

Read also Romans 12:1-2. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

Is prayer primarily something you do in your own mind? When you pray is it a one-sided event? The prayer is sent up—you speak your request: *Helloooo . . . is anybody therreeee???*

When I was young I remember a store called Sterling Jewelry Company, on Northwest Highway. It had all kinds of merchandise. You would pick out your item from a catalog and fill out an order form. The clerk would put your order in a vacuum tube, and send it off to the stockroom. You would pay for your item, which would then come out on a conveyor belt and you would pick it up at a certain time.

Is prayer like that to you? Do you send it up—place your order; hope it's "in stock" and you then wait for the answer to return to you. It's the giving of the request and waiting and receiving an answer. That is, prayer is more of an order form or a list of needs. Often we think of it like this. We are told to "make our requests known to God," so we do that. (Phil 4:6)

But prayer is not always like that. Sometimes it is quite different. Today we are going to look at a story in the Bible where prayer was, well, let's just say it was a surprise. That happens sometimes. It happened to a woman I know.

Olive was born in Glasgow, Scotland. Her parents were Christians who wanted to do something for the Lord. They worked but also took ministry seriously. One day her mother decided to go to Canada to get some training. This was a huge deal in the 1950s for a woman to leave her family and travel to North America by herself. At the same time her father also took on some mission work in England. At eight years old little Olive was sent to live with a family she had met only briefly.

One life was closed down, and overnight she was moved to a new city, changing schools, family, and friends, in an instant. She rarely saw her father and did not see her mother for a year. She writes that it did irreparable damage to her as a child.¹

On a regular basis she would escape outside and find a private place to cry.

In the meantime, her father, without informing her, sold the family home in Scotland. The next year when her mother returned, Olive was taken to a new home in a new city in England.

She explains that this discontinuity in her family cause her to feel great pain and contradiction. But later she married happily. They had a son, and then a daughter. Everything was very good. But then a tragedy struck which shattered their world. Their little daughter suddenly died.

Olive felt as if she had plummeted down a mine shaft. She writes: "I sat at the bottom in the damp mud unable to move . . . for years."²

¹ Olive M. Fleming Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples: Spirituality and Creativity for Today's Church*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2002), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Then Olive was invited to attend a clown ministry workshop. Yes, you heard right. She loved the experience. She loved most that she could tell Bible stories as a clown. So she began weaving her story with Bible stories in the voice of her clown.

One day, in that cold dark place of depression she heard a voice, “Olive, we have got to get you out of here.” She began to have a conversation with “The Voice.” She felt that to get out of that pit was “like climbing up a sheer rock face.” But God began to lift her out. Then one day she heard a laugh and realized it was her. Joy welled up. She whispered to God, “I will do anything you’d like me to do.”³

It was then that the Voice said, “Wonderful. At the moment I’m looking for a clown.” This was a shocker. She argued with The Voice for a while. And then she began her adventure for a whole clean, fresh, healing start.

Let’s leave Olive’s story and turn to another person who had a very rough start in life. This person was a twin, the second-born. The father favored his brother and his mother, him. Competition dominated the two boys from the womb and he desired his father’s blessing more than anything in life.

But he never seemed to achieve it.

His mother was always scheming. As one person said at our storytelling workshop, “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” Jacob was a schemer. He cheated his brother to gain his father’s blessing. His enraged brother plotted his murder. Mom got wind of it and said to Jacob, “You must leave—go live with your uncle for a while.” Then she sent him away under the pretense of finding him a wife.

Jacob was another displaced person. READ the story. Gen 28:10-22

This event was a moment of prayer. You might not think of it that way, but this was a prayer encounter. God made himself known in a dream; God talked to Jacob.

Do you ever wonder if God can transform human reality? This story answers a resounding “YES!”

Jacob had just begun his journey; he was entering life without those familiar things and people. God came to him the first night and gave him a new reality. Just like God gave Olive a new reality that transformed her depression.

Jacob came to this place fearful, fleeing for his life, without any visible future.

God came to the worst person in the family; the one who tried to overcome his problems by cheating others.

³ Ibid., 14-15.

God gave an extraordinary promise: land, offspring as numerous as the dust of the earth, blessing all families of the earth, God with him, keeping him wherever he goes, bringing him back to the land, not leaving him until God had done what he promised him. Jacob hit the jackpot! His life was marked forever!

One person said on Wednesday night that they always desired to have that kind of prayer encounter with God. But Jacob's encounter is our encounter, too.

God's first Prayer Message:

Grace—God comes to those who do not deserve it.

"I am with you."

The message of the ladder is heaven coming down to earth. God does not watch us from afar but abides with us. We are not subject to simple human solutions to our problems; or scientists' beliefs of reality; but we experience the presence of God. Think of Jesus' name: *Emmanuel*—*God with us*. What did Jesus say after before he ascended to heaven? "I am with you always" (Mt 28:20). God is willing to stand with us.

God's second Prayer Message:

Active Presence—like a shepherd, God will protect you.

"I will keep you."

Psalms 121 says this: He who *keeps* you will not slumber. He who *keeps* Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is your *keeper*; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. The LORD will *keep* you from all evil; he will *keep* your life. The LORD will *keep* your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

When we believe, our lives are never subject just to our own resources, even when we are in severe conflict. The vision of angels supports this. Psalm 91 says, *for he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways*.

God's third Prayer Message:

Promise of homecoming—when we are displaced for a time, we are not randomly floating out there. Both Olive and Jacob felt displaced. But God has a hand on you and me to bring us home.

You might be displaced by divorce or loss of a spouse or loss of a job or transitioning change, but your life is always in the Lord's hands, heading in a positive direction.

Jacob wakes up. He knows God is present; this is extraordinary; and he is going to embrace it.

But he is still the same Jacob. He still speaks with a lot of "ifs"—"If God will be with me . . . if God will keep me . . . if God will give me bread and clothing, so I will come back to my father's house in peace" . . .

I don't see that as demands. It's more like when someone offers to do something extraordinary for you and you say, "*Would you really do that for me? If you would do that for me I will love you forever.*"

But here's what you say to God. This is what Jacob said:

I will worship you regularly at your house.

I will surely give one tenth of everything I have to you.

Paul said, "Present your whole self to God because of all he has done for you. Let it be a living and holy sacrifice. . . . This is truly the way to worship him. . . .[L]et God transform you into a new person." (from Ro 12:1-2)

Give tender, heartfelt commitments of gratitude. Jacob has learned to pray. Prayer has opened up heaven's resources. He worships and gives to show his awe. Prayer has become so much more than filling out an order form.

How about you? Would you rather send your order form? Or climb the stairway of heaven and experience God's promises fully?

AMEN