

Someone once described prayer as being the heartbeat of a Christian. I think that's a very beautiful way to put it. Prayer is our great privilege. Prayer is our great joy. Prayer brings us close to God, and it teaches us over and over again that he is always with us and that he will care for us all of our days. Yes, Christians, prayer indeed is the heartbeat of what it means to be a Christian.

But I ask you on this day: does that describe your prayers? Would you describe your prayer life as being as natural to you as your own heartbeat? Would you describe your prayers as being as natural to you as your own breathing? Or do you find it quite a bit more difficult than that? And I know I can speak from my own personal experience that as a pastor being called to pray for each and every one of you by name on a regular basis, I also find it very difficult from time to time to pray. What should be a great privilege and a great joy sometimes ends up being more like a burden and a chore. So why does that happen? Why do our prayers become lifeless? Why do we find it so difficult to pray? I think the answer to that question is that we come to prayer with the wrong ideas in mind. And when that happens we become impatient. We say, "How long is this going to take? Or is God really going to answer my prayers?" or whatever it might be. We come to it with the wrong expectations, thinking that God is going to do things which he never promised to do. Or we may even come to it with parameters and limits, as if we're telling God, "This is what I want you to do for me, and if you don't do this for me, then I'm going to be grumpy or sad or whatever it might be." We want God to act in our terms. But when that happens, Christians, unfortunately that makes us lose heart. Our prayers become lifeless, and we don't pray nearly as much as we used to. We find it very difficult to continue. But prayer is a great privilege. Prayer is a great joy. Prayer brings us to God. And God wants to teach us in our Old Testament reading for today that we should never lose heart in our prayers, that we should hold onto him no matter what. And he shows us that through how he answers the prayer of Jacob. And when we see how he did that, it will encourage us to be diligent in our own prayers.

But if we're going to understand how God answers Jacob's prayer here, we have to understand how Jacob got into this situation in the first place. Because Genesis chapter 32 is pretty much the end of the story. And if you've ever read the book of Genesis, you will know that Jacob is not what we would call a good man. Jacob is deceptive. Jacob is always trying to get things for himself, to do whatever it takes to get his way. And you see that happen even from his own birth. When he was born, he was holding onto his twin brother Esau's heel. Because that's what the name "Jacob" means. It means "he grabs by the heel," or in Hebrew that can also mean "a deceiver, a trickster, one who is deceptive." And so Jacob is literally the heel grabber. That's his name. And he lives up to that name time and time again. Because Jacob grabs the heel of his brother Esau again when he steals his birthright from him, taking what belonged to his brother in exchange for a pot of stew. And Jacob grabs the heel of his brother Esau again when he tricks his father Isaac into blessing him instead of his brother. Is it any wonder, then, that Esau says in chapter 27 verse 36: "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." Jacob lived up to his name time and time again as the heel grabber, the one who was the deceiver. And so Esau understandably is very angry. He wanted to kill Jacob. And so Jacob ran away to go to Paddan-aram to live with his uncle Laban to get away from the wrath of his brother.

But that was twenty years ago by the time we get to Genesis 32. It's been a very long time, and now Jacob is coming home again. And when he went to Paddan-aram, he was alone, and he didn't have a thing in the world. But now as he's coming home again, he has a very large family and many, many possessions. God has been very kind to Jacob. But there's one question that's been hanging over his head this whole time. "Is Esau still going to be angry with me? Is Esau going to kill me?" And so he sends messengers to his brother and says, "Find out how he feels." But those messengers come back with bad news. Esau is coming, and he's got four hundred men with him. By all appearances, Esau hasn't forgiven him. By all appearances, Esau still wants to kill his brother.

So Jacob is afraid. He's afraid of what's going to happen. And in that moment, he prays. And the heart of his prayer we find in 32 verse 11: "Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children." Jacob is afraid that Esau is still going to kill him. But now he's left in this kind of uncertainty. Even though he's prayed, he's wondering, "What's going to happen? Is God going to answer my prayer? Am I going to be delivered from the hand of my brother? What will happen in the days ahead?" And in the midst of that uncertainty, he sends his family and everything he owns across the river so that now he is left alone in the dark, wondering what the future might hold.

Christians, how often do you find yourself in a similar position as Jacob? Left in the dark all alone, seemingly, wondering, "Is God going to answer my prayers? Is God going to take care of me? What is going to happen in the days ahead?" Maybe you prayed like Jacob to be reconciled with a friend or a family member. And you've prayed about it, and you're left wondering, "Is this going to work? Can we go back to the way things used to be?" Or maybe you're like Jacob and you're praying about the future and your fear of the future. What's going to happen to me in the days ahead? Maybe my past is finally catching up with me. Am I going to have to deal with the outcome of my own actions? Or in a more general sense, what will happen in this country? What's going to happen to me? What's going to happen to my children? What's going to happen to my grandchildren? What is life going to be like in the days ahead? Will God take care of me? Or maybe in an even more general sense, you pray about your health or someone else's health. God, please heal me or heal my loved one! And then we're left wondering, "Is God going to do it? Because things don't seem to be getting any better. Things seem to be just the same as before." But the problem with this uncertainty, Christians, is that it very often makes us lose heart. It makes us think that God's not going to do anything. And so our prayers start to falter, and we wonder, "Will God ever follow through on his promises?"

But Christians, God does answer prayer. He always answers prayer. And he shows us that today in how he answers the prayer of Jacob. Because now a very strange thing happens to Jacob, doesn't it? He's all alone, but suddenly he's wrestling with a stranger who has come upon him. And he is wrestling all the way until the dawn of the morning. Jacob is not a weakling. After all, he's wrestling hard with this opponent for hours and hours on end without letting up. It's a continuous fight all the way to the morning. Jacob has things, he thinks, in his own hands. But that's how he's always acted. That's how things have always gone for him. Because he wrestled with his brother Esau, and he won. He wrestled with his uncle Laban, and he won. He's used to winning. He's used to having things go his own way. And it looks like he might even win this wrestling match too. But then the stranger touches him on the hip and humbles him. Now

crippled, so that Jacob can no longer continue fighting, he sees things that he never saw before. He finally understands something that he could not see. And Jacob says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." This stranger is obviously greater than he is. He recognizes that. And so he wants a blessing from him, to bless him so that he might come out of this with something. He holds on for dear life, refusing to let go, even though by all accounts he lost the fight.

But then the stranger says to him, "What is your name?" He doesn't say this because he has no idea who Jacob is. He says this as if he's saying, "Who are you really, Jacob? Who are you when you're not pretending to be something else? Who are you in the deepest parts of your being? Who are you really?" And that's why Jacob says, "Jacob. I am the heel grabber. I am the deceiver. I am the one who has always tried to have things my own way. That's who I really am. I don't deserve this blessing, and my name proves that to you. But I refuse to let go. I will not let go unless you bless me." And then the stranger says to him, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." He is given a new heart. He's made into a new man. He is no longer Jacob the heel grabber. He is Israel, Israel who strives with God and has prevailed. His blessing has come upon him. And when Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name," the stranger says, "Why do you want to know? You already know who I am, Jacob." And it's true. Jacob did know. Because he called the name of the place Peniel, which means "the face of God." Jacob had been wrestling with the Lord himself. And because of that experience, Jacob has become a new man.

And that's how God answered his prayer, Christians. He answered his prayer by showing him that he has seen God face-to-face and yet his life has been delivered. And if he can be in God's presence and yet be delivered, he will certainly be delivered from the hand of his brother. He has nothing to fear from Esau. God has shown him that he is the one who will watch over him, that he will protect him. Because if he protected him from himself, he will certainly protect him also from his brother. God has answered Jacob's prayer. And so when he went back across the Jabbok that morning, he was no longer fearful Jacob limping in his soul, but a new and confident Israel with only a physical limp to remind him that he was now a new man.

So what does this teach us, Christians, about the nature of prayer? The first thing it teaches us is that God always answers prayer. He hears you in his Son Jesus Christ. And whenever you come to him, he will not fail to hear you. He will not fail to do what he says he's going to do. And we can also learn from this that we should confess who we are before God, that we are not people who deserve anything from his hand. We're not going to force him to do anything when we pray to him. We have what we have purely by his grace. When we confess our sins, confess who we are, our true name, God will give us a new name in Jesus Christ and make us a new people, one for whom he will do all things. But above all, Christians, this teaches us not to lose heart, to be patient. God will answer our prayers. It may not be in the way we expect it, though. God may answer us in a way that we do not expect. Because I'm sure Jacob when he prayed thought God was maybe going to strike his brother down or help him to escape or something else, something that would make sense to him. But God answered his prayer with wrestling, with a wrestling match that taught him to trust in the Lord. And God may do the same for you, Christians. He may answer your prayers in a way you do not expect. But we know that no matter how he answers prayer that he will take care of us no matter what.

So go to him. Go to him and call on his name. Pray to him and pray frequently. Do not give up. Wrestle with the Lord, holding onto him for dear life. Because God has promised you in Jesus Christ that he will always answer your prayers. Trust in him, because God is faithful to his Word.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have promised to hear us through your Son Jesus Christ. We pray that you would watch over us and give us your Holy Spirit who prays with us, so that we may always trust in you, knowing that you answer our prayers. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.