

Growing up, when we come into the world we are quite helpless, and rely on our parents for everything. But then, little by little, while our parents still help us, what we find is more often we hear things such as “you can do it yourself” or “just try harder” and sometimes we also hear the word “no.” At the time, it can seem frustrating. But what we learn is that our parents have wisdom and help us to reach our potential, but it requires us to both trust them, but also to persist in finding and fine-tuning our gifts.

The same is true with God. God loves us more than we can ever know. God is also merciful. But when we say “yes” to God, what we also find is that God will be with us, but we have to be open to changing too ourselves and persist in becoming the person we want to become. Faith requires a response and is a two way relationship between ourselves and God.

Jeff Brown was a prisoner. And to some, it would seem his life was over as he was to be in prison for a long time - a lifelong sentence. But one day things changed when he went to solitary confinement.

“Enjoy your week alone, convict.”

Those were the last words he heard before the prison guard slammed shut the steel door. His new cell was a 10 by 10 room with concrete walls. All he would see for the next seven days. Just him, a thin mattress on the floor and a book. But he didn't let the guard see how he felt about it. He wasn't going to show any weakness. That could get a him killed.

Several counts of dealing and cooking methamphetamines had earned him a jail sentence of about 175 years. He would never get out of the Oklahoma Lexington Correctional Center. With no hope and nothing else to do, he dealt and took even more drugs in prison—that's how he ended up in solitary. A bad drug deal on the yard.

But what did it matter, he thought. His life had ended five years ago when he got locked up. Not that he fit into regular society anyway. If anybody saw him coming down the street—beard down to his belly, hair down his back, fire in his eye—they'd say: There's a guy who's going to hell. And, he reasoned, they'd be right.

Jeff sat on the mattress, his back up against the wall, and picked up the book. A Bible. Of course. Don't know what they think this book has to do

with me, he thought. The Bible was for upstanding people on the outside. People like the man his family thought he'd become when he won a math achievement contest at 13. Not the junkie convict he was now. Jeff tossed the Bible into the corner.

As the hours and the days dragged by, that little red book looked more interesting. Jeff lost track of how long he'd been in the hole when he started reading. He flipped to the stories about Jesus. The prison ministers talked about him all the time. How great he was, how loving. Jesus wouldn't know what to do with him, that was for sure Jeff thought. Nothing much to love about a guy like me. Jesus was for good people. People who didn't have to be forgiven for much more than their little white lies. But then...what was this? Jesus said, "I was in prison and you visited me...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." He read the passage again, making sure he got it right. Jesus related to prisoners? He read more of the Bible, about how Jesus encouraged all the outcasts to follow him. He had died for their sins, and he forgave them. My sins too? Jeff wondered. Jesus wasn't just for good people?

The page before him blurred. If the other prisoners saw the tears in his eyes he'd be in trouble. You don't show weakness and survive in prison. "Jesus?" Jeff whispered. "Would you really help me? Take away my desire for drugs. Let me be a better man."

Jeff fell asleep with the Bible open in front of him and read it as soon as he woke up. He read until the day the guard opened the thick steel door. Daylight poured into the dim cell and stung his eyes. "Back to the yard, convict."

Back to the yard, Jeff thought. Back to reality. Had I really prayed in there? Had I really asked God for help? A moment of weakness, Jeff thought as the guard locked him back up in his usual cell. He couldn't let that happen again.

Right away he scored some drugs to block out his memory of his time in solitary. Getting high had always been his answer. Not this time though. He did the drugs that night, but he didn't get high. "Must be something wrong with the drugs," he said, staring up at the ceiling.

But a few days later when he tried again, he couldn't get high. Where was the rush? He remembered his crazy prayer in solitary: Take away my desire for drugs. He'd want them again soon enough. For now, without the obsession dogging him, he paid more attention to the hospital chaplains. When the education coordinator, Donna, called him down to her office, he went.

"I think it's time you enrolled in college," she said.

"College?" He laughed. "Guys like me don't go to college. Who needs a better-educated inmate?"

She closed the folder and looked him right in the eye. "None of us knows what the future holds. It's one thing to serve time, another to waste it."

Jeff guessed she had a point. If nothing else, a college course might be a distraction—like that Bible in solitary.

Jeff passed the entrance exam and a week later showed up in the classroom trailer. There were about a dozen prisoners who'd signed up, all

clean-cut looking guys who wanted to start over in life when they got released. “What are you doing here?” their eyes seemed to ask as they looked at Jeff. Which is what he was asking himself. Why was I wasting my time learning about computer technology? He asked himself. Because I’d had another moment of weakness and let myself hope things could be different for me?”

He stuck with the classes. He’d always been good with computers and enjoyed it. In two years he’d earned his associate’s degree. “You should be proud,” Donna said when he went to see her.

“I am,” he said. “I almost forgot what it felt like.”

Upon completing a degree, a prisoner automatically comes up for a parole hearing.

His was held just a few days later. “Jeff Brown,” the committee chairman said, “in seven years of incarceration you haven’t shown you have anything to offer society. Frankly, you could get ten degrees and still have nothing to offer. Parole denied.”

He faced the committee squarely, not showing any weakness. But as he shuffled back to his cell, Jesus' story came back to him. He gave hope to people who had none. But wasn't he beyond all hope? "Did I expect God himself to get me out of prison? Have one of his angels unlock the cell door?" Were his thoughts.

A couple days later Donna called him to her office again. "The governor is going to release five hundred inmates," she said. "The only people eligible are nonviolent offenders who have upgraded their education in prison."

"Like me earning my degree?"

"It's all done," Donna said. "Jeff, you're a free man."

He went back to his cell in a daze. Me? Free? He thought. He closes his story by saying, "I don't think it's the governor who's in charge here. There was a higher power at work. I knew I'd struggle to stay drug free. But now I was determined. God had released me from my hopelessness. From the prison I'd locked myself in for too long. He'd answered the prayer I'd made,

and even the prayer I didn't dare make. He was just waiting for me to be brave enough to ask for his help. Just waiting for me to have a moment of weakness to show me the meaning of strength."

Most of us aren't in prison, but it can certainly feel that way in the world at times, because life can be hard. But we are not alone. God journeys with us, but along the way He also challenges us to grow closer to Him and to respond to the faith. Sometimes that involves a lot of work; it often involves persistence and setbacks. But with us every step of the way seeing our potential is God, who is not like the parole board Jeff experienced but rather is always saying to us we have so much to offer the world, if only like Jeff we strive to better ourselves and one another.

This week we have the blueprint for how to do that in the Lord's Prayer from Luke's Gospel. It's one of the first prayers we learn, and we say it so often. But do we think about the real meaning of the words that we say? It's worth doing so because each section of the prayer has so much to say about our faith.

At the start, we call God our Father. And it's much like Jeff came to realize when he first started reading about Jesus, wondering what would God want to do with someone like him, a drug dealer who was doing a life sentence. But then He came to realize that God came for people just like Him and wanted so much to do with him. We call God "Father" because it shows the closeness of God to us. Think of Jesus in the garden using that intimate term "Abba" similar to our word "dad" in English. God is close, not distant, and wants us to invite Him in and have a personal relationship with us.

We then say "hallowed be your name." God is our God alone and we have no other gods before Him. For Jeff, there was a time when drugs and the need for power were his gods before he truly converted. Like him, we need to ask ourselves who is our god and who do we worship? Sometimes that can be a job, success, money, or even people. But God needs to always be first.

We then say "your kingdom come." Jesus will say "the kingdom of God is at hand." In the face of the pain in the world and in our lives, God comes in. But this prayer also reminds us to be like Jesus and bring about His kingdom. We pray that as members of the body, we can contribute to this

kingdom by being a person who is loving and forgiving, and who brings about justice. It's a reminder that our faith is also a call to action to bring good and love into the world, and reminds us to look at the choices we have made and what people see when they look at us.

"Give us this day our daily bread" invites us to depend on God that He will provide, and for Catholics this refers to the Eucharist. It's a pointing to the future of heaven when we will be with Jesus forever. Remember the Eucharist is God's gift to us of love; it brings us closer to Him, it removes our sins - so this petition is also linked up with forgiveness and the challenge to become what we receive in bringing about the Kingdom of God through how we lead our lives.

Then there is that reminder that Jesus came to understand - forgive us our sins. Jesus came first and foremost to do just that. We see this throughout His ministry; neither do I condemn you to the woman in adultery; the reconciliation to the woman at the well; and the ultimate act of love from the Cross, forgive them, they know not what they do. We pray this all the time, but again and again it's worth thinking about how much God loves us.

With that though comes the challenge - as we forgive those who trespass against us. We receive Jesus in our souls, we ask for mercy, but we also are called to pass this on. This invites us to think about how we let go of the grudges and resentment, and try to love as Jesus.

Then we hear do not subject us to the final test. We've often said it lead us not into temptation; it may be changed slightly to soon say "do not let us fall into temptation" which would make more sense as God does not lead us into temptation and as you can see from the Gospel there's different ways to word it. Jeff in the story underwent a change, but he would need to continue to receive God's strength to avoid the temptation to fall into old habits. This part of the prayer reminds us that God is with us but we live in a world with so much temptation. On our part we look for ways to avoid the occasion of sin meaning that we try to avoid putting ourselves in situations where we may be more prone to a particular sin, but we also ask for God's help in doing this.

And one final note - remember the words "thy will be done." After we hear the prayer, it almost sounds like if you persist in asking for something, you'll eventually get your way. We can't change God's mind. But we should ask

God for things. We can make prayer personal; petitionary prayer is a good thing. The caution must be not to think we are controlling God, but also to think that if we don't get what we want that God somehow doesn't care. Remember Jesus asks for the passion to be removed, but then says not my will but your will be done. God love us, but sometimes the answer is no to a particular thing we ask for. God will still be at work though; just as the good emerged from Good Friday, in our lives too, sometimes good things happen even if we don't see them at the time. We pray for a person to change and they don't right away, but later in life they learn from their mistakes; we go through suffering and it may teach us empathy or compassion; we go through a struggle that takes time to get over and it helps us to grow as a person; we ask for that job to work out or the relationship to work out and years later we find that a better job or person we hadn't met yet turned out to be so much more better for us. Sometimes when God says "no" to a prayer, He's helping us to learn patience, but also to conform our will to His will, and to purify our desires.

In Jeff's story, what struck me were the words of the prison guard "back to the yard, convict." He was just doing his job, but he didn't see Jeff as anything more than just another faceless prisoner. And how different our

God is. I once had an atheist say to me in how vast the universe is and how many billions of people there on the earth, if there was a God, why would He even think of me? And the answer is He did, because He loves me, and loves us all. We are not just another face in the crowd, meant to go back to the yard after we leave Mass that is the world, but are precious to God who wants us to truly bring about His kingdom. The way to do that is to realize what Jeff did, that God wants so much to do with us, but to also realize that God isn't some genie in a lamp, but rather gives us the tools and help to change from sinners into saints. So let Jesus in and think about the words we say so often, letting God take possession of you so we can all share in the work of God to bring about His kingdom of love and mercy here on earth.