

PRAYER'S ESSENTIALS

by Ray C. Stedman

I wonder if you sense, as I often do, a close identity with various characters of Scripture? There are two men I particularly feel close to:

1. In the New Testament, I identify with Peter, who had the ability to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. He had a deeply devoted heart for the Lord, yet he always seemed to put the wrong foot forward. (Peter has been described as one who only opened his mouth to change his feet, and I myself have felt very much that way at times.)
2. In the Old Testament, I identify with Jacob, the schemer, the operator, the self-reliant character who always had his own way of doing things. Jacob's theme song could have been, "I Did It My Way" -- the Frank Sinatra of the Old Testament.

We are going to look at a prayer of Jacob's this morning. I hope this prayer will help us to see how these Old Testament characters understood the marvelous relationship they had with God through prayer, and also how they were helped to grow through prayer. This incident, found in the 32nd chapter of Genesis, comes at a time when Jacob is coming back into the land of Canaan, having spent some twenty years with his Uncle Laban, in Syria. Jacob is now married to two wives and is the father of eleven children. He has amassed great herds of cattle and camels and other material wealth, and God had said to him that the time had now come for him to come back into Canaan. But Jacob comes with a great deal of trepidation. He knows that he is going to meet up with his twin brother Esau, and he is afraid of that encounter. He remembers vividly the last time he saw Esau, when he had cheated him out of his birthright by a clever manipulation, typical of Jacob, by which he had taken advantage of his brother's hunger to get him to promise him the right of the firstborn. Now God had promised Jacob the right of the firstborn -- Jacob's mother knew it and had told him so -- but Jacob was never one to let God work things out his way, so, in a rather sordid maneuver, he cheated his brother, deceived his father, and obtained the birthright. When he saw what had happened Esau was very angry, and Jacob had to flee from his brother's wrath.

Now, Jacob is on his way back to Canaan and he has to face his brother again. In a typical action, Jacob sent a couple of messengers ahead to let his brother know he was coming. He wanted to feel out the scene, and see what Esau's reaction would be. The messengers return with the foreboding words: "Your brother is coming to meet you with 400 armed horsemen," {cf, Gen 32:6}. Nothing in the account suggests, or says, that Esau intended to harm him, but Jacob immediately jumps to the conclusion that Esau would not come with 400 armed men if he was not intent on some evil. Jacob is very frightened indeed, so he divides his company into two bands, thinking that if Esau fell on one band and destroyed them the others would have a chance to escape. So you can see the character of this man. He is a manipulator, an operator, a slick, scheming businessman.

I am sure he was the originator of that famous Jewish saying, "Oy, such a deal!"

As we know, God had sent Jacob back into the land, and, furthermore, when he came to the borders of the land, God had encouraged him with a remarkable vision, or an opening of his eyes. There is a brief reference to it at the beginning of this chapter. Though we are not given details, it is apparent that Jacob experienced something very much like what happened to the servant of Elisha in that famous scene where the servant is concerned about the armies of the Syrians around him. On that occasion Elisha prayed that his eyes would be opened, and he suddenly saw all the angelic hosts of the Lord. Something like that happened to Jacob. God showed him the tremendous spiritual forces that were at work to guard him and protect him as he came back to face this encounter with his brother. Jacob named the place, "The Two Companies," by which he meant the band of people who were traveling with him and the invisible company of angels who also accompanied him.

You would have thought, from that, that Jacob would have felt very secure and at peace when he came to meet

his brother, but, instead, he is fearful and trembling, certain that he is going to meet with danger, if not destruction. So he prays, and his prayer is found here in these words in Genesis 32. It is really a most excellent prayer, a remarkable prayer, a kind of model prayer of the Old Testament. It has certain noteworthy ingredients, which I would like to call to your attention:

First of all, the prayer focuses upon the being and greatness of God, for Jacob says:

"O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who didst say to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,'" {Gen 32:9 RSV}

Now according to the New Testament, that is the way to start praying. Do not focus on yourself, or your circumstances, or your problems, but, when you pray, begin with God. Jesus told us that. "When you pray," he said, "say, 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,'" {Matt 6:9 RSV}. Jacob begins that way. This is a greatly improved prayer over the one that is recorded of him in the 28th chapter, when he began his journey into Syria twenty years earlier. He prayed at Bethel then too, but his prayer was very self-centered: "If you will be my God; if you will bless me; if you will do this, then I will serve you," {cf, Gen 28:20-22}. This is a typical prayer of a young convert whose focus is still upon himself. But now Jacob has learned to start with God, and with the promise of God. He reminds him, "You're the God who said to me, 'Return to your country, and I will do you good,'" so he begins with the divine promise and focuses on the divine character.

Then he recognizes his own personal unworthiness:

"I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou hast shown to thy servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies." {Gen 32:10 RSV}

That is a marvelously humble statement. Jacob recognizes how undeserving he is of God's grace and mercy, and yet how faithfully God has blessed and prospered him. It is an open acknowledgment on Jacob's part that he does not deserve this, but God has given it to him anyway.

Then Jacob makes his petition. It is specific and definite, like all good prayers ought to be:

"Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau," {Gen 32:11a RSV}

With it comes an open acknowledgment of his fear:

"for I fear him, lest he come and slay us all, the mothers with the children." {Gen 32:11b RSV}

That is a great way to pray. There is the recognition that he is in trouble, and needs help. Jacob states it very definitely. He isn't vague or uncertain. He isn't praying, "Bless me, Lord, help me," in some general way. Rather, he prays, "Deliver me from the hand of my brother Esau, for I fear him that he is about to wipe me out and all my family as well."

Then he reminds God of a divine promise:

"But thou didst say, 'I will do you good, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'" {Gen 32:12 RSV}

God had first said that to Abraham, he had said it again to Isaac, and evidently also to Jacob. So Jacob reminds him, "Lord, Esau's threatening to kill me and my family, but you've said that my children are going to be more numerous than all the sands of the sea." There seems to be a recognition here that God had overruled the possibility for evil in Esau's coming.

This is a wonderful prayer, as I have said. It is theologically correct, it is very eloquently phrased, but,

practically, it was a total waste of time. The next section indicates that Jacob apparently did not believe a word of it, not in his heart, for we are now treated to the story of how he made complete preparations to assuage his brother's wrath, to calm down the whole situation and to handle everything himself:

So he lodged there that night, and took from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau, [and what a present] two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats, [that's two hundred and twenty goats] two hundred ewes and twenty rams, [that's two hundred and twenty sheep] thirty milch camels and their colts [however many that may be], forty cows and ten bulls, twenty she-asses and ten he-asses. {Gen 32:13-15 RSV}

That is a very expensive present that Jacob is preparing for Esau. The account goes on to say that he divided them up into flocks, with the idea that he would send one on ahead, and, about the time Esau would be impressed by that, another one would come, and when Esau began to look that over and gloat over it, another one would come, and then another one. Jacob had it all worked out. This was a very clever, psychologically-designed scheme to impress his brother, to overcome his feelings of animosity and deliver him from Esau's wrath. There is not the slightest indication that he expected God to do anything in answer to his prayer.

Many of us pray that way too. Some of the prayer meetings I have attended have seemed to be pools of unbelief, where people have prayed earnestly that God would do something and then acted as though there was no possibility that he would ever answer. This is what Jacob is doing here.

I know there are some commentators who tell us that he was really "putting legs" to his prayer -- that this was a proper activity on his part -- that he was trying to fulfill what he thought was required of the situation and still, nevertheless, trusting that God would bless his efforts to bring about a reconciliation with his brother. I have heard messages on this incident which said there was nothing wrong with Jacob's action here. Now, it is true that there are times when we need to act after we have prayed.

Some years ago a student told me that he was facing a severe examination for which he had not studied, so he prayed, and asked God to give him a good grade. Then he asked himself, "Which would be the greater evidence of faith, to pray and then study for this examination, or to forget it all and go fishing and trust God to bring me through?" His conclusion was that the best evidence of faith would be to go fishing. He did so, and failed the exam.

Others facing similar circumstances point out that we are to pray and work -- you know, "Praise God and pass the ammunition." They say that the way to exercise faith is to operate on the basis that God will strengthen us in doing the normal thing, and thus answer our prayer that way. But I do not think that is what is happening here, for several reasons.

It is true that there are times when we need to "put legs" to our prayers. There is normal, expected activity which is not to be set aside, and canceled out, by prayer.

I remember, when I was about twelve or thirteen years of age, cultivating corn on my grandfather's farm up in northern Minnesota. I was attending a vacation Bible school, having just come to the Lord a year before. I was growing in my faith, and excited about the possibilities of prayer, so I thought I would try it out in the corn field one day. I was tired of cultivating and there were about fifteen more rows of corn yet to be done, so I prayed and asked God to finish the job for me. "By faith, whatsoever you ask" {cf, John 14:13} it says, by faith then I would claim that that field would be cultivated and all the weeds eliminated. Then I felt I had better "put legs" to my prayer, so I just went home. Some weeks later my grandfather cornered me. He asked, "Why didn't you finish cultivating that field?" I started to say, "I expected God to do it," but I didn't think he would understand, so I just said, "Well, I didn't feel like it." He gave me a reminder that made me feel quite differently!

A lot of people, however, approach prayer that way. But Jacob is not doing that here. There are three clues which indicate what is going on:

First, this account concerns Jacob and Esau, and those are highly significant names in the Scripture. They were not only twin brothers who grew up in the same home, who had two very different characters and two widely different destinies, but they are used all through the Scripture as symbols of something. They even appear in Galatians and in Romans in this capacity.

- Jacob is always the symbol of the man of faith, the man who has a spiritual sensitivity which trusts in God.
- Esau, on the other hand, is forever the man of unbelief, the man of the flesh, the self-indulgent, the self-centered materialistic man who trusts in his own abilities and has a proud disregard of any offer of help from any source.

That being so, then, there is a clear indication that Jacob's attempt to appease Esau parallels what we often do in our life when we bolster up the flesh and seek to solve our problems by fleshly schemes and operations, rather than trusting in the grace, the power, and the mercy of God. That is the first clue.

Then second, in the next chapter the account goes on to indicate that when Jacob and Esau actually did meet. Esau was not at all influenced by Jacob's present. We are told that Esau ran to Jacob and threw his arms around his neck and kissed him and welcomed him home. There is no indication in the whole account that he did not intend to do that right from the very beginning. The remarkable thing is that Esau comments on this strange present that he met, saying, in effect, "What was that mess I met on the way here? What was that all about?" Jacob had to explain to him what he was trying to do, so it is clear that all his efforts to appease his brother had no effect at all. They were merely the manipulations of a distrustful heart, trying to take advantage of psychological opportunities as best it could.

But the third clue is even more positive, for the account goes on now to tell us what God did about this. We are told a very interesting thing in Verse 22:

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. And Jacob was left alone; {Gen 32:22-24a RSV}

It is obvious that Jacob does this deliberately. He wants to be alone either to think, to plan, or to pray. We are not told. But what we are told is rather striking and amazing:

and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. {Gen 32:24b RSV}

This is one of those mysterious, intriguing stories that are found very frequently in the Old Testament, where some element of mystery is introduced without any adequate explanation. Everyone who reads this account asks, "Who is this masked man? Where did he come from? What is he doing?" I am sure Jacob must have felt that way too. He thought he was all alone, having sent everyone and everything across the river, when suddenly out of the shadows steps a man, and to Jacob's amazement begins to wrestle with him.

I have read messages and heard sermons based on this story which actually use the words, "Jacob wrestled with the man." But the account does not say that. It very carefully states that it was the man who wrestled with Jacob. As you read further, there is, no doubt as to who the man is. In fact, at the end of the story, Jacob names the place of this encounter, *Peniel*, which means, "the face of God," because he said, "I have met God face to face and still survived." So it is clear that this is one of those strange encounters in the Old Testament of man with God himself, much as we saw with Abraham when God appeared to him in the form of a man and ate with him in the shadow of his tent. Here is a man who, in some strange way, in one of those Old Testament theophanies, is God himself appearing in visible form, and he wrestles with Jacob.

What does all that mean? Well, taken in connection with the whole story which we have had up to this point, there is no question that what we have here is God's attempt to improve Jacob's prayer life with a crash course on praying. God is attempting to break down Jacob's stubborn dependence upon himself. Jacob's problem was that he never really trusted God to do things. He always had that inward feeling that if he did not do it himself, God would probably not come through. Now God is dealing with him in a moment of truth. Jacob

has to face up to the fact that, though his prayers are eloquent, beautifully phrased, and theologically accurate, they are useless because he does not believe that God is going to do anything. All his trust is in himself.

I meet a lot of people like that. They pray and talk wonderful, theologically-correct language but do not really believe God is going to act. This is what Jacob is doing here, There is no confidence, no expectation, but rather a stubborn refusal on his part to give up and expect God to handle the situation.

Do you recognize yourself here? I recognize myself frequently doing that.

The account continues, Verse 25:

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. {Gen 32:25 RSV}

That came after hours of wrestling. Jacob has resisted, struggled, and fought back. He will not give in until, at last, the divine hand touches him on the thigh and puts the hip socket out of joint. That is the end of it; nobody can wrestle in that condition. All Jacob can do now is to cling in helpless dependence upon this strange wrestler. Knowing by now something of who this man is, he hangs on desperately. We are told that the man said:

"Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" {Gen 32:26-27a RSV}

Here we find two more of those provocative, searching, divine questions like the ones we saw asked in the Garden of Eden. The first question is, "What is your name?" God, of course, knew what Jacob's name was, but Jacob needed to remember. The name *Jacob* means, "a supplanter, a usurper, a man who seeks to take the place of someone else." Jacob is reminded that his character, his nature is to trust in himself, and try to get advantage of somebody else. "What is your name?"

And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel [which means "God's fighter, God's striver"], for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." {Gen 32:27b-28 RSV}

Many messages that I have read on this account have commented on the fact that Jacob was mighty in prayer because he wrestled with God all night long and thus prevailed. But I have already indicated that it is not true that Jacob wrestled with God. It is God who wrestled with Jacob, trying to break down his stubborn self-reliance, his feeling that it all depends on him, that he has got to do it or else it is not going to get done, that God is really going to do nothing in the situation, Furthermore, Jacob did not prevail over God by wrestling. The moment of prevailing comes when his hip is broken, when he is absolutely helpless and can do nothing but hang on. That is when he prevailed with God. That is what this account is teaching us. God responds to that sense of human helplessness.

This is also what Paul is teaching us in Second Corinthians, when he says, "His strength is made perfect in my weakness, for out of weakness am I made strong," {cf, 2 Cor 12:9}. Here is a vivid example of this.

Jacob is at last brought to the place where his human ingenuity and power is broken and ended. In a moment of helplessness, clinging to God, asking only for blessing, Jacob is said to prevail with God. His name then is changed to "God's fighter."

To me one of the most remarkable things about the Old Testament is the many ways God teaches men to make war as examples to us of how he fights:

- There is the story of Jericho. How does God take a city? Well, by marching around it seven times and blowing trumpets. What do you think the Joint Chiefs of Staff would think of that strategy?
- And how does God meet the armies of the Philistines which come against it? By a rumbling in the top of the mulberry trees. Who would have thought that one up?

- How does God overcome the Midianite hosts which are ravishing the land in the days of Gideon? By a band of three hundred men who have nothing but earthen jars filled with torches.

God works differently than we do. Our problem is, we do not believe it, we do not accept it, we do not expect it. We do not think God can do anything, so we resort to our human ingenuity. This is what is broken in the life of Jacob.

Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. {Gen 32:29 RSV}

This is the second question God asked of Jacob. It was only natural that Jacob would ask his name, since he had just been asked for his own. The divine wrestler replies, "Why do you want to know? What is your motive? Do you plan to use me like you use everyone else you run into? Are you trying to discover what my strength is so that you might put it to work for your ends? What is your motive for asking?" He leaves it there. Yet he blesses him, for this is a parable worked out for us, as it was for Jacob, to indicate that Jacob's strength, his power, his ability to act was only realized when he came to that place of helplessness and dependence upon God.

The account goes on to say,

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the sinew of the hip which is upon the hollow of the thigh, because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh on the sinew of the hip. {Gen 32:30-32 RSV}

This practice became a ritual in Israel, designed to remind them that the moment when prayer is most effective is when we really believe God is going to do something because we can do nothing.

I have called this, *Prayer's Essential*. I think it is true. Over and over again throughout the Scripture we find that God's great struggle with us is to teach us to stop thinking we have to do it all ourselves.

I just went through an experience like this myself. I had been praying about a situation where I felt if I could just sit down and reason with the people involved, if I could point out what they were doing, I was sure I could make them see what was happening. But I could not do it. Physically, I was removed from it; psychologically, I knew I did not have an open door of communication. I felt the frustration that I could not do something, yet it was out of that sense of frustration that I began to pray and trust that God would act -- and he did act. This is the secret of prayer -- not our strength but his.

Here is an accurate expression of that truth from the hand of Alan Redpath:

Are you battling with yourself, defeated in life, going down under the buffeting? You face so many battles! None of us stands above you in this, because we know it all in our own hearts, but we would gladly tell you the good news that you overcome not by battle but by faith.

You overcome not by inward struggle but by upward look. Any battle for victory, power and deliverance -- from ourselves and from sin -- which is not based constantly upon the gazing and the beholding of the Lord Jesus, with the heart and life lifted up to him, is doomed to failure.

There are, of course, normal activities that we are to fulfill after we pray, but even then our confidence is to be that God intends to act and that he can act "above and beyond whatever we ask or think," {cf, Eph 3:20}. Our sense of peace and quietness and victory will come only as we have that confidence.

Jacob limped the rest of his life, as a constant reminder to him. Wouldn't it be wonderful if God would cause us to limp? Some of us do, don't we? Psychologically, we limp. We feel the scars of past defeats to remind us how essential it is to trust that the God we pray to is able to act on our behalf.

Prayer

Lord, perhaps by your grace you may lame some of us this morning that we may have a constant reminder that you are the God who acts beyond anything we can do. When we ask you to act we should expect you to act, Lord, and not be like Jacob, working things out with our own human wisdom. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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