. He had promised that the Saviour to come would come from Abraham's descendants through Isaac. Isaac had two sons, and now the lineage to the Savior would follow the line of Jacob. Jacob didn't get that blessing by stealing it. Then, just before Jacob left to go to Laban, Isaac took Jacob aside and said to him, "*May God give you and your descendants the blessing of Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land that God gave to Abraham*"

Jacob held it tight to that promise. Lord, You promised to bring me back to that Promised Land. You can't go back on Your promise. I have sinned and brought this all on myself, but please forgive me. Rescue me from my sins and bring me home. Jacob's trust in himself had been broken but he was not left in despair. He was led to trust God's promises, God's grace, God's mercy. He prays, "Lord, I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness You have shown to Your servant." As he remembers how God has blessed him in the past and as he remembers the promise of God that his descendants will be as the sand of the sea, he wrestles with God, as if to remind God of what He has promised. It is because of that promise that he can say, "Lord, I'm ready to trust You now that You will do what You said You will do, and that You will rescue me from the hands of my brother."

God kept His word of promise to Jacob, and a joyful and tearful reunion between Jacob and Esau followed. This is more than just a nice story with a happy ending. It shows that Jacob and the other patriarchs were sinners too. They struggled with doubt and all the other challenges of life that we face. Scripture doesn't present God's people as flawless heroes, but as people like us, people who faced struggles and crises in their lives. It also shows us people who found hope and help in God's amazing grace. Most of all, it shows us God's love for sinners, a deep and abiding love that would send Jesus to the cross one day for the sake of sinners.

In Luke 18 this morning Jesus told a parable about a poor woman and an unjust judge. The poor woman could not get the judge to listen. She could not get justice for her complaint. The judge wouldn't even give her the time of day and yet, she succeeded in finally getting justice because of her nagging persistence. She got what she was asking for because of her dogged determination. She wore him down and wore him out. This judge had no love for her, no consideration for her, nothing, but he knew this: he knew that he would have no peace until he gave in to pleas and gave her what she wanted.

So, is that what prayer is? Is the goal of prayer to break through God's reluctance and obtain what He doesn't want you to have? What is the point of the parable? Do you have to wrestle with God to get what you need, or is there something else going on here? Prayer is not about bending God's will to what you want. Prayer is about surrendering your will to God's will and trusting God's promises and holding God to His promises. It is a parable of contrast. If the heart and mind of a selfish and uncaring judge can be swayed by a poor widow who has no pull, what will happen when you cry out to your heavenly father who loves you more than you can imagine? The answer is obvious: your faithful and loving God will answer speedily.

Don't be afraid to pray. Don't be afraid to pray boldly. Pray in a way that calls on God to do that which He has already promised to do for you. You are not crying out to an unjust judge, who will answer your cries just to get rid of you. You have a loving heavenly father who delights to hear your prayers.