

## The Praying Life

1 John 5:14-16 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. <sup>16</sup> If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.

“If you had asked me as a young Christian whether I believed in prayer, I would have quickly said yes. I would have told you about the time I spun out in the snow and didn't get hurt, or the time I dropped a house key somewhere and my '74 Dodge Dart and couldn't find it for hours, until I prayed. Maybe God takes care of [new] believers, I don't know. He doesn't seem to take care of old-timers, though. I could list probably a hundred prayers that haven't been answered. I'm not speaking of selfish prayers, but important prayers: God, keep my kids safe, keep them away from the wrong crowd. All three ended up in trouble with the law; abusing drugs and alcohol...I've been living at the edge of the abyss for several years now. Yes, I have had close time, have felt the presence of God, and these memories alone are what keep me from checking out...I cling to those few memories, and get nothing else, no new sign that God is listening.

“I'd guess maybe 20 percent of my prayers get anything like an answer I want. Over time, I give up. I pray for those things I believe will happen. Or I just don't pray. I review my journal and see God doing less and less. I get mad. Like a child. I stop talking. I'm passive-aggressive with God. I put Him off. Maybe later.

“I went to a mentor and poured out my soul, describing in detail all I've been through in the past few years with my health and especially with my kinds “What do I do?” I asked.

He sat there for the longest time and said, 'I don't know, Joanne’ He sighed. I waited for words of wisdom. None came. That's how it is with prayer too.”

(“Joanne”, as quoted in Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* 64-65.)

Those are brutally honest words, but tragic at the same time. Not tragic because she is angry and disappointed, tragic because her experience of prayer has led her to a place of deep cynicism about prayer itself. I don't know her circumstances or the story behind her story, but I'd suggest her words might represent the feelings of quite a few Christians I pray and nothing happens.

There is a large gap between that kind of experience of prayer, and the kind which the Bible describes to be normal for a Christian. A kind of prayer exists which a born-again believer can and should experience regularly.

The book of 1 John is all about the normal Christian life. John has been explaining to us what it looks like when God's life is implanted in a human soul. He has been showing us sign, after sign, after sign of the marks of true salvation. One of the fruits, or evidences of eternal life, is the believer's experience of prayer. Far from being just an external thing which a Christian may or may not do, John more than once in this letter describes a kind of prayer life as normative for a believer.

The kind of prayer life which John describes as normal for a Christian is a confident prayer life which has its requests, for the most part, answered. The way John describes prayer seems too simple. Christians ask, and Christians receive what they ask. Because that keeps happening, they are confident when they pray, and so they pray more.

Perhaps Joanne's story resonates with you, and this idea of regularly answered prayer does not. Perhaps you listen to Joanne, and listen to John, and identify a lot more with Joanne than with John.

If that's the case, then this passage is vital for you to either check that you are saved, or to make some important changes to your life so that your prayer life looks like John's not Joanne's.

Confident prayer depends on two certainties: God is listening, and God will answer.

Here John is going to teach us about these two certainties of Christian prayer. He's going to teach us about our guaranteed audience with God, and our guaranteed answers from God. And along the way he's going to teach us about certain conditions we need to meet.

Let's look very closely at this passage together and seek to understand the secret of confident prayer.

## **I. Our Guaranteed Audience With God**

*1 John 5:14 Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*

According to John, Christians have confidence in Him (also translated *before Him*). What does this confidence consist of? It consists in the absolute certainty that He hears us. Does John simply mean that God hears us the way we hear a cricket chirping in the night, or the way you hear cars passing? Does John mean God simply knows we are talking? No, it doesn't mean that, because that would not be comforting or bring confidence. God hears every conversation on the face of the earth. He hears the thoughts of every living being, angel and human. He hears the prayers of people praying to false gods, and people praying to Him in the wrong way.

So if it doesn't mean merely that God generally hears the words we utter, what does it mean? Clearly John means a *kind* of hearing. He means that God hears us favourably. God hears us sympathetically. God hears us with every intention of responding. This is the hearing of loving attention.

Proverbs helps us get the idea:

*Proverbs 15:29 The LORD is far from the wicked, But He hears the prayer of the righteous.*

*Proverbs 15:8 The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, But the prayer of the upright is His delight.*

God is able to hear the wicked, and He does hear them. What Scripture is telling us is that God does not hear them in the same way. The way God hears the righteous is a positive, favourable kind of hearing.

I remember as a boy phoning my father at work. I would call his direct line. And he would answer in a businesslike, monotone, announcing his surname. And I would say, "Hi, it's me!" And his tone would change immediately into a kind of cheer, "Yes, my boy!" How my father had heard office conversations, calls from secretaries and other administrative tasks was not how he heard me.

Now what if you knew that God would give you such an audience? What if you knew that when you came to God, and said, "It is so-and-so here, Father", that His response would be a positive focus? As if in the clamour of billions of voices talking to God and to each other, God gives yours special, positive attention, like you do when speaking to a five-year old. God stoops down to listen.

How do we know that we can have this kind of favourable attention from God? Fortunately, the text

tells us. This hearing by God comes as a result of meeting a condition. The condition begins with the word 'if'. What is that condition?

*if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*

This kind of favourable audience with God hinges on asking according to His will. He hears all our prayers, just like He hears all human beings generally. But this special, favourable kind of hearing only happens when we ask in a certain way. What is that way? When we ask according to His will. His will limits and guides and shapes my requests. If you are learning a computer program and you are told to use it *according* to the manual they give you – then the manual limits what you enter in that program. When you are in a court case, you can only claim and defend *according* to the law. The law of the Republic is what you use.

So true prayer, confident prayer, prayer which brings God's favourable attention, is prayer shaped by God's will. When you ask what God wills, what God desires, what God wants, you are asking in a way that will bring God's ear. When you ask in line with what pleases God, then God is pleased to answer.

It's quite possible to ask in a way which is not God's will.

*James 4:3 <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

Put simply, selfish prayer is not prayer that God answers. God is not a service organisation where He is obligated to answer people because they pray to Him. Recently a bank in our country ran the campaign “Ask once”. Supposedly, you phone, give them your request, and their promise to you is that they will attend to it because you asked once. God is not like that bank. He is not obligated to answer at all when we come to Him and expect Him to be a means to my own ends. Nobody uses God. God is not a supplier, a service provider, a servant of my desires. You cannot get God to do things for you. No one manipulates God. Using God, manipulating God, this is not prayer. Prayer is prayer according to His will.

So the big question of this passage is what does it mean to ask according to God's will? A large part of the answer is found earlier in this letter in chapter 3.

*1 John 3:21-22 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. <sup>22</sup> And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.*

Now if we put 1 John 3:22 and 1 John 5:14 side-by-side, we're going to see some interesting parallels. We're going to see whatever we ask and we receive in both those passages. In 5:14, the condition is “if we ask according to His will”. In 3:22, the reason is given as “because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight”. What does this tell us? Asking according to God's will is closely tied to doing God's will. You want to ask according to God's will? Then become consumed with the idea of doing God's will.

We often think that God's will is a strange, hidden thing that no one can know or do. Well, can I show you five ways in which you can know and do God's will?

### ***Be saved***

*2 Peter 3:9 <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering*

toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

### ***Be surrendered to God's control.***

Romans 12:1-2 *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.* <sup>2</sup> *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

### ***Be Spirit-filled***

Ephesians 5:17-18 *Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* <sup>18</sup> *And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,*

### ***Be sanctified.***

1 Thessalonians 4:1-3 *Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God;* <sup>2</sup> *for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.* <sup>3</sup> *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality;*

### ***Be satisfied in God.***

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 *Rejoice always,* <sup>17</sup> *pray without ceasing,* <sup>18</sup> *in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

### ***Be submitted to authority***

1 Peter 2:13-15 *Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme,* <sup>14</sup> *or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.* <sup>15</sup> *For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men --*

Now how will these things help you pray according to God's will? The answer is, when you are doing God's will, you grow in the understanding of God's will.

John 7:17 *"If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.*

Isn't it interesting that the path to God's will is not trying to find it out by getting more sources of information. The path to knowing God's will is doing the will of God as you know it already.

Proverbs 1:7 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

“The best way to know God’s will is to say “I will” to God. “

To know God's will you don't need better information. You need more submission.

We think God's will is a code we must crack; God says that it's right in front of you. Live it out. Love me. Put off the old. Put on the new. Be like Christ. The result will be you'll be pruned. God will clip off priorities and desires and ambitions and tastes and goals and values that you used to have. You just won't bring them to Him at all anymore. The kinds of things you will ask Him are the kinds of things that you've learned He loves.

This is why sin interrupts our prayers.

*Psalm 66:18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear.*

Sin perverts our desires. We ask for the wrong things.

Sin steals our confidence.

Sin robs us of assurance and boldness before God. We come with a soiled conscience and do not ask.

Sin soils our usefulness. We come to God as those whose prayers have too much static on the line – the static of our own selfishness.

When we love and live out God's will, it is as if we are tuning our whole lives to God's frequency. So when we start transmitting prayers to God, they are all on His frequency. If we pray according to His will, we have this audience with God. And now John draws an unbroken line from this kind of hearing by God to receiving what we ask for.

## **II. Our Guaranteed Answers From God**

*1 John 5:15 And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.*

This is quite a statement. If you have this hearing with God, you can know with certainty you have the requests you requested of Him. Not even *shall* have. Already have. It is as good as present-tense.

Once you pray according to God's will, you get this favourable hearing. And once you have this favourable hearing, you get what you asked for. John is making answered prayer inevitable when we pray this way. John is making answered prayer as inevitable as fruit in a healthy tree.

Let's imagine the will of God like the sap of a plant. If you are a branch in a tree, and you need that sap, what must you do? You must remain connected to the tree. You must not go your own way. You must not be independent. You must be connected and stay in communion with the tree. If you do that, the sap will flow, and you will bear leaves and fruit. Do you know that's exactly how Jesus illustrated prayer?

**John 15:1-11** *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. <sup>5</sup> "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. <sup>7</sup> "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. <sup>8</sup> "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. <sup>9</sup> "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. <sup>10</sup> "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. <sup>11</sup> "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.*

Jesus says, take in my Word, and then stay in a close, obedient relationship with me. Don't go off on your own - stay in me, walk in me. If you do that, my will be in you, and the fruit you will bear will

be answered prayer.

*Psalm 37:4 <sup>4</sup> Delight yourself also in the LORD, And He shall give you the desires of your heart.*

And the more this happens, the more confidence you'll have, and the more you'll pray.

Do you see that we need more than prayer times. We need praying lives. Or perhaps to put it another way, we are to **be** living prayers. We are to love God's will, know God's will, do God's will, and pray God's will. God isn't reluctant to answer prayer.

*Matthew 7:7-11 Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. <sup>9</sup> "Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> "Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? <sup>11</sup> "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!*

But God also cannot violate His own will. Prayer is not getting God to do our will

"Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man's will done in heaven, but for getting God's will done on earth," wrote Robert Law.

George Mueller said: "Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance. It is laying hold of God's willingness." (Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. )

When we love and live God's will, answered prayer is an inevitability in our lives. We will know better how to pray. We will have clean and bold consciences. We will be in a place in our lives where it is helpful and safe for God to bless us without our stumbling over His gifts. We will be clean and useful instruments in God's hands.

By way of application, John now gives us an extreme example.

### **III. An Extreme Example**

*1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.*

John here gives us an example: Should one Christian see another professing Christian sinning, he can apply these principles. According to God's will, a Christian who is not sinning a sin to death, should not die. Therefore, the Christian prays according to God's will and life is given for that Christian.

Now what is this sin to death? Well, we'll try to cover that next time. The point here is the prayer. The Christian prays according to God's will and is answered.

If it wasn't a sin to death, weren't they going to live anyway? Yes, so long as Christians prayed. Because part of God's will is the act of praying.

I think the reason John has given us this example is the fact that asking for someone to be saved from death is a rather significant prayer. When Abraham pled for Sodom, that if there were only 10 righteous, that God should spare them, this was asking for life for people. God answered this

prayer. And if God will definitely answer such a significant, literally life-or-death prayer, then He will answer all the requests, not as urgent or consequential as someone's life or death.

If we're going to sum it up, it's going to sound like this: your prayer life is as good as the life that surrounds your prayers. The life between your prayers determines your prayer life. So if your experience of prayer is something like Joanne's – here's where you start. Make the will of God your passion. Love it. Read it. Learn it. Obey it – and then pray it.