

A Model Prayer

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Jacob's prayer, if analyzed as a model prayer, bear some resemblance to the Lord's Prayer. It starts off by naming God; instead of **Our Father which art in heaven**, Jacob prays **God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac and the Lord which spoke to me**. This is significantly more personal and intimate than **Fear of my father Isaac—much less abstract and radically personalized**. Possibly it was Jacob's up close and personal deliverance from the envy, resentment, suspicion and violent vengeance of Laban that worked this transformation. A major dissemblance is the absence of any reference to **hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**. That whole segment, dependent on "the Kingdom of God" proclamation of Jesus, is consistent with the level of revelation given to Jacob at his point in salvation history.

What comes next is declarative: **Lord who said, "Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee, or that I may do good to thee."** (v.9) There is first a command (**return**) to thy kindred (the children of Esau primarily? and those of Ishmael particularly) and, direction, **to thy country**; followed by a conditional promise (**I will deal well with thee**). ***This sounds very like a mini-covenant between God and Jacob.*** And this covenant is quite central to the prayer: it is part of the salutation and it reoccurs as Jacob's parting argument. The style of the prayer is "argumentative"¹ and it reminds us plainly of Abraham's discourse with the destroying angel sent to judge Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 18:23: **Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty? How about forty-five? Thirty? Twenty? Ten?** Perhaps Abraham's goal is walk back the punishment to a number of persons as might be expected to live in his nephew's household. But at each stage, the argument is based on the righteous character of God: **Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?** This rhetorical question is both a flourish and the heart of Abraham's intercessory plea. However, the argumentative style of prayer may be something to add to our repertoire of prayer because it is 1. approved, 2. precedented and 3. effectual with God.

¹ The whole prayer is **argumentative**; in this it is reminiscent of Abraham's dialogue with the the Lord over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. There Abraham pleads God's character (just, doing right) against various scenarios—they walk down the judgment in a manner that some might find impertinent, if not presumptuous. Jacob uses four arguments with God: 1. he argues from the covenant—now Lord by your faithfulness to your covenant promises. We can plead the merits of our Lord and Savior as a follow-up to this plea. 2. Jacob argues by the promises of God made specifically to him: . . . **I will deal well with thee**. 3. Jacob pleads his past history—**all your former mercies**. Can you stop your mercy now? And 4. Jacob pleads the current promise **Thou said**. It is possible for us to enter into this last plea by invoking the word of God as directed us is **absolutely true**. Indeed what we know of the promises of God can deliver us speedily out of the Slough of Despond(ency) that Bunyan describes in Pilgrim's Progress. They are the stepping stones through the swamp that provide solid footing. *Many misstep, miss the stones and become bemired again and again.* Know the promises . . . they are divine provision.

Jacob builds on **I will deal well with thee . . . I will do thee good**. A predicate, or premise for what follows. The promise of progeny reappears, which seals the Abrahamic covenants reappears here demonstrating that a continuity of thought is entailed. Jacob's hope is that *these children*, these sons and daughters will be preserved as the ones through the great number, **the sand of the sea, will come** numbered for **a multitude**. He will not have to start over as it is recorded that Job was blessed to do! We determined earlier that this allusion to **a multitude** carries the meanings of a "congregation, a nation, and the people of God . . . a sacred assembly, or even the church.

After noting this argumentative style, the next point of prayer structure is **humility** framed in gratitude. Jacob is grateful for **all the mercies and all the truth shown**. These two categories can be broken down further into the ways and means used of God to prosper Jacob: the provision of a home, employment, a valuable skill set (the shepherd in him), business acumen and a progeny through two wives, their handmaidens and so forth. He returns from Paddan Aram enriched and with eleven sons! *There is no doubt that the promise made and kept accounts for both some mercy and it also made the promise true—or **a truth shown**.*

Jacob's favoring Joseph, the first born son of Rachel, re-ignites the sibling rivalry that had plagued both Abraham's and Isaac's houses *and holds serious ramifications for the future*. The surprise in **of all the truth which thou has shown unto thy servant** (v. 10) **that Jacob is unworthy of is** the revelation truths given to him.

Starting with the self-disclosure of God at Bethel (which revealed the promise of that land, a vast progeny **and, that, through his offspring all the families of the world will be blessed**. 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. (Gen, 28:14-15) Then, again, In Gen. 31:11ff, in another dream, the Lord spoke: **Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you**. (v.12) That is revelation truth—part of **all the truth, which thou hast shown thy servant**. (v.10) The ESV renders **mercies** as **deeds of steadfast love**, and **truth** as **all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant**. A check with the Hebrew text supports "mercy and truth" over **deeds of steadfast love** and **all the faithfulness**. Then Jacob rings the chimes on gratitude by recalling that **he left with a staff . . . and is returning with two bands!** Rags to riches, poverty to wealth are of God's mercy.

A very direct, simple plea follows: **Deliver me from Esau . . . for I fear him . . . lest he come and smite me, the mother with the children** meaning "slay us all." Then, remembering the argument of the prayer, Jacob points out that this dismal outcome would be entirely inconsistent with **I will deal well with thee**, or **I will do thee good**. It is pretty clear, given that Jacob proceeds to put some distance between himself and Esau, where Esau dwelt, that he never quite got over his fear of Esau or the guilt associated with his shabby dealings with Esau decades prior. Jacob's prayer ends on a positive note as does the Lord's prayer: **For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.**

Jacob's foundational humility is to be commended. Why? It honors God and it is realistic: ***we are unworthy of divine blessings***. Those blessings are a gift. They are neither an obligation on God's part, nor a reward for our labors *apart from the express promises of God*. They come as a result of grace; God has promised to care for his children; therefore he does so. We should be grateful for what he freely bestows. And Jacob is . . . which is one reason why this is a model prayer.

Yet it was God who prospered Jacob—and punished Laban. It is the Lord who bestows life (bread and food as the means to live) and God does this *graciously, freely* all the good and necessary things. At least that is the truth which prompts Jesus to teach us to pray: **Give us this day our daily bread**. (Matt. 6:11) And Jacob confesses as much in his prayer when he says: **I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant, for with my staff I passed over this Jordan, and now I am become two bands**. (v.10) Two bands refers to the multitude of livestock, family and servants that he is shepherding back to the Promised Land. And now his messengers have returned to him saying, **he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him**. (v. 6). These are armed men, warriors and the threat of physical annihilation is very real to him. And, as we know, there is reason for this fear of assault, armed retribution. Esau was tricked, deceived and robbed by Jacob before he fled to Laban's household. Jacob had sinned against his brother, and the weight of his fell heavily upon him. If ever a sense of guilt was legitimate, it would be at this point in time. That is why these animals and servants are sent ahead—an act of appeasement and a gesture of goodwill. He was courting favor with his elder brother. Gifts apparently would follow.

Jacob strategically divides up **the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels into two camps** which may have been inspired by the two camps of God's angels who had come to meet him. He was hoping to blunt any attack, he was hoping that the second camp would escape destruction. ***Then he be-took himself to prayer***. Some have criticized Jacob for his practicality but this is perhaps invalid: it appears that God actually expects us to do two things; do what we in our wisdom know to do and to undergird all of that with prayer. Prayer should proceed and follow our plans. Further note that God is able to do us good, he is inclined to do us good; God is engaged to do us good; and God has already done good to us. These four things spell what is behind: **I will surely do you good**.

Please deliver me from the hand of my brother Esau. (v. 11) His prayer is specific, simple and direct. These, too, are commendable qualities in prayer. Now God does answer this petition but God first puts all of Jacob's planning to one side. Esau comes his heart altered by God, not by gifts, or appeasement. He comes in peace despite the appearance of warlike hostility. God plants a spirit of conciliation in Esau's heart.

This is what should pertain between Christians! Seeking peace, pursuing reconciliation should be such a priority that when one brother offends another, and the other brother may also have offended the former brother, they should, without consultation, both set out to repair the breach before the sun sets. Reconcile before the injured hearts have opportunity to harden. The great thing would be for them to

cross paths *seeking to be reconciled with each other*. Each eager to apologize, to ask for or to extend forgiveness as their basic response to the outstanding offense. *Being right with each other* should be such a priority that who was right and who was wrong in the matter disappears on the way to each other's house! They should greet, each eager to say, "I was wrong to be angry with you earlier today." And both, bearing the same message, "I was coming over to say that. I, too, was wrong in being angry. Please forgive me." You see, if our heart desires to be right with each other, there is no need for an arbitrator. When both disputants are more eager to be at peace than to be vindicated in their anger, peace prevails and everyone wins!

Perhaps you have noted that Jacob spent a lot of time, two decades, in Padan Aram under the tutelage of his uncle Laban being schooled in shrewd dealings, greed, deceit and thievery. Being schooled out of his deviousness is the more positive way to describe this season of preparation. Jesus spent thirty years preparing for three years of ministry! And we have ironically reversed this equation, we think that three to four years of higher education prepares an individual for a life time of employment—actually it is more like eight to nine years because graduate studies usually follow four years of undergraduate work on one's path to a professional career. I remember deciding against a medical career largely on the basis of the time of preparation it would take and then proceeded to spend much the same time (eight years to prepare for a teaching career, two years plus two more for seminary training). Way short of Jacob's twenty, and Jesus' thirty . . . and yet nothing so short as the three years in which I completed an undergraduate degree. Jacob was a wheeler and dealer, he lived a commercial life of trade, exchange and barter. . . always cutting a deal, edging out his competitors, taking advantage of every situation.

At times, we pray for salvation and God answers by destroying all our hopes . . . by taking away the route to happiness that we envisioned. He destroys the garden, turning it into a desert because the plants we planted were poisonous. He then plants better plants. Jacob's answered prayer came in the form of divine opposition—an all night wrestling match from which he limps away. Yes, the Lord is good enough to heal by wounding if that is what it takes **to do good by us. *Under the guise of hardship, suffering, loss and adversity, his kindness arrives and we are satisfied.***

After all that limping Jacob goes through, Esau arrives, **ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him.** Well, then, amen.