

Why Children Of God Pray With Confidence.

Text: Jer 29:11-14

Suggested Hymns:

423, 420, 424, 426

1) What is Prayer?

2) God wants us to pray

3) God wants to help us

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Jeremiah 29:11-14, *¹¹ For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.*

¹⁴ I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today is the fifth Sunday after Easter which is called *Rogate*, or Prayer Sunday. The Christian church has from ancient times directed its attention to the subject of prayer on this Sunday.

It is certainly very fitting that the subject of prayer should be given special attention during the Easter season. The fact that we have a Saviour who rose from the dead ought to help convince us that the prayers we speak to Him are not just empty words or a useless exercise. And on this Sunday before the ascension, we are reminded, too, that this living Saviour now sits at the right hand of God, where He rules over all things in heaven and on earth. That, too, ought to help convince us that the prayers we speak to Him will be heard and answered.

Let us therefore understand that children of God are to *Pray With Confidence*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. What Is Prayer?

Firstly, let us look at what prayer is. To pray means to commune, to talk, with God. Abraham spoke to the Lord, so did Jesus. This may be done by speaking words, by singing hymns, but we can pray also in our thoughts and with the desires and longings of the heart.

In prayer we not only make known to God our wants and needs, our griefs and sorrows, and ask Him for help, but we also praise and thank Him for what He has done for us.

Prayer is an act of worship, because thereby we recognise and honour God as our Helper in every need. Such worship God demands of us. When we pray, we should bear in mind that we are speaking to God, and therefore not repeat prayers thoughtlessly, but think of what we are doing, and mean what we are saying.

The value of prayers lies not in their length and number, nor in the correct and polished language we use, but in this that we pray from the heart, earnestly and sincerely, in truth.¹

Our prayers may be brief, but they should be strong and fervent. We should not pray to idols, nor to saints and angels, but to the Triune God alone. This is why praying in ecumenical services is so wrong. You cannot pray with those of different faiths. Prayers addressed to any “other god,” no matter how sincere, will not be answered.

Luther tells us “why only Christians can pray.”² *Praying is the work of faith alone and something no one but a Christian can do. For Christians do not base their prayer on themselves but on the name of the Son of God, in whose name they have been baptised; and they are certain that praying in this way is pleasing to God because He has told us to pray in the name of Christ and has promised to hear us.*

God indeed commands us to pray. Not to pray is sin. The feeling of personal unworthiness should not keep us from praying, as the example of the tax collector³ and of the centurion shows.⁴ God’s promise to hear and help us is not vain and empty, but sincere and true. He will and can do what He has promised.

However, God does not hear the prayers of the unbeliever, but He certainly hears the prayers of His children. In trouble we seek help, trouble teaches us to pray. Hence our own troubles, great or small, temporal or spiritual, should move us to pray. But also the troubles of our neighbour should move us to pray for

him. Abraham prayed for the righteous in Sodom, the centurion prayed for his servant.

We thank people who help us, likewise we should not forget to thank God for what He gives us in answer to our prayers. God expects this of us; having delivered us, He wants us to glorify Him. Because of the innumerable blessings we daily receive there should be in our hearts a constant feeling of gratitude.

We should pray, firstly, in the name of Jesus, that is, with faith in Him as our Redeemer and secondly, with confidence, that is, with firm trust that for Jesus' sake our prayer will be answered.

This means that we should pray thoughtfully, sincerely, with penitent hearts, according to the will of God, in the name of Christ and with confidence. This is what our text emphasises today.

One of the lessons concerning prayer that is taught many times in the Bible is that, when we pray, we are NOT to approach God in a spirit of unbelief. James, for example, told the Christians to whom he wrote his epistle, ⁵ ***If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.***⁵

Later in the same letter he says, ***the prayer of faith will save the sick.***⁶ In other words, James says that a prayer that is offered in doubt and unbelief will not be heard, but a prayer that is spoken with confidence in the Lord's help will be answered.

So often people pray in a spirit which says, "Well, it can't do any harm, and it even might do some good." Such words are really an expression of doubt and unbelief, and to pray in that spirit is really an insult to God.

When we come to God in prayer, we ought to do that with the confident conviction, firstly, that it is going to do some good, secondly, that God listens to our prayers, and thirdly that He takes them into consideration as He governs the course of the whole world, as well as the smallest details of our own lives.

Today our text helps us to grow in that conviction and overcome our sinful doubts as it reminds us why children of God pray with confidence.

2. God Wants Us to Pray

Secondly, we can pray with confidence because we have a God who wants us to pray. Our heavenly Father is never like an earthly father who says, *“Don’t bother me now. Can’t you see that I’m busy?”* He made that very clear in our text when he told the children of Israel, ¹² ***Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me.*** It is very obvious from those words that calling upon God and praying to Him is something that God wants His people to do.

The context in which those words were addressed to the Jews can help us see that even more clearly. These words were spoken to the children of Israel after the beginning of the captivity in Babylon. That captivity was a punishment from God which had come upon them because they had not been praying to the Lord as they should have prayed to Him.

Instead, they had fallen into all kinds of idolatry and immorality. God had sent His prophets to warn them and to call them to repentance. He had sent many calamities to remind them of their sin and the greater punishment that would come if they did not repent. But none of this seemed to do any good.

Finally, God said that, if they refused to listen to His warnings, their nation would be conquered, their cities would be destroyed, and those who survived would be carried away as captives into the land of Babylon. When even this did not help to bring them to repentance, the king of Babylon came with his army, and Jerusalem was captured and finally destroyed. And, just as the prophets had foretold, the Jews were led into the Babylonian Captivity.

In the verse before our text, Jeremiah told his people that this captivity would last for seventy years. God refers to the end of that period of captivity when He says, ¹² ***Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me.*** God is in effect saying to them, *“It will take seventy years for you to learn what I want to teach you. But at the end of the seventy years, you will once again have become a praying people.”*

These words of God clearly teach us, firstly, that God is displeased when people do not pray to Him, and secondly, that He is pleased when they do pray,

and thirdly, that by sending them trouble and grief He wants to teach them to pray and to call upon Him for help.

In their unbelief, people often react to such times of trouble by finding fault with God and complaining about the way He runs this world. They may even be tempted to ask whether there is a God who is still in charge and still in control of the universe.

But, instead of reacting in that way, they ought to learn the lesson that God wants to teach them and turn to Him in humble, penitent prayer that recognises that we have no right to expect anything good from Him, but that He still is pleased to have us come with our requests.

When we consider how God dealt with the children of Israel, we might ask ourselves whether we need such a lesson today. I expect that most of us have become aware of the fact that life in the twentieth first century may not be quite as easy for us as it has been in the past.

Who knows how long the world's natural resources will last? And then there are droughts, floods, wars, and the economy. Will we really have to wait until things get worse before we learn that we have a God who wants us to turn to him in times of trouble?

Will it be necessary for many people to die in a nuclear attack before the nation learns to turn to God with their whole heart because there is nowhere else left to go for help?

We know that we have a God who wants us to pray. He has commanded us to do that in many places in the Bible. And the troubles we experience in this world and the dangers that we see before us ought to create in our hearts a desire to pray. When that desire takes root in our hearts, we need never wonder whether God has time for us, because we can come to Him confidently, knowing that He wants us to come to Him with our requests.

3. God Wants to Help Us

Thirdly, we can pray confidently, not only because we have a God who wants us to pray, but also because we have a God who wants to help us. He promises to hear our prayers and to help us. He told the children of Israel

through the prophet Jeremiah, ¹² *Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.*

One of the things that the children of Israel longed for during those seventy years was that they might return to Jerusalem. That longing is expressed in Psalm 137, which was written during those years of the Babylonian Captivity. There the psalmist wrote, ¹ *By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept When we remembered Zion.* ⁷ He also said, ⁵ *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget its skill!* ⁶ *If I do not remember you, Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth.* ⁸

In our text God gave the Jews in Babylon the promise, ¹³ *And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.* ¹⁴ *I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.*

God kept that promise. Seventy years after the first exiles were taken to Babylon, the Jews began to return to Jerusalem, and seventy years after the temple was destroyed, it was rebuilt and rededicated to the worship of the true God. We know that during those seventy years there were some people who were praying earnestly for the Lord's help. One of the first captives to be taken to Babylon was the prophet Daniel. He was a man so devoted to prayer that he was thrown into a lions' den because he would not stop praying to the true God. ⁹

To many of those pious Jews it sometimes must have seemed during those seventy years that their prayers were not being heard. At times like that we ought to remember that faith is the evidence of things not seen. ¹⁰ When we do not see the fulfilment of our prayers, that is just the time for confident faith. Our faith ought not to rest on what we have experienced or what we have seen. It ought to rest solely and alone on the promises of God. We should not believe that God answers our prayers because we can point to instances when prayers were heard, but we ought to believe it because we have God's promise.

Luther emphasises that we are to look at God's Word and promises. ¹¹ *Learn, therefore, that there can be no real prayer without this faith. But do you feel weak and fearful? ... You need not consider whether you are worthy or*

unworthy; all you need to consider is your need and His Word, on which He tells you to build.

And we ought to believe it especially because we know what kind of God we have, because we know that we have a God who loves us and who wants to help us. This is the way God describes Himself in our text when He says, ***"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."*** By their sins the children of Israel had deserved something far worse than the Babylonian Captivity. But God sent that lesser punishment to them so that they might repent and turn to Him for forgiveness. He wanted the final outcome of their lives to be eternal salvation in heaven.

We know that God wants us to have that kind of a ***future and a hope*** also. For that He was willing to send His own Son into death on the cross so that He might earn for us the forgiveness of all our sins by suffering our punishment for us. A God who would go to such lengths to help us find eternal life with Him in heaven is beyond all doubt a God who wants to help us. As St. Paul says, ***"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"***¹²

God answers every proper prayer, but in His own way and at His own time. God did not remove the "thorn in the flesh," as Paul had asked, but by the assurance of His grace God strengthened the Apostle in his weakness.¹³ Thus God answers our prayers not always in the way we ask or expect, but most certainly in a way which is best for us.

God answers our prayers at His own time.¹⁴ Jesus did not at once grant the request of the Syrophenician woman, but He held back to test her faith, yet finally He helped her.¹⁵ Thus it may seem that for a "small moment" God had forsaken us and 'hid His face' from us, but with everlasting kindness He will have mercy on us.¹⁶ Thus we should never become discouraged when our prayers are not immediately answered, but "continue steadfastly in prayer,"¹⁷ and when His hour comes, He will have mercy on us.

What a privilege it is to come to that kind of God in prayer! Therefore we should surely pray with all confidence when we come to God who also says to us, as He said to the children of Israel, ***"For I know the thoughts that I think***

toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. God wants us to pray, and He wants to help. What more do we need to encourage us to lead a life of confident prayer? Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Ps. 145:18

² E. M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1991, 3440

³ Luke 18:13

⁴ Matt. 8:5-13

⁵ James 1:5-7

⁶ James 5:15

⁷ Psalm 137:1

⁸ Psalm 137:5,6

⁹ Dan. 6:10-23

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:1

¹¹ E. M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1991, 3449

¹² Romans 8:32

¹³ 2 Cor. 12:9

¹⁴ John 2:4

¹⁵ Matt. 15:22-28

¹⁶ Isa 54:7-8

¹⁷ Rom. 12:12