

Teach Us to Pray

Co-missioners,

Carol Braun reflects again this week on the challenges of faithful parenting. As she wrestles with the question of how to encourage habits of prayer in younger children, she'll nudge us all toward a more reckless and joyful confidence in the praying we do.

Carol and her family live in the Hudson Valley. You'll likely have heard how the rains fell and the floods rose in that region this week. Some reckless, stubborn prayer for people hurt by this is very much in order at the moment.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Teach Us to Pray

by Carol Braun

Next month I'll be the lead teacher of a small Vacation Bible School program. We're using the *Operation Restoration* curriculum that Lori Cornell [mentioned in this space](#) back in December. On Day 4, the curriculum calls for lessons on prayer: how Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and how prayer fits into God's unfolding plan to mend the world.

In getting ready for those lessons, I've also been thinking about how my own kids are learning to pray. My sons are now six

and eight. As I've discussed here [before](#), the pandemic drove us into habits of in-home devotion and Bible study that I'd neglected to cultivate in earlier years. My sons took to composing prayers at the ends of our lessons, and I was in awe of God's Spirit at work in places where my own clumsy hands couldn't reach.



From Canva

Last month I was surprised to find myself feeling, for the first time, somewhat at a loss in response to my kids' burgeoning prayer life. One of them started telling my husband and me about prayers he had prayed on his own, along the lines of, "I prayed for Mommy to come give us another goodnight kiss, and she came," and, "I missed a goal playing soccer, and then I prayed to make the next one and I made it." I suppressed a squirm as I heard these reports—a shudder at what must sound to my generally non-

praying husband (and what, in fact, was starting to sound to *me*) like something bordering on superstition. Say the magic words, and get what your heart desires.

I held my tongue but wondered, should I be doing something to nip this in the bud? Something to guide my little ones toward better approaches to prayer? Should I give them some sort of list of what's good to ask for in prayer and what isn't, and what's reasonable to expect in response? Would I even know how to begin composing such a list?

When I started asking these questions, I was in the midst of attending a weekly Zoom Bible study on Genesis (another silver-lining legacy of pandemic times). That week, we happened to arrive at the chapters on Jacob. And something about reading those chapters in one sitting and then discussing them, no doubt with those prayer-related questions still on my mind, made the arc of Jacob's story click for me in ways it never had before—especially the part about Jacob's overnight wrestling match by the Jabbok ford.

The question arose in our study group: if Jacob strove with God and won—or, depending on our various translations, “won out,” or “prevailed” (Gen. 32:28)—does that mean God *lost*? How could that be?

While we discussed, the context of the wrestling came into sharper focus for me. This was the climax of a story that started many years earlier, when Jacob came out of the womb grabbing onto his brother's heel. Next he grabs Esau's birthright and blessing. And then comes the moment of crisis: Esau, enraged, pledging to murder his brother over the stolen blessing, and Jacob, at Rebecca's urging, fleeing for his uncle's house far away in terror for his life.

Then there's the twist—the *deus ex machina*—the angels ascending

and descending and God's great promise to Jacob in the midst of his flight: I will give this land to you and your offspring, and your offspring will be like the grains of sand, and all the earth will be blessed through them, and, crucially, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land" (Gen. 28:15). Jacob's response is fear and awe at God's presence, but also cagey bargaining and a burning need to grasp at more specific help for his current dire predicament: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God" (Gen. 28:20-21).

The second act follows: the long interlude at Laban's, full of more grasping and bargaining. And then, at last, comes Jacob's journey back to his father's house, the terror rising in him again as he approaches the brother from whose wrath he had fled. The long-feared moment is imminent. Jacob prays, thanking God for all the undeserved blessings God has given him so far, and pleading with him to keep his promise. That night, the mysterious wrestler appears.

If Jacob strove with God and won out, was God defeated? But consider what kind of winning out this was, and what the wrestling match was about. Jacob doesn't drive his wrestling partner to the ground or leave him injured. The only one injured, in fact, is Jacob. His kind of prevailing is simply a refusal to release his grasp. The wrestler gives him an out—"Let me go, for the day is breaking" (Gen. 32:26)—and still Jacob grasps and holds: "I will not let you go until you bless me" (verse 27).

And no sooner is the blessing granted than the sun rises on Jacob's face and he looks up to see Esau approaching. And immediately the tension is defused and God's promise of

protection is fulfilled: Esau embraces Jacob in tears; all is forgiven; Jacob's safe return to his father's home is guaranteed.



Jacob Wrestling with the Angel
(1861)

[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

In Jacob's example we can see a picture of how God wants his people to be: not entirely docile and purely receptive, acquiescent, quiet; rather, striving and pushing and wrestling and grasping onto him in the midst of our own free, rambunctious will, pressing him to fulfill his promises to us. I'm reminded of Robert Farrar Capon's explication of the Song of Solomon in

Chapter 7 of *Hunting the Divine Fox*: “The will, the desire of the lover is simply the beloved herself in her freedom: God just wants *us*.” In refusing to let go, Jacob’s “prevailing” in his wrestling match with God in fact places him right where God wants him.

There are many things God invites us through Scripture to do in prayer: to give thanks, to lament, to praise him, to ask for forgiveness and ask for our needs to be fulfilled—but also to grab for him and push on him, as Jacob did, to hold him to his promises. This is the same idea, I think, behind Jesus’ scenario of the persistent neighbor knocking on his friend’s door in the middle of the night asking for bread for the unexpected guest (Luke 11:5-8), and his parable of the widow pestering the unjust judge until she gives him justice (Luke 18:1-8).

Of course, we are not Jacob. God didn’t appear to each of us in a dream with angels streaming, to give us a special promise for only us and not our brother. How dare we push against God as Jacob did? Do we really have standing to do so?

The answer is one we know well: Yes, certainly, not on our own merits but in Christ we have that standing as St. Paul will remind us at church this coming Sunday. (See [Romans 8:1-17](#), a portion of which is the day’s Epistle reading.)

When I first sat down to write this essay, I paused to search the Crossings website for discussions of Jacob’s wrestling match with God, and I was delighted to find a Thursday Theology from May of 2009 called “[Preaching the Christian Gospel from Old Testament Texts. One More Time.](#)” In its first section, Ed Schroeder shares a communication he received from Kit Kleinhans, in reply to Ed’s post of the previous week. Kit lists three places in Luther’s works where Luther “makes reference to Jacob wrestling at the Jabbok other than in the Genesis

commentaries”—passages she highlights for their “clear Gospel connections.” All three snippets are worth reading, but here I’ll just repeat part of the one from *Against Latomus*, which helped me make further sense of the train of thought I’d begun in that Zoom Bible study in June:

[I]n order that we may have unfailing peace, [God] has given us his Word in Christ, on which we rely with confidence, secure from all evil. The gates of hell, together with all sins, do not prevail against that Word. This is our rock of refuge where we, with Jacob, can wrestle against God [Gen. 32:28] and, so to speak, dare to press hard upon him with his promises, his truth, and his own Word. [1]

So, what do I take away from this, practically, about how I should or shouldn’t be guiding my sons’ approach to prayer?

For one thing, I can put the Scriptures in their hands and ears and teach them to listen for what God promises us. And I can teach them to have the confidence, grounded in Christ, even to push against God in asking for fulfilment of those promises “in and among us,” as Luther puts it in the Small Catechism. [2]

But also I can hold my tongue and trust. God’s Word conveys no promise to satisfy each prayerful request for a soccer goal or motherly intervention. But when my child prays for those things, he is holding God to a different promise: the one framed as an invitation to call upon him as Abba, Father, and to trust that he is there listening with loving, fatherly ears. Each willful childish prayer is a grabbing and holding onto God in that promise, and is thus a blessing in itself—a flowering of faith, putting the child exactly where God wants him to be.

Endnotes

[1] In *Luther's Works* Vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 193

[2] See Timothy Wengert's translation of the explanations for the First and Third Petitions of the Lord's Prayer. In *The Book of Concord*, Kolb/Wengert edition (Fortress Press, 2000), p. 356-7; also in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg Fortress, 2006), p. 1163.

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