

God's Command, God's Love, God's Promise

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[0:00] We're continuing our series in the book of Genesis. Genesis is the very first book in the Bible. It's the origin story of God's people, Israel. And this summer we are in the story of Jacob, found in chapters 25 through 36.

Last week we were in chapter 31, and God tells Jacob it is time for him to return home. But there's a problem. The reason that Jacob left home is because his brother Esau wants to kill him.

So Esau's threat from 20 years ago is the tension that drives this narrative. It doesn't just drive the narrative, though. It also drives Jacob's dependence on God.

And so that's our focus this morning. We're going to look at Jacob's dependence on his trust in God. And in that, Jacob is going to provide us with a master class on prayer.

You may remember our overarching question for the book of Genesis is, what does it look like to follow God in faith? This week, one specific element of that, how do we rely on God in prayer?

[1:10] And so with that, I invite you to turn with me to Genesis chapter 32, starting at verse 1, which you'll find on page 6 of your worship guide. Remember that Proverbs chapter 30 tells us that every word of God proves true.

He's a shield to those who take refuge in him. And so that's why we read now Genesis 32, starting at verse 1. Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.

And when Jacob saw them, he said, this is God's camp. So he called the name of that place Mahanaim. And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau, his brother, in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, Thus you shall say to my lord Esau, Thus says your servant Jacob, I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now.

I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord in order that I may find favor in your sight. And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him. Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him and the flocks and herds and camels into two camps, thinking, If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.

[2:43] Verse 9. And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, Return to your country and to your kindred that I may do you good.

I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant. For with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.

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.

But you said, I will surely do you good and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.

Verse 13. So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him, he took a present for his brother Esau. Two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.

[3:54] These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove.

He instructed the first, When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?

Then you shall say, They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.

He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves. You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him. And you shall say, Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.

For he thought, I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me.

[4:53] So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you again this morning for drawing us together as your people to sing to you and to hear from you. And we ask that you would honor your promise, your promise in Isaiah 55, that your word does not return to you void, but it accomplishes your purposes.

And so do that this morning. Use your words in Genesis 32 to accomplish great things in our lives. Most of all, that you would take our eyes and you'd set them on Jesus Christ, that our love and our affection for him would grow.

We would increase our reverence and our awe for him, that you'd lead us in obedience to him. We ask these things knowing that we don't deserve them and we haven't earned them.

And so instead we ask them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I want you all to remember where we're at in the story. All the way back in Genesis chapter 25, we met two brothers, Jacob and Esau, who were at odds with each other, even in their mother's womb.

[6:09] That same chapter 25, we see Jacob steals Esau's birthright. And then in chapter 27, he goes on to steal Esau's blessing. And at the end of chapter 27, Esau is so upset that he threatens to kill Jacob.

So Rebecca, Jacob's mom, tells Jacob, flee to Laban, my brother, your uncle. Jacob does that. And that's where we've been for the last number of weeks.

Jacob spends 20 years with Laban. While he's there, he gets two wives, both of Laban's daughters, Rachel and Leah. And we saw he had many sheep that he got from Laban, which caused some tension.

That was part of why he had to leave. Now he is on the way back. And as far as we know, Esau's threat is still good.

As far as we know, Esau still wants to kill Jacob. And so that takes us straight into the story. Verse one, Jacob went on his way.

[7:13] That is, he's leaving last week's confrontation with Laban straight into a new problem, the problem of Esau. Jacob here is proactive. So we see in verse three, he sends these messengers ahead of him to announce his coming to his brother beforehand.

And the message that he sends mentions his great wealth. This is verse five. I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my Lord in order that I may find favor in your sight.

Which might seem odd at first. Hey, brother, I haven't seen you in 20 years. By the way, just so you know, I'm really rich now. Indirectly, he's communicating this.

Hey, maybe we could solve this problem with money. My net worth, you know, my net worth is a lot higher. It's greater than it was 20 years ago when I left. So I'm thinking maybe you and I, we can work out a solution where you don't kill me.

Maybe that could be kind of what we work towards. We could come to a compromise where I'm not murdered. That's exactly what he does, by the way, at the end of this passage, verses 13 through 21.

[8:24] He sends these droves of animals onto Esau as gifts. So that's his first overture. Okay, I'm coming back to Esau. Let me be proactive. Let me figure out how we can thread this needle.

Jacob hears back from the messengers and the news is not good. In fact, that's an understatement. It is discouraging. It is frightening.

This is verse 6. And the messengers returned to Jacob saying, We came to your brother Esau and he is coming to meet you. And there are 400 men with him.

Esau doesn't need 400 men to welcome his brother back. Okay, this is ominous. It is threatening. Commentators point out that this is the size of a militia. He doesn't receive a response back. Esau has no word for him. The messengers just come back and say, Yeah, Esau and his militia, they're on the march.

[9:26] So Jacob, his worst fears seem to be coming true. He does two things. First, this is verses 7 and 8. He makes himself a harder target. He makes himself a harder target by dividing his people, his camps, into two groups.

So if you're a tactics nerd, we might say he has dispersed command posts. Jacob decides he's going to set up a distributed operation. And he tells us that explicitly in verse 8.

If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left. Jacob will escape. Jacob's always got a plan.

And if we were dealing with Jacob 20 years ago, if we were dealing with the Jacob of chapters 25, 26, 27, that would be it.

Jacob would rely on his skill, on his strategy, on his tactics, and nothing else. But you may have noticed something is different this time.

[10:35] We met Jacob all the way back in chapter 25. And now, in chapter 32, we have his very first recorded prayer.

Jacob has finally decided it's time to pray to God. Jacob has finally decided it's time to pray to God. And this, by the way, is the longest prayer in the entire book of Genesis.

Yes, Jacob has a plan. Jacob always has a plan. And we talked about this at length last week.

Jacob has really changed. He's changed all the way down to his bones. Yes, Jacob has always been crafty.

Yes, he always has a good tactic. And this time, this time, Jacob finally prays. And if you've been taking the story seriously, if you've been engaged in it and involved with it, there's this sense in which we should feel a chill here.

[11:50] That our hair should stand up a little bit because we know what a big deal this is. We know how long it's taken, Jacob, to get to this place. We know the pain and the hardship and the agony and the sweat and the blood and the tears for him to finally say, God, I need your help.

The lesson that God's been teaching Jacob has finally made it from his head down to his heart. So verse 7, when he hears about these 400 men, it tells us he's greatly afraid and distressed, which makes sense.

And for the first time, Jacob takes his fear and his distress to God. Now the request itself, the request in his prayer is quite simple.

You'll find it in verse 11. He says, His request, his ask for God's help, that is not what makes this a master class on prayer.

It's actually the three other elements that surround it. If you look on page 8 of your worship guide, these are the three elements, which also happen to be the title of the sermon, God's command, God's love, and God's promise.

[13:21] First, let's take a look at God's command, which is where Jacob appeals in verse 9. And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good.

So Jacob here is referring to the very beginning of chapter 31 from last week, where God did not suggest, but he told, he commanded Jacob, return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred. And so the idea that he's getting at is this, hey, Esau, Esau's coming against me, and he's coming against me with this militia. And the reason I'm in this situation, the reason he's coming at me and he has his 400 men is because I'm doing what you told me to do.

I'm following your command. I'm following you in obedience. What I'm doing is in line with your will. You've told me what to do. You told me to go home. Now I need your help to do it.

I need you to help me do what you have told me to do. You've told me to return. Now I'm asking you to show your power.

[14:34] And not just to show your power in general, to show your power specifically as I'm doing exactly what you told me to do. It's a way of praying that is called arguing in prayer.

You'll see this on the very back of your worship guide, this quote, speaking of the Puritans. So the Puritans used to speak rather grandly about using argument in prayer. But this they did not mean pressing God to fall in line with their own desires.

My will be done. What they meant was telling God why what we have asked for seems to be for the best in light of what we know God's own goals to be.

In other words, God, this is what you said you wanted. This is what you say is good and beautiful and true and I'm pursuing after that. So hear, hear and answer my prayer.

I'm praying for you to do what has to be done for your command to be obeyed. A number of years ago, when I was in my early 30s, I had a season of prayer that went like this.

[15:48] Lord, I know that you have called me to lead this church. You've made it clear. You've made it clear that that's your will and you've made that clear in a variety of ways.

But there's a problem here, God. And the problem is that I'm actually not experienced enough to do that. I'm not wise enough or old enough. And I actually don't know what I'm doing. But you decided this was a good idea.

I need your help. You're going to have to show up. You're going to have to show up in a supernatural way by your spirit to give me the wisdom that I need through mentors and resources by your work in me.

You've said that you empower and enable what you command. Please do it. You've told me what to do. Now I need your help to actually follow through.

I'm not in my early 30s anymore. I actually still need God's power and help and wisdom. We never outgrow our helplessness before God.

[16:52] Now I will say this just as an aside. You know, here we see Jacob grow in his dependence as he ages. We also need to be cautious, though, about the opposite. There's times when we're young and inexperienced.

We can be so dependent on God in prayer, right? And as we get experience and accomplishments behind us, we think, oh, I got this. I know what to do. And yet our need for God's help is just as great as it was before.

Right? So this can move in both directions. Now, God has not necessarily called you to lead a church. For you, arguing in prayer could look like this.

Lord, you've told us, you've told me in Psalm 133, you've told us in 1 Timothy 2 that the Christian community, it's supposed to be a place of unity. And man, we're really having a hard time getting along.

Help us. You've said what you want is unity, so help us do it. You've said in Colossians 3, if we're at work with our employer, that whatever we do, we work heartily for the Lord and not for men.

[18:02] Lord, I can't do that on my own. I need you to give me the perseverance and patience and joy to be an employee like that. This is your will.

This is what you've said you want. Come and help us do it. Lord, you've said in Ephesians 5 that our marriage should be this picture of the gospel, of the relationship between Christ and his church, and we want our marriage to be like that.

But outside of your work, outside of your spirit, it is so far less. Help us. Make it a display of your gospel for the world.

Arguing with God could look like this. Lord, in Malachi 2, you told us you want Christian marriages to lead to godly children. We don't actually have the wisdom we need to do that.

We don't have the wisdom that we need to raise our kids to know and love God. And you know what? Even if we did have the wisdom, we actually don't have the power. We're not powerful enough to change and shape and form our children's hearts.

[19:10] We need you to do it. We need you to show up. We need your help. Use us as your instruments. Christian, you can pray to God like that.

In fact, I'll put it more strongly. You should pray to God like that. Lord, I am praying for what you have said you want. Please show up.

By the way, this shapes our prayers because we have to ask ourselves, are we actually praying in line with the Lord's prayer? Can we say that we're praying Matthew 6, verse 10?

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. So Jacob has appealed to God's commands.

Look, you told me to return. I need you to show up. Next, Jacob appeals to God's love. This is verse 10. I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.

[20:23] For with only my staff, I crossed this Jordan and now I have become two camps. This word steadfast love from verse 10 shows up in the Old Testament over and over again to communicate God's commitment to his people.

And the best definition I know of comes from the Children's Storybook Bible, which describes God's steadfast love in this way, his never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love.

God's steadfast love is his never stopping, never giving up, unbreaking, always and forever love. Jacob doesn't base his request on his own worthiness or merit or skill.

He doesn't say, God, look how great I've been. No, in fact, the opposite. Again, this is verse 10. He says, I am not worthy. Remember Jacob when he shows up to the well and he meets Rachel and he moves that stone single-handedly that it took a bunch of people to move, but he does it by himself because he's so jacked.

Jacob thought he was really hot stuff. And that's probably why he didn't pray. He didn't pray. It has taken Jacob years, years, to learn his helplessness and God's power.

[22:01] It's taken Jacob years to finally say, I am not worthy. God has had to push him to the end of himself where his skills and his ability and his tactics and his strategies are not enough.

Calling on God's mercy, that's prayer. That's why we pray in Jesus' name. That's why you'll often hear me say, hey, we haven't earned these things and we don't deserve them.

But we ask for them in Jesus' name. Remember Jesus' words in Mark chapter 2. Jesus said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. sinners do. Those who think that they are righteous have no need for prayer.

Sinners do. Those who think their own tactics and strategies and intelligence are enough will not turn to God in prayer.

[23:17] those who have realized they are not hot stuff will. The Apostle Paul learned that as well.

He tells us in 2 Corinthians chapter 12, 12, but he said to me, that is God said to him, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon you. Do you want the power of Christ to rest upon you?

Comes in weakness. Comes in admitting your helplessness and your need. near the end of his life, there was an interview with the famous pastor, Timothy Keller, about his decades of ministry, and the interviewer asked him this, looking back over your nearly 50 years in Christian ministry, what's something you regret?

What's something you wish you had done differently? And he said, oh, that's easy. I wish I'd prayed more.

[24:47] He's one of the most successful pastors in his generation. It can take a lifetime to learn how helpless we are.

It can take a lifetime to learn that everything comes from God's mercy. God's God's God's love. It can take to learn everything. It can take a lifetime that everything easier. Jacob appeals to God's command. He appeals to God's love.

And then finally, he appeals to God's promise. It is not only that God has commanded Jacob to return, he's also promised to do him good. We see this first in verse 9.

He says, you told me return to your country and to your kindred that I may do you good. And then it comes in a fuller form in verse 12. But you said, I will surely do you good and make your offspring as the sand of the sea which cannot be numbered for multitude.

[25:54] Okay, so Lord, you promised to do me good, and how are you going to do me good if these 400 men wipe me and my family out? I mean, it doesn't seem like that's very good.

And even more than that, you said you've promised offspring as the sand of the sea. Now, how am I supposed to have offspring as the sand of the sea if we're all killed? Those two things don't really seem to go together, right?

How does that happen if Esau slaughters us? So protect us because of your promise. Your promise for good, your promise for offspring.

Christian, you can plead God's promises as well. Lord, you told us in James 1 verse 5 that those who ask for wisdom will receive it.

Well, we really need some wisdom right now. So we're asking you for it. Honor your promise. Lord, you told us in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 verse 13 that there's no temptation that will come to us for which you don't provide a way out.

[27:09] Well, I'm overwhelmed by temptation right now and I need a way out. Honor your promise. Help. Show me the way to escape.

Lord, you promised us in Psalm 34 verse 18 that you are near to the broken hearted and you save the crushed in spirit. And we're in the hospital right now and we feel alone and abandoned.

Honor the promise. Be near to us. Give us a sense of your presence. Do what you talk about in Romans chapter 5 that the love of God will be poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Lord, you promised us in Philippians chapter 4 verses 6 and 7 that if we bring our anxieties to you in prayer, you will give us the peace that passes understanding that will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Lord, we're drowning in fear and we're bringing that to you. Honor the promise. Give us the peace that passes understanding.

[28 : 22] Lord, you've promised us in Psalm 23 verse 6 that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. And it sure seems like the darkness is winning.

Feels like the lights are dimming. Honor your promise. Show us your goodness and your mercy.

Lord, you've told us in James chapter 4 verse 7 that if we resist the devil, he will flee from us and we are resisting. Honor your promise.

Do what you said you would do. Restrain the evil one. Protect your people. Lord, you've told us in Isaiah 55 that your word will not return to you empty, but it will accomplish your purposes. promises. We're begging you. Use your word in a powerful way in our lives. Honor the promise.

[29 : 23] Do great things in us by your word. Do you want to really pray?

Plead the promises of God. And why should God answer your prayer?

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, he says, all the promises of God find their yes and amen in Jesus Christ.

That is, you're not pleading on behalf of your merit. You're not pleading that you deserve anything. No, you're pleading because Jesus represents you before God the Father and that you've been adopted as one of his sons or his daughter, as we talked about in our confession of faith, which means you don't just have forgiveness of sins, but you have access to the throne room of God. And you plead God's promises based on what Jesus has done for you. This is in page 7 of your worship guide. Jesus' sinless life and sin-bearing death provide the meritorious basis upon which any promise is made good to us.

[30 : 44] Apart from Christ, we have no right to any of God's promises, but through our union with Christ, we have access to all of them.

Christian, there is a difference. in fact, there is a world of difference between simply listing our requests to God and wrestling with God in prayer, naming God's will, his commands, acknowledging our need, our helplessness, claiming God's mercy through Jesus Christ, claiming God's promises that are ours because of Jesus.

It's Jesus who tells us this in Matthew chapter 7, ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks, receives, and the one who seeks, finds, and to the one who knocks, it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?

Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?

[32 : 27] Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you and thank you for the embarrassment of riches that are ours in Jesus Christ.

We ask that you would teach us to pray, that we pray in line with your will, we come admitting our helplessness and our need before you, and that we would set our lives on your promises. promises. We ask all of these things in Jesus' name, amen.