

A Model Prayer in Our Distress

Genesis 32:1-12

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Introduction:

In our last two messages in our Genesis sermon series, we have seen how the LORD made it possible for Jacob to return to the Promised Land.

- Jacob had gone away some years before to escape the murderous anger of his brother Esau, whom he had deceived,
 - and had had gone to find a suitable wife—a wife who was not from among the Canaanites whom the LORD had devoted to destruction because of their ungodliness.
- Jacob had gone in haste and so was penniless, and though he found his Uncle Laban, Laban took advantage of his nephew...
 - first, in accepting Jacob's offer to work seven years in exchange for his daughter Rachel...
 - and then switching daughters on him so that Jacob consummated his marriage with Leah instead of Rachel—
 - and then offering Jacob Rachel also if he would promise to work for another seven years.
 - We have seen how Jacob foolishly agreed to this—he did not seek the Lord about this matter—and he ended up with a very contentious home.
- But after his fourteen years of hard labour as a shepherd, he was ready to return home, to the land that God had given to him as the heir of His kingdom...
 - It was the land where God had promised to be God to him and to his people,
 - and to raise up a kingdom of righteousness from which Christ would come, bringing righteousness to the kingdom itself and the nations of world which would be brought into it.
 - Jacob wanted to return, but he had no means to do so—he had 4 wives and 12 children,
 - And even though he had faithfully served Laban for 14 years and Laban knew that he had greatly prospered because of Jacob,
 - Instead of sending him away with gifts to set up his household (as would normally have been done even for one who was not a relative)
 - Laban took advantage of Jacob's situation and sought to get more work out of him for wages.

We haven't got time for all the details,

- But in short, Jacob made an arrangement by which he would only take as his wages those animals that had characteristics in the colouring that would have been extremely rare,
 - And God showed His hand in providing an extraordinary number of these, making Jacob a rich man and the envy of Laban's household.
- After six more years of labour, the LORD appeared to Jacob and called him to return to the land of promise...

- And Jacob, being afraid that Laban would try to take his wives (Laban's daughters) by force, took his family away secretly while Laban was gone.
- And all this did was put him in a place of greater danger so that now the LORD could reveal the fact that He was protecting Jacob.
- Laban came after him in hot anger, with an army of men, and the only thing that stopped him was the LORD—again, the Lord showing that He was the one who protects His kingdom.

So Jacob is growing in his faith—advancing from strength to strength, learning to trust in the LORD who provides and the LORD who protects.

- And today we see something of that growth as we find him calling on the LORD in his distress in a prayer that serves as a model for us all.

Please listen now as I read to you from our text, Genesis 32:1-12:

Genesis 32:1-12: So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ² When Jacob saw them, he said, “This *is* God’s camp.” And he called the name of that place Mahanaim. ³ Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴ And he commanded them, saying, “Speak thus to my lord Esau, ‘Thus your servant Jacob says: “I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. ⁵ I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.” ’ ” ⁶ Then the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men *are* with him.” ⁷ So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that *were* with him, and

the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies. ⁸ And he said, “If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape.” ⁹ Then Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you’: ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. ¹¹ Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me *and* the mother with the children. ¹² For You said, ‘I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’ ”

Jacob would not have been able to pray like this if the LORD had not taught him to trust in His provision and protection.

- Jacob's whole life had been a training ground that had transformed him into a praying man instead of scheming man.

And yet, even with this change of character,

- we see that as is so often the case with us, he needs additional stimulation to stir up proper prayer...

Today we will proceed by looking at two triggers that the Lord uses to trigger prayer in His people,

- and then we will look at this wonderful prayer of Jacob as a model for us of proper prayer.

So let's proceed by looking at the first trigger of prayer...

I. The LORD triggers prayer in His people by reminding us that heaven is busy looking after us.

A. Jacob has this vision of angels as he makes his way to the Promised Land—

1. There he was in his camp...
 - wealthy, but not a formidable bunch.
 - They could fight off a few thieves, but they were no army—they were vulnerable and weak in that sense.
 - This is his camp.
 - But then Jacob’s eyes are opened to see another camp!
 - A camp of mighty angels all around.
 - As David puts it in **Psalm 34:7: The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.**
 - Like Elisha’s servant, Jacob is enabled to see this mighty army.
 - Do you remember that in 2 Kings 6?
 - In 2 Kings 6:15, it says: **And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?”**
¹⁶ **So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who *are* with us *are* more than those who *are* with them.”** ¹⁷ **And Elisha prayed, and said, “LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain *was* full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.**
2. Surely, this meeting brought back memories to Jacob!
 - a. Twenty years before when leaving Canaan to go to Syria, he had seen another vision of angels ascending and descending on a great stairway to heaven!
 - And on that occasion, the LORD has spoken to him and promised to take care of him.
 - Jacob was able to see that heaven was busy about him.
 - b. He did not need a lot of information this time—
 - a simple vision of the angels was enough to bring back to his mind that he was not alone...
 - that besides his camp, so weak and inadequate, there was a heavenly camp, charged to look after him.
 - c. He was so impressed with this that he named the place May-han-ay-im which means “two camps...”
 - probably referring to his camp and this heavenly camp.
3. This was a trigger to help him remember to call on the name of the LORD in his distress...
 - Now there might be some righteous person here who would be quick to say, “but should he not have already known that without this help,”
 - to which I would reply, “Of course he should!”

- But if you are like the rest of us Christians, you know how quickly we forget...
 - Truly, I am embarrassed at how often I will not think to call on the LORD when I should.
 - Really, here I am a pastor, and I would be ashamed for you to know all the times that I have to have triggers for prayer.
- B. The LORD is in the business of giving us such triggers to remind us that there is another camp that is looking after us.
- I am so glad that He does.
 - We need all the help we can get...
1. Sometimes, He reminds us of His nearness through some little providence in which we see His hand...
 - Maybe we are distressed about someone who is struggling with their marriage, and just then we receive a tax rebate that is God's answer to our prayer for a need that we have,
 - and we are reminded of the camp of heaven and are stirred to pray for our friend's marriage instead of just fretting about it.
 - There are all sorts of little circumstances like that the LORD uses to remind us that there are two camps.
 2. A second way He often reminds us is in His Word...
 - a. As we read the Scriptures and as we listen to the preaching of His Word, He reminds us that heaven is busy about us—
 - that we are joined to Him by the ladder of Jesus Christ and that the angels of God are busy going up and down between us and heaven to minister to us.
 - It is so helpful!
 - b. Brothers and sisters, let me encourage you to be diligent in personal worship, family worship, and public worship.
 - You need the Word—Satan will try to draw you away.
 - Perhaps you don't study or lead your family in worship because you feel inadequate...you say, I am not that great with God's Word...
 - But you are looking in the wrong place—don't trust in yourself, but in God's ordinance—He will use His Word.
 - And you should be diligent about listening to my sermons if you are member of this church...
 - Not because I am a great preacher, but because God has put us in relationship as pastor and congregation—
 - Don't trust me, but trust Him to give the blessing on His word in the relationship that He has appointed.
 - Everyone should be diligent, even though there are better preachers out there, to listen to their own pastor at church and their own husband or father at home.
 - Don't deprive yourself or your children of this.
 - God will use it in your life to remind you that there are two camps (along with many other things).

- Okay, so He reminds that there are two camps through providence and through His Word...
- 3. A third way is through friends...
 - Talk to your friends—tell them of your struggles and fears, and many times they will remind you of the heavenly camp that you have forgotten...
 - God will use them to do this...
 - And you too should be that friend—that one who tells other people about how the heavenly camp has blessed you, provided for you, whatever...
 - and who also reminds your brothers and sisters in their distress...
 - You don't have to give them a big lecture about the other heavenly camp, just listen to their struggles and then offer to pray with them about it...
 - They know there is another camp—they just need to be reminded and what better way to do that than to pray with them for help from the heavenly camp.
 - Sometimes, you may need to speak to them directly about the other camp and pray that their eyes will be opened to see it (the way Elisha prayed for his servant), but usually just offering to pray with them is enough to remind them that heaven is busy about them.

TRANS> How helpful it is to be reminded that our camp is not the only camp.

- This is the first trigger that God uses to get us praying.

C. But beware of hyper-Calvinism about this...

1. Don't be one of those idiots who says that there is no reason to pray because God has already decided what He is going to do!
 - You should read Calvin on prayer—he has a great corrective about that in the Institutes...
2. You need to understand that we are in a position to change the world by prayer.
 - Yes, God is sovereign and God does has everything planned,
 - and it is not His plan that we change when we pray—it is what happens in the world that we change.
 - God's plan includes our prayers—prayers that He answers.
 - And the scripture says plainly that we have not because we ask not, or because we ask with the wrong motives.
 - It is true that God planned even the fact that you would pray
 - but that does not mean that prayer won't change things if you do—it does—prayer does make a difference.
3. What you need to learn is that if you belong to Christ, your sovereign God is at work in you to remind you that heaven is active for you...
 - and you are called to respond to those reminders by fervent, active prayer.

TRANS> So the first trigger to start prayer is the reminder that there is another camp besides our own, the camp of heaven...

- Now let's look at the second trigger.

II. The second trigger of prayer is the presence of distressing circumstances.

- A. These circumstances remind us that it is not only Lord that is busy about us when we are called into Christ's kingdom—it is also Satan!
1. As believers, we know that this is true...
 - The Bible tells us that Satan goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour...
 - And he does devour people...he devoured Cain and Absalom and Judas to name just a few.
 - He wants to destroy God's kingdom, and he employs destructive forces of all kinds—
 - He uses everything from wicked rulers who send out their agents to root out and destroy every Christian,
 - to kind grandmothers who use their kindness to deceive and lead His saints away from the LORD.
 - He uses fear, discouragement, bitterness, pride, envy, self-pity, deception, misunderstanding, ignorance, distraction—you name it!
 2. And just as we sometimes forget to pray because we don't remember about the camp of heaven,
 - so we forget to pray because we don't remember about the camp of Satan.
 - We don't recognise the danger that we are in and that the church is in...
 - until God brings us into such distressing circumstances that we cannot deny it.
 - Perhaps we are having financial troubles, marriage troubles, problems with depression, temptation, fear, problems with our children...
 - Or maybe we are threatened or troubled by ominous political developments at work or in our nation...
 - But the threat that will stir us up to pray the most of all is when we see God's kingdom threatened...
 - When we see Satan assaulting the kingdom and trying to destroy it or trying to draw us away...
 - The very thing that Jesus told His disciples on the night He was betrayed when they kept falling asleep.
 - They did not see the threat, so they did not pray.
 - We need to see that we would depart from the LORD if He did not keep us!
 - Judas departed, and Peter did for a time, but his faith did not fail because Jesus prayed for him...
 - If we are elect, He will keep us, but the way He will keep us is by waking us up to the danger so that we pray and so that we return.
 - If you are not concerned about your soul, it indicates that you do not really know the LORD—
 - There is a fierce battle for your soul.
 - You can have assurance, but proper assurance can only be yours when you are fighting against temptation and sin that would destroy you.
 - That is when you have true Spirit wrought distress that leads you to real prayer!

- B. Esau was the great force that Jacob saw—the force that stood between Jacob and the kingdom of God!
1. Jacob knew that he had to go back to the land, and he knew that in going back, he had to face Esau...
 - And the last he had heard, Esau wanted to kill him because of the wrongs that Jacob had done to him.
 - And remember that Jacob was the one that was to bring forth the kingdom of God that would bring forth the Messiah...
 - If Jacob was destroyed, there would be no kingdom of righteousness—Jacob was the one that the LORD had chosen.
 - And to Jacob’s credit (I told you that he had grown) he knows that he must go back and he knows that he must face Esau.
 2. So Jacob initiates contact with Esau—hoping that Esau will accept him.
 - a. Esau was not in his path—Esau had moved to the east—to the land of Edom at Mount Seir.
 - Apparently, he had decided to leave home,
 - Certainly he had no use for the promised land as far as God’s kingdom, for he was a profane man who had no interest in eternal kingdoms...
 - And perhaps he left because he knew that his wives were a source of grief to his parents...
 - And likely he left because his father lingered and he wanted to have more independence—to be a prince of the little dynasty he had set up such that the land was named after him.
 - b. And even though Esau was not on his path, Jacob sent messengers to him!
 - This is so not like Jacob—the schemer, the avoider, the one who just recently left Laban’s house in secret because of fear...
 - Here he is taking initiative, like a godly man—to deal with this matter!
 3. And you see what he does in verse 4 and 5—he does all that he can to make peace with Esau...
 - He sends his servants to Esau, and (as Gen 32:4-5 tells us): **he commanded them, saying, “Speak thus to my lord Esau, ‘Thus your servant Jacob says: “I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. ⁵ I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.” ’ ’**
 - Jacob is not just boasting of his wealth, but he is letting Esau know that is not going to drain the family inheritance—
 - He does not need the double portion of the inheritance that he had schemed to obtain—God has provided for him.
 - His interest was in the kingdom of God, the spiritual inheritance for which Esau had no interest...
 - And by calling Esau his lord and himself Esau’s servant, he lets him know that he has no intention of trying to rule him.
 - What do you think? Is Jacob going too far here? Is conceding too much because of fear?

- or is he doing something sacrificial and noble—seeking first the kingdom of God and not allowing the things of the world be a source of contention?
 - One thing for sure, Jacob has grown—at least he is dealing with things, even if he is giving too much...
 - And he is most certainly being a peacemaker here...much as his grandfather Abraham had done with Lot.
 - He knows that God can provide for him and he is willing to let Esau have the inheritance of his father as long as he can have the blessing of the promised kingdom.

C. Esau's response is not at all encouraging and puts Jacob in great terror and distress!

1. He does not reveal his intentions...
 - All he does is gather four hundred men—this rugged tough animal-like man, and start heading out to meet Jacob!
 - Humanly speaking, he has the power to crush Jacob!
2. Recognising this, Jacob is terrified...we are told that he is greatly afraid and distressed...
 - And in his fear, he enacts a plan to try to at least save part of his family.
 - He divides them into two camps—supposing, as he explains, that if one is destroyed, the other may be spared.
3. Can we fault him for this?
 - Is the old Jacob trying to use his wit instead of trusting God?
 - Or is this the prudent action of man making provision to protect his family in an emergency?
 - One thing is clear—Jacob has changed—
 - Not only is this seen in that he went to Esau in the first place, but all the more in the trusting prayer that he prays!

TRANS> And that is what this sermon is all about...

- God reminds us of the camp of heaven—and of the camp of Satan—in order that we might learn to pray...
 - that we might learn to put ourselves in God's hands knowing that it is He who gives us the kingdom—knowing that it is His delight to give us the kingdom!

III. Now let us look at the prayer of Jacob as an excellent model of true prayer!

A. First, you can see that Jacob prays to God as the God who has made a covenant with him and his family!

1. Many unbelievers will pray in their time of distress, but they do not know who to pray to.
 - They are at the end of their rope and they hope that God might help them.
 - They may be quite sincere—they may even make vows that they will serve Him or do something for Him if he will deliver them.

- But they do not know God—nor are they interested in knowing Him—they just want to be delivered from their problems...
2. How refreshingly different is Jacob’s prayer!
- a. He starts off identifying the LORD (see verse 9) and remembering his covenant: **“O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you’ ”**
 - Jacob is coming back to the Promised Land because the LORD has told him to do so.
 - He is coming back to obtain the kingdom that God has promised him.
 - He is trusting in God as the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac who has entered into covenant to be their God and his God.
 - b. There is a relationship of trust here, a relationship established on God’s promises in Christ—just like we have if we are in Christ...
 - Yes, Jesus had not yet come, but God had promised to raise up a kingdom that by Christ to come would become a righteous kingdom.
 - He had accepted Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as His people and promised to be their God—all on the basis of Christ who was to come.
3. Under the New Covenant, this is what it means to pray in Jesus’ name.
- We pray on the basis of the blood of the New Covenant that Jesus shed to take away our sin.
 - We pray in the confidence of that relationship that God has established with us through Him.
 - You know what He did don’t you? You know what He had to do that we might be His people, don’t you?
 - He had to bear all our sins—all the shame and all the punishment...
 - That is what He did on the cross, and it is on the basis of this that we know Him as our God and Saviour...
 - And it is on this basis that we can pray to Him.
 - We have a relationship that is established in mercy, and we pray especially for the preservation of that relationship!
 - If you don’t have such a relationship with God, a relationship with Him through faith in Jesus,
 - then you ought to be very distressed about that—that ought to be your greatest concern because you are sinner before a holy God...
 - You need to trust in Jesus at once—He is freely offered to you.
 - This should be your greatest concern—all your other problems are trivial compared the problem of being a sinner before a holy God!
 - It doesn’t matter what sin you may have committed—there is forgiveness if you will turn from it to Jesus.

- And once you have this relationship, then you will pray for the preservation of that relationship—as Jacob does...
- Not just to get out of trouble, but because the relationship is more important to you than life itself—it is your life!
- You will be concerned about anything that tries to pull you away from God’s kingdom or that tries to hinder the advance of the kingdom.

TRANS> And look, the next thing Jacob does in this prayer.

B. He confesses how unworthy he is to receive anything from God.

1. It is not a prayer where he says,
 - “Lord, you should do this for me because I have done this and that for you,”
 - or “Lord, if you do this for me, then I will do this and that for you.”
 - Don’t get me wrong, there is a place for setting before God our faithfulness or for making vows about the future...
 - but at the root of it all, we must recognise, as Jacob does, that there is no merit in us whatsoever.
 - Even when God accepts our works, that in itself is a great mercy.
 - We are favourably associated with Him by free grace, the merit belongs to Jesus Christ alone...
 - That is where real security lies!
 - If you are trusting in what you have done (or what you are promising to do), you are sunk.
 - Trust in our dear Lord Jesus and what He has done!
2. Jacob confesses his unworthiness in verse 10 when he says:
 - **10 “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies.”**
 - Do you see what he is saying?
 - Already the LORD has freely given him way more than he deserves, and he knows that!
 - The only reason he is asking boldly for help is because of God’s covenant—the covenant that we just looked at in which God declared Himself to be his God on the basis of sheer grace.
 - There is an important thing to notice here too...
 - That even in his distress, Jacob is full of thanksgiving to God for the mercies that he has already received—
 - Once you understand God’s free mercy,
 - it cures you of the problem of coming to Him in a whiny way—as if your present distress is unfair after all that you have been through...
 - you have just gotten away from Laban, and you have tried to make peace, and now this...

- Yes, you may be that way at times Christian,
 - but it is very good when you get over it as Jacob did and so understand God’s grace that you can say,
 - “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which you have shown Your servant...”
- By the way, *truth* here is faithfulness—that God has been true to His covenant to be Jacob’s God—to protect him and to provide for him as promised.
 - God has voluntarily placed Himself under obligation to us by His promises, and Jacob acknowledges that God has been both merciful and faithful or true to him.

C. And now Jacob gets to his actual prayer—his request in his distress...

1. He gets straight to the point...verse 11: **“Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children.”**
 - God delights in such prayers—
 - It honours Him for us to ask Him to deliver us—don’t ever hesitate to do this—He tells us...
 - **Ps 50:15 Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.**
 - The greatest example of all of such a prayer was that of our LORD Jesus on the cross!
 - There He was, with all our sins laid on Him, bearing the shame and the curse of us all...
 - As Hebrews 5:7 says, **in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear,**
2. And note the godly fear that Jesus had as well!
 - Jacob also confesses his fear of Esau—that he might come and attack the mother with the children...
 - language that pictures a mother bird on her nest in which both she and her hatchlings are all cleaned out so that nothing is left.
 - Jacob, like Jesus, is praying for the kingdom which is threatened by destructive forces!
 - This is godly fear of a kind—not the godly fear that Jesus had which was fear of God Himself—we will talk about this a lot more next week...
 - but fear in this case of the destruction of God’s kingdom.
 - It is a fear that is rooted in the fear of God—that to lose the kingdom would be the greatest disaster of all.

TRANS> That is how to lay your supplications before the LORD in your distress...

D. And then to close his prayer, Jacob returns to lean on the covenant relationship he has with God—this time to God’s specific promise to him.

1. In verse 12, he says to the LORD: **“For You said, ‘I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’ ”**

- What confidence we can have when we plead the promises of God!
 - When we do this, we know that we will be heard!

2. And don’t let that cause you to think that you do not need to pray!

- Most of God’s promises are conditional upon faith.
 - Every one of you, both child and adult, who are baptised in Jesus’ name are, according to Galatians 3, heirs of God’s covenant promises.
 - But if you do not believe, if you do not look to the Lord in your distress—if you do not cry out to him,
 - Then you are like unbelieving Israel—you have the covenant and promises and the adoption in an outward way...
 - but you do not obtain the blessing, or righteousness...
 - **Rom 9:31-33: but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. ³² Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. ³³ As it is written: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”**

3. The design of God’s promises is not to drive us away from Him as those who have nothing more to be concerned about,

- but they are designed to invite us to come to Him on the basis of free mercy in Christ rather than on the basis of our own works.
- If we have the promises and do not come to Him with believing prayer, we do not obtain the blessing.
 - We have not because we ask not.
 - Jacob believed and therefore Jacob asked—and he received.

Conclusion: So how are your prayers?

- Do you see that there is a camp in heaven besides your own camp, and that you need help from camp of God?
- Do you see that you are in great distress in the world because Satan would have you forever in his kingdom, lost in your sin?
- And so you come to God in earnest prayer that you might be brought into His kingdom of righteousness and kept in it on the basis of free mercy in Christ?