

## Prayer for God's Guidance

### Genesis 24:10-21

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Sunday, July 6, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

The past two weeks I attended the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). It was in San Jose, California, and it seemed like all of California was burning. There were a number of burning issues in the General Assembly itself, and I am about ready to write a letter to our congregation to inform you of these concerns that we will be looking at for at least the next year, and beyond. So pray for our denomination...for our church in relationship... and for our presbytery in relationship, as we all carefully work through some very difficult issues. Now, let us listen to the Word of God from Genesis, chapter 24:

10Then the [chief] servant [of Abraham], [Eliezer – from Ch. 15 of Genesis], took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all kinds of choice gifts from his master; and he set out and went to Aram-naharaim [that is, land between two rivers], to the city of Nahor. 11He made the camels kneel down beside the well of water outside of the city; and it was toward evening, the time when women go out to draw water. 12And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master, Abraham. 13I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. 14Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please offer your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant, Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master." 15Before he had finished speaking, there was Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, coming out with her water jar on her shoulder. 16The girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known. She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. 17Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please let me sip a little water from your jar." 18"Drink, my lord," she said, and quickly lowered her jar from upon her hand and gave him a drink. 19When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." 20So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. 21The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful.

This is the Word of the Lord. Let us pray together. Almighty and merciful God, you have spoken to and guided your people from ancient times. You have invited us here today to share in your mysterious, but magnificent, ways of prayer. Now teach us, by the power of your Holy Spirit, to live into the prayer lives of Abraham and Jesus, in the community of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

God created us to seek God's guidance in prayer. God gives us the gift of prayer so that we will enter into an intimate relationship with God to do righteousness and justice, while we learn to walk humbly with God. Prayer is both listening to, and speaking with God. Prayer is to be interwoven into the thoughtful, purposeful, intelligent understanding of human life. My professor of systematic theology in seminary articulated the interconnection between prayer and work, with these simple words: "In the Reformed tradition, we pray as if everything is in God's hands, and we work as if everything was in our hands." Prayer and action are intertwined: prayer moves us to action; and the need for action moves us to pray.

In the 1970's, I happened to be in a university town as an assistant pastor in a church. One day, a young man from the local university came in to ask me a question about prayer. And he said, "There is an attractive young woman on campus and I love her. We are good friends, but she's going out with another guy. God has spoken to me and told me she is the one I should marry. I've prayed about it, but nothing seems to happen. She still dates the other guy." As it happened, I also knew the other guy and the young woman. I knew that the other fellow was, in fact, in love with her, as well, and believed also that it was God's call that he should marry her.

When the first young man asked me if God would answer his prayer, I asked him, "Are you working as

hard as the other guy to catch her attention and convincing her that you love her?" And he said to me, "Isn't prayer enough? Isn't it up to God, if it's God's will? I believe in the power of prayer!" And I responded, "The other guy's praying too, but he's doing everything he can to persuade her." "Well," he said, "I think prayer is more than enough. If God wants her to marry me, God will tell her and God will make it happen." She married the other guy.

Now I believe that God calls us to pray, but God calls us also to take action. Action and prayer are interwoven here in this special prayer by Abraham's servant, Eliezer. Prayer must be connected to all human action. God has created us to be total participants. Prayer and action go together. God invites us into the prayer arena to be a player... not just a spectator. Prayer is always connected to our whole being—mind, soul, body, and strength. God invites us, through prayer, into the mystery, the majesty, and the magnificence of a divine-human relationship—for ruling earthly life in concurrence with heaven's purposes. We are to pray as Jesus prayed and taught us to pray: "Our Father in heaven, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Praying for the will of God and doing the will of God are two sides of heaven's common currency on earth. Prayer and human initiative are interwoven into a detailed and delicate fabric which colorfully shows God's faithful actions in this grand texture of world culture, and through the fine thread count of everyday human affairs.

When I left First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to accept the call here at The National Presbyterian Church, a small prayer group gave me a steel blue shawl as a remembrance of them, and as a call to daily prayer. That shawl can be seen on the back of the red leather couch in my office. As I face that hand-knitted steel blue cotton prayer cover when I counsel with people who are seated on the couch, it reminds me, in every present situation, that God is there as an intimate partner in the conversation. God's presence...and our prayers for God's guidance...permeate our conversation. It signifies the sacred space, the *kairos* (unique and holy) moment that we are in, where we recognize that God speaks and guides us as we talk, listen, reflect, plan, pray, and decide.

Someone had to work hard to knit that beautiful steel blue covering; and that working hard flowed in conjunction with their disciplined prayer life. In prayer, God is always the primary actor. But, as we mature in faith, God grants us more and more say... more and more input... more and more impact on how the outcome of prayer and God's will, will be accomplished. We grow in a partnership with God in prayer. In this way, prayer is a transforming spiritual discipline that God uses to bring us into alignment with divine will at any given moment. Prayer interweaves the temporal moment into the transcendent will of God, joining human history with heaven's eternity.

So let's look at this prayer of Eliezer, just for a moment, and catch some of the nuance of what he was doing in prayer. He began by saying, "...O LORD, God of my master Abraham..." We pray to a God who has shown love to others before us. And they have demonstrated to us, in their relationship with God, that God is good, faithful, gracious, loving—our parents, our mentors, those who've disciplined us, modeled for us the pattern of God's love in their lives. They teach us that God assists us in how we pray and what to pray. Eliezer had a long life of watching how Abraham related to God and how Abraham prayed; and he learned to pray in the way that his master prayed. This mission journey of Eliezer—probably the most significant event of his life—was a validating moment to enter into Abraham's pattern of prayer, and to receive God's gracious response for himself. We have seen others on the adventure with God in prayer. We have seen their passion. We have seen how God's answers them. And we are stirred to participate in that mystery when we see them passionate about the adventure of prayer.

As I have mentioned on several occasions, I had a grandmother who modeled a life of personal and passionate prayer: Grandma Nellie. She was often heard, as she bandied about the house doing chores, praying out loud (at the moment, in the midst of her activity) what she was very concerned about. And all of us believed God listened to her and answered her prayers. That was supported by the fact that all of her grandchildren, at some moment, asked Nellie to pray for them. And I learned to pray by watching her pray.

Eliezer continued in his prayer, "...Please grant me success today, LORD..." Prayer is personal; it not only affects the world, but it touches me as an individual human being. When you pray, you put a lot on the line, personally, with God. As C. S. Lewis said, "You put God in the dock." And God must be a witness to

what God's going to do in response to prayer. When you address God, you expect an answer. But prayer is not a demand; it is a request. Prayer is not telling God what to do, but it, in fact, is asking God to do what God might choose to do. The words, "Please grant..." deliver the essence of our humility and our meekness: we come to God as seekers and servants, not as commanders. We are noble beggars, not arrogant nobility.

Eliezer went on to pray: "... And show steadfast love to my master, Abraham..." We join others in prayer; we are not alone in our prayers. We pray for them as they pray for guidance and help. And we are extensions of one another in the prayers that we offer for events in life.

Eliezer continued in prayer, "... I am standing here by the spring of water and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water..." Prayer is done in the cauldron of unfolding drama of life, and in the face of the ordinariness of life. Prayer is in the midst of fast action... or seeming inactivity. Prayer is relevant to any human engagement—no matter how grand, or minute. Brother Lawrence, the 15th century monk, in his writings, *Practicing the Presence of God*, said this, "We ought to act with God in the greatest simplicity, speaking to him frankly and plainly, and imploring his assistance in our affairs, just as they happen. God never failed to grant it, as I had often experienced." Prayer is about real people in real places doing real things. Prayer is about young women doing their daily chores...thirsty camels waiting patiently for a drink...employees who have to get their work done... ambassadors who must communicate the message of their president... and middle managers who must figure out a way to do their work without frustrating their boss. Prayer must work in the real world.

Eliezer goes on to say, "...Let the girl to whom I shall say, 'Please offer your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels,' let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant, Isaac..." Prayer is about the details, as well as the big picture—the small, minute brush strokes, as well as the whole canvas painting. The big picture, here, is that: God, you promised Abraham to have offspring and descendants in the myriads of thousands, and your only heir— Isaac— is without a wife. So, God, it's time for you to step up and meet your own plan."

Sometimes the answer to these prayers are found in the crustiness and the thirstiness of camels. When actress Rachel Weisz was filming in Egypt, she spent a lot of time with camels. She described her feelings about the animals: "I have absolutely no empathy for camels," she said. "I didn't care for being abused in the Middle East by those horrible, horrible, horrible creatures. They don't like people. It's not at all like relationship that humans have with horses." Camels are desert animals and they are built to go a long time without water—up to 17 days. When they do drink, they drink up to 30 gallons of water at one time. The answer to Eliezer's prayer includes the unlikelihood of finding an available, good-looking young woman who doesn't mind engaging tired, stinky, thirsty, and potentially mean camels. Then, on top of that, she must have the desire, the discipline, the energy, and the patience to water all ten of them. What kind of a prayer is that? As one writer said, "It's as though Eliezer was setting God up for an impossible task." Eastern hospitality demanded that, when a person asked for a drink, the host gave that person a drink. But when it came to watering camels, this was up to the person who owned them; you were responsible for your own livestock. But interestingly enough, Eliezer expects the young woman to water ten camels. Each camel will drink 20-30 gallons. It was not a matter of simply turning on a spigot and holding a hose in a trough. It involved taking a two-gallon jar that she held on her shoulder, dropping it down 50 feet into a well, pulling it back up, hand-over-hand, then carrying the two-gallon jar over to a trough and pouring it into the trough. This had to be done ten-to-fifteen times for each animal. That was 100 to 150 times that this young woman had to lift out, haul up, and pour out two gallons of water. Does that sound like something an ordinary teenage girl would be willing to do? Obviously, Eliezer was praying for something very, very special. He was putting his faith in God's hands, but he was being very specific in how he prayed.

What does this teach us about prayer? I believe it teaches us that we are intimately interconnected with our own imagination and planning; our own thinking and advice and counsel within ourselves, to enter into a conversation with God, so that we, as partners accomplish something of special quality, at a unique moment in history. This might include camels and water jars. God cares about the ordinary things of life to do extraordinary things.

And even before Eliezer had finished praying the prayer, there was Rebekah. He hadn't even completed the prayer, when the answer to the prayer showed up. God is way ahead of us. God not only participates with us and helps us to pray, but God prepares the person and the answer to prayer even before we offer it. And so it is that we enter into this deep, abiding relationship with God in our ordinary, everyday, and unusual prayers.

But that's not the final reality of prayer: 21 "The man gazed at the woman in silence to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful." There's a certain reservation; there's a certain modesty and hesitancy that anyone who prays enters into, in expectation of God. We do not have the last word. If we pray according to scripture, and according to Eliezer, and even in the life of Jesus, we always give God the option that God may want to do something differently than what we pray. Even Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will, Father, but yours." And so we come to prayer with humility— with an openness that, while God involves us, the ultimate power and last word is God himself. And this is how God guides, in prayer. It's an invitation to us to use all of our faculties... all of our experience... all of our training... and everything we have in life, to enter into prayer—to fully participate in all the action demanded by our prayers, and to allow God the freedom to have the last word. Let us pray. O Lord, now, we give you the freedom to have the last word—that you would take this word that you have spoken to us, and that you would magnify in your own way, to the power of helping us pray according to your will and way, in Jesus Christ. Amen.