

Beloved, I have good news for you.

Prayer, just like every part of your life in Christ, is God's gracious gift to you.

If there's anything you walk out of this sermon series remembering, let it be this.

Prayer is not a work you perform in order to please God.

Rather, prayer is a gift that you receive.

Prayer is not something you stir up inside yourself.

Rather, prayer is the eternal ongoing fellowship between the Son and Father that you step into by the presence of the Spirit which Jesus has poured out on you.

Prayer doesn't start with your action, with your decision.

No, prayer, properly understood, is something that is already happening, something that is always happening, as the Son continually communes with the Father and intercedes on your behalf — and by God's grace, the Holy Spirit is poured out on you so that you may enter into the prayers of Jesus.

Beloved, prayer is a gift you receive, not a work you perform, because you never pray alone. You have never prayed alone - not once, your entire life.

No, you always pray in and with and through Jesus, the one who prays for you.

Jesus Christ lives forever as our man in heaven, and he lives for this reason — that he might forever intercede for those who draw near to God to him.

For this is the claim of Jesus: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

And this is true for our life of prayer, just as it is true for our salvation, and the forgiveness of our sins, and our life everlasting.

For in him, in Christ, all things hold together, including our communion with God in prayer.

This morning, we've heard already from Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestles with the Lord at the ford of Jabbok - which is a dramatic picture of how God calls us to wrestles with him in prayer.

We heard also from the New Testament, where the writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus himself wrestled with the Father in prayer, and how it was through that wrestling that he learned obedience and was made mature.

And finally, we heard the teaching of our Lord Jesus himself in the Gospel of Luke, where he told a parable to teach his disciples that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

For my money, this parable is one of the most fascinating of all of Jesus' teachings, and we'll listen to it again now.

Listen now to once more to God's holy and inerrant word from Luke 18:1-8, which is printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to follow along.

*And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. 2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. 3 And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' 4 For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"*

*6 And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? 8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you. Prayer...

The parable we just heard is unusual because Luke surprisingly tells us the meaning of the parable in the introduction.

"And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart."

Jesus then goes on to tell a story about an unjust and unrighteous judge, who cares nothing for justice or for God, and a widow who has suffered some wrong.

In the story, the widow continually cries out to the judge for justice until he finally relents.

The powerless widow wrestles with the powerful judge, and in the end, over time, through the persistence of her supplication, through her “continual coming,” as Luke puts it, the widow wins.

She receives that for which she asks.

And then Jesus explains the parable for his listeners. If this unrighteous judge will listen to the complaints of the persistent widow, then “will not God give justice to his elect, who cry out to him day and night?”

Jesus concludes his teaching with this question, a question that should stick with us, a question we should turn over in our minds: *“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

What Jesus seems to be saying is that the proof of our faith, the evidence of our hope, is expressed in this way — that we continue to cry out to God again and again, day and night, for justice — until he gives us what we ask.

And the fulness of what we ask for will be given only in this way — though the Second Coming of the Son of Man.

And this, of course, is why the fundamental Christian prayer is disclosed in the last words of the Scripture — *“Come soon, Lord Jesus.”*

*Come soon, Lord Jesus* — this is the petition that is behind every prayer we will ever pray — for it is only the coming of the Son of Man that all of the good things which long for will finally and fully given to us.

What Jesus teaches us in this parable is one of the deepest mysteries of the kingdom of God — and that mystery is this:

*God is always calling his children to persevere in in the face of unanswered prayer, that they might learn to pray and not lose heart.*

The examples of this dynamic in the Scriptures are countless.

Consider Abraham and Sarah, who waited decades before the birth of their long-promised son.

Consider Hannah, who endured years of infertility before the Lord gave her Samuel.

Consider David, who waited decades before being given the throne he had been promised.

Consider Job, who cried out to the Lord for answers that were never really fully revealed to him.

Consider Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, all of whom prophesied of future works of God's redemption that they would never see with their own eyes.

Consider Daniel, who prayed three times a day for years for the Lord to bring about the end of the Babylonian exile - and was almost at the end of his life before his prayers were heard.

Consider Zechariah and Elizabeth and their longing for a son — and how John was only given to them in their old age.

If there's one thing that consistent about the faithful saints in the Scriptures, it's that their lives are marked by years of praying for things that they are not given.

Indeed, the Apostle James tells us that it is in *just this way* that the Old Testament saints are examples for us — in patience and perseverance in prayer and waiting on the promises of God.

*As James writes: “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient...as an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”*

Beloved, I know that to speak of these things, to speak of unanswered prayers, is a deeply sensitive and tender topic, among the most sensitive and tender that a pastor can ever address.

And I want to acknowledge in this moment that for you who are in this room this morning, there are things you have prayed for, people you have prayed for, desires you have offered to God for a very long time without receiving a clear answer to those prayers.

And that's incredibly hard.

But I also want you to see, from God's word, that the tension, the difficulty you are experiencing as you persist with God in prayer, even apparently unanswered prayer, is something that you share in common with all of God's people throughout all the ages.

And that's because our relationship with God in prayer is not just some kind of spiritual transaction.

It's not a matter of just saying the right words in our prayers, or doing enough good deeds, or giving enough money, or purifying our lives the right amount and then God will give us what we pray for.

That's just simply not how it works. That's not who our God is. That's not what he wants from us.

Now, believe me, I can't map out for you why some of your prayers have not yet been answered.

I don't have an algorithm that will solve that equation, or a proof text that will answer that question.

But, beloved, I do know this.

In the midst of your unanswered prayers, I know, with the authority of God's word and by teaching of our Lord Jesus himself, that your Father is calling you to keep praying and not to lose heart.

I am confident that your heavenly Father is calling you to continue in your prayers, to continue in your dependence, to continue in pouring out your desires to him.

And I believe your Father is requiring you wrestle with him in this way because he wants you to grow in maturity, because he wants you learn what it means to hope in him, and only in him.

Remember, beloved, the words of the Apostle Paul, who taught us, saying:

*“Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”*

It is precisely in the place where we do not yet see those things that we pray for that we learn what it is to hope — because hope has to do with persistence and patience.

Indeed, in many ways, hope is simply what faith looks like over a long period of time.

But if we're honest, our hope is not as strong as it should be.

In the face of unanswered prayer, we're tempted to give up. We're tempted to grow cynical. We're tempted to stop praying.

And it is this place that we must remember that the hope that we need to sustain our prayers over the years of our lives is not something we can find within ourselves.

No, our only shot, our only chance at continuing to pray with hope and perseverance and patience is by remembering that we do not pray alone.

Beloved, all of your life, your Lord Jesus has been praying for and with you.

But his prayers did not begin with you.

No, for two thousand years now, Jesus has been praying continually.

For two thousand years, Jesus has been praying, just as he taught us to pray, for his Father's kingdom to come, for his Father's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And believe me, Jesus sees and knows all the ways those prayers have not yet been fulfilled.

Jesus sees every act of wickedness and oppression. He sees every injustice. Every single one.

Jesus knows the suffering of his church, his body on earth.

Jesus sees the way that evil and sin and death continue to seem to hold the field in the world around us.

And in the face of all of that, do you know what our Lord Jesus keeps on doing?

He keeps interceding. He keeps praying.

He keeps saying to his Father: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

And our Lord Jesus continues to pray the words of the psalms, saying to his Father: *“And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you...For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth...For I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more...”*

Beloved, by calling you to persist in your prayers, by calling to you to be patient, by calling you to continue to hope in your heavenly Father, Jesus is not asking you to do anything that he is not himself doing as well.

And believe me, the eternal Son's hope in his Father does not fail.

He feels all the tension that we feel, all the gap we feel between the way things are and the way they ought to be, and he continues to hope in God.

And so as you pray beloved, in the weakness of your hope, remember this.

You never pray alone. Never. Not once in your whole life have you ever prayed alone.

For Jesus is always praying with you, even as he is always praying for you.

And his firm hope, his unshakable confidence in his Father's goodness does not fail.

Remember, prayer is not a work you perform, it is a gift you receive.

And when you pray with our eternal high priest, when you enter into his intercession, you are invited to rely on his hope, to depend on his confidence in his Father as we join your prayers with his.

What would it look like, beloved, for you take your unanswered prayers to God — those prayers you hardly dare speak aloud — depending not on the strength of your own hope, your own confidence in God's goodness, but rather depending on the confidence and trust and hope that Jesus has in his Father?

That's exactly how I would encourage you to pray in your own lack of hope.

To go to God and say, Father, I am offering you this prayer not on my own, but I am giving it you in the name of Jesus.

And by giving it to you in the name of Jesus I am depending on his hope in your goodness and steadfast love where my hope is weak.

I can't can't keep praying for this thing on my own. My hope isn't strong enough.

But I know that I never pray alone, and I so am going to keep on praying this thus far unanswered prayer in the name of Jesus, who perfectly prays for me.

What if we prayed like that?

Beloved, it is only as we pray in union with Jesus, the one who never grows weary in his prayers, the one who never gives up, that we will learn to pray with a hope that does not fail.

Remember what Jesus says. Remember what Jesus believes to be true, even when you doubt it:

*“Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.”*

And it is this same Jesus who says to us today, who keeps saying to us, all through the years of his intercession: *Do not lose hope, beloved. For surely, I am coming soon.*

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.