

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Life certainly has its share of problems and difficulties, doesn't it? I can name any number of problems and difficulties member of our congregation are facing right now. Huge problems. Difficult circumstances. Situations that are very uncertain and that have very serious consequences. There are members of this church asking these very questions:

Will we be able to work out our differences or is this marriage heading toward a divorce? How are we ever going to pay down this debt and get to a point where we can sleep again at night? Will this disease take my life, or will I recover? Will this injury or pain ever go away, or will I have to deal with it the rest of my life? Will I ever find someone to share my life with? Why aren't I happy? My life is good, but I'm depressed. How can I possibly make this life-changing decision? I just don't know which way I should turn.

What should we do when faced with the uncertainties and problems of life? What should we do when we feel the waves of nauseating anxiety coming over us because of the unknown that lies ahead? People think of all sorts of ways to cope. Some seek strength or advice in a close friend or relative. Some look to horoscopes and fortune tellers to decide what they should do. Some meditate and look for inner strength. Some try to forget their problems and ease the anxiety with alcohol or medicating. Some try to dismiss the hard times out of hand, rationalize that everyone has times like this, and this too will pass.

But the Bible offers us a much, much better way to deal with the anxiety and the worry. Here it is: the key, the answer, the solution to worry and anxiety: Prayer. Some of you were sitting on the edge of your seat waiting for the answer, and when you heard prayer, you sat back and thought, "Oh. I thought maybe I'd hear something new." You're right. I bet everyone here already knew that prayer is what God wants us to do when anxious or worried. But something new we might learn today is *what* we should pray in times of anxiety and worry. What do you pray about in such times? What is the *content* of your prayer? And even if you can rattle off the top of your head right now exactly what we should pray for in times of anxiety, be honest: do you pray this way? Always? If not, why not? My prayer is that by the end of today's message, you not only know what to pray when your worried and anxious, but that you'll actually do it. Regularly. Always.

So let's take a look at Jacob and his prayer when faced with a huge problem in his life. "But wait, pastor. Did Jacob really have a problem as big as mine? Was he really feeling the pressure like I am? Was he really as worked up as me? Because I'm not so sure these Bible guys would even comprehend the scope of my problem and the pressure I experience because of it."

Let me tell you about Jacob's situation, and you be the judge of whether it's as bad as your situation. First, we need to get up to speed.

As you probably remember, Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of twin boys: Esau and Jacob. God had foretold that the promise of the Savior and the blessings of the first born would go to Jacob, rather than to the older twin Esau. But Isaac loved Esau more, and intended to bless him. Jacob and his mother didn't trust that God could keep his promise unless he (Jacob) took matters into his own hands. Jacob deceived his elderly father Isaac in order to receive the blessing.

Esau was furious! Someone overheard Esau saying that as soon as his Dad died, he was going to kill his brother. They told Jacob and his mother, and they quickly decided that it would be best of Jacob quickly skipped town. Jacob left his family and all that he had and with not much more than the clothes on his back, fled 400 – 500 miles away to the north to Haran where he stayed with his uncle Laban. On his way there, God appeared to Jacob in a dream and he repeated the vitally important promises that he had first made to Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham. This is important. Listen to what God said:

**“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. 14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. 15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Genesis 28:13-15)**

In spite of what he was going through, God’s promises had not changed.

I won’t tell you all the details but he arrived at Laban’s house and stayed and worked there 20 years. God blessed Jacob richly there. He married two of Laban’s daughters and had many sons. His flocks grew tremendously. Jacob became a rich man... even without the inheritance of his father Isaac. But more importantly, in that time, it appears Jacob grew in his faith, and learned to rely upon God even in difficult times.

God did not want Jacob to remain in Haran. God wanted him back in the Promised Land where he belonged. Jacob obeyed God’s word and decided to return. But Jacob knew that Esau was still there waiting for him. Jacob had good reason to fear this confrontation.

Jacob sent messengers to Esau to announce his arrival. And here’s what happened:

**Genesis 32:6-12 When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, “We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, “If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.” Then Jacob prayed, “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’ I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”**

In this short prayer, we see 5 parts.

1. Address God (the only one who can and will help)
2. Remember who God is and what he has done (word and promises),
3. Confess our own unworthiness
4. Ask you need.
5. Remember God’s words and promises which are the basis for our prayer.

Now let’s look at each part in more detail. [1] Jacob starts his prayer by addressing the one true God. Jacob knows God and addresses him as “the God of my father Abraham and the God of my father Isaac.” This is the God who made specific promises to his father and grandfather. Jacob knows and believes that God and his promises have not changed. There is only one God who exists, one God who will help and one God with whom he has a relationship.

He also addresses God with the word, “LORD”. This is the name God later revealed to Moses at the burning bush. This name means, “I AM”. It stresses God’s complete independence and changelessness. Jacob knew and believed that when God promised love and kindness, he would make good on those promises.

[2] Jacob then remembers a specific promise God made: **“Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper.”** God’s promise was the reason for the situation Jacob was in. God’s promise was the basis for Jacob’s prayer.

When we pray, it is good to begin by remembering God’s promises. Are you praying for health? First remember God’s promise that all things work for our good. Are you praying for a stronger faith? First remember God’s promise to strengthen our faith by the Holy Spirit through his Word and Sacrament. Are you praying for opportunities to witness your faith to others? Recall Jesus’ promise to give us the proper words to say. Are you praying for forgiveness of sins? First remember God’s promises of salvation through Jesus Christ. So before you pray, first think the promises God has made which are connected with what you want to ask for. Start your prayer by remembering God’s promises! By the way... to remember them, you have to know them. Bible study is vitally important for the believer. We can’t hold God to a promise that we have never learned!

[3] Now let’s return to Jacob’s prayer. Before making his request, Jacob acknowledged his own unworthiness, and God’s goodness. Jacob realized he didn’t deserve any blessings from God. There was nothing good in him that merited God’s favor. Jacob knew that his sins were the reason he had to flee in the first place. God didn’t owe him anything. But how did God treat Jacob? When Jacob fled from his brother and went to Haran, his only earthly possession was a staff. When he returned 20 years later, he had vast riches. God had blessed him immensely!

When we pray it is also beneficial for us to remember and pray about who we are and what God has done for us. Confess your sins. Understand your unworthiness. Humble yourself before God. But then remember and pray about the blessings God has given you. Despite what you deserve, God has given you so many good things – both physical and spiritual. Thank and praise God for his goodness.

[4] After remembering God’s promises and confessing his own sinfulness, Jacob was ready to ask God for what he needed. His prayer was simple and heartfelt. **“Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.”** Jacob didn’t hide his fear or his feelings. He told God exactly what he was thinking. He asked for God to deliver him from his brother. Jacob was afraid for his life... and the life of his family. Jacob acknowledged that the current situation was out of his control. If Esau had evil intentions, Jacob’s family would be devastated. Only God could help.

No matter what we pray for, we ought to pray sincerely and from the heart. We don’t need to think up eloquent words or poetic phrases. Say what comes naturally. Speak as you do to your best friend. Tell God how you feel. Tell God specifically what you want. Then trust that he will do what is best for you. God listens carefully to every word and knows what is in your heart.

[5] Jacob finished his prayer by once again remembering God’s promises. He remembered what God had promised to Abraham. **“Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.”**

Have you ever doubted that God hears and answers your prayers? Maybe you feel this way because you don’t spend enough time thinking about all that God has promised. When you end your prayer by recalling God’s promises, you’re reminding yourself that this prayer isn’t offered because of your goodness or your wishes, but because of God’s command and promise. We have certainty we are heard and answered because our prayer is rooted in God’s promises!

How closely do your prayers match the pattern of Jacob's prayer? Again, the structure of his prayer was as follows:

- 1) Address the true God.
- 2) Remember his promises that are specific to the request you are about to make.
- 3) Confess your sins to God. Pray humbly, knowing that it is not our own merits that make us worthy, but God's goodness.
- 4) Make your request to God. Be honest about what you are feeling.
- 5) Close by remembering God's promises to you.

We certainly do not offer perfect prayers, do we? Often times we even forget to pray. Sometimes we refuse to ask because we rely upon ourselves or others. Sometimes we ask with wrong motives. Sometimes we ask with doubting hearts.

Thank God for the greatest promise he made *and* fulfilled! Because of our sins, the Lord Jesus entered our world. He perfectly knew and trusted God and all of his promises. In the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed openly and honestly with the Father to take the cup of suffering from him if it was possible. But he also added, "But not my will be done, but yours." When Jesus went to the cross, he took our sins upon himself. Our guilt was removed and placed on him. He suffered. He died. Him for us. On the third day he rose to prove we are indeed forgiven. Our prayers are indeed acceptable by our heavenly Father. His love for us cannot be questioned!

We usually end our prayers with the words, "In Jesus' name". Jesus is the reason why God hears and answers all our prayers. The name "Jesus" reminds of countless promises that God has given us, such as forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation. Praying in Jesus' name is a constant reminder that God has made and kept his promises to us.

What problems do you face right now? What are your concerns? Your worries? Take them to the Lord in prayer!

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged -- Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Are we weak and heavy laden, Cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Savior, still our refuge -- Take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer.  
In his arms he'll take and shield you; You will find a solace there. [CW 411]

Amen.