

Sure Life and Prayer

I John 5:13-21

John has given us five certainties of the Christian faith, and it's a powerful climax to all that he has said already in this letter to his brethren addressing their certainty and assurance of their life in Christ.

John 5:13-21, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him. If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."

John is concluding this letter with a discussion of five certainties that we can have in our Christian faith. He hammers these certainties home by using the word 'know', seven times in these verses.

The first is the certainty of the assurance that we have eternal life, knowing that we are born of God, knowing that we are saved and have partaken of salvation that Christ has purchased for us through faith. This first certainty is found in verse 13: *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

The **second** certainty is found in verse 14 that relates to the certainty of answered prayer. *"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him"*

The **third** certainty is found in verse 18, “*We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him.*” It doesn't mean we'll never fall, and it certainly does not mean that we'll not struggle with temptation - perhaps all the more because of it - but we will know victory, and we ought to know it.

Fourthly in verse 19 he says again: “*We know that we are children of God and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one*”. The certainty is that the Christian belongs to God, he is owned of God.

The **fifth** and final certainty that Jesus Christ is the true God “*We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life*”. That had been doubted by some of the false teachers that had been infiltrating and influencing the church at Ephesus.

This letter of 1 John is a breath of fresh air in that it is filled with absolute certainty. In contrast, there are not a lot of certainties about the time in which we live. Moral absolutes are not believed in any longer; spiritual convictions are frowned on and viewed as dubious; and to be able to say 'I know something', is seen as blatant arrogance, pride, or presumption. At worst certainties are seen as ignorance, and at best they are viewed by those in our world as naive.

Even some Christians will say that there are not many things that we can be certain about in this life. Today we live in a 'focus group' mentality. We hear about it in politics. Politicians put the feelers out and see what people are thinking, what they want, and then they construct their policy to give people what they want. That relativism is beginning to influence religion and, of course, Christianity is not exempt.

Very quickly, perhaps even without realizing it, we can begin to relate our beliefs to what others believe, think or feel. John was living in a similar age. The Docetists, who eventually became the Gnostics, were bending to Greek philosophy and other influences upon religions that were around them - the fashionable, intellectually appreciated. But John said to his brethren: “No, the Christian should not bend to such pressure”. What Christians say they believe should not be hazy or vague in their portrayal and understanding of what is truth concerning the revelation of Jesus Christ and the truths that flow from that truth. John is telling us in this epistle of certainty; he tells his people that their Christian claims ought never to be ill-defined or imprecise. They are absolute! They are definite!

The Christian faith is not one of speculation, but of certainty. We will consider the certainties that John concludes with in his letter.

We see from 5:13 that this letter was written to those who already had faith in Jesus, *'These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God'*. His purpose for writing was so that those Christians might know assurance, and the great Christian sureties and certainties that come from that. What are some of the things we can learn from this text?

First, John tells his audience that they can know they are saved. This assurance of our salvation is based on and in the timeless truth and the changeless facts of who Jesus Christ is, of what He accomplished through His work on the cross and of His great resurrection power. Christianity is unique in this claim: the faith of God in the Bible transcends all other faiths. The cults and the religions in our world cannot give the certainty of eternal life. The fact of the matter is that the great spectrum of spiritual belief in this world really has no footing at all other than their works or blind fateful speculation. They don't have a firm footing to be able to say, "I am sure that my soul is secure".

This letter was written to give assurance to those who truly believed, but it was also written to expose those who may have false security. The best thing that the church can do for Christians is to assure them of God's saving grace and everlasting love. The worst thing the church can do for the lost is to convince them that they are saved when they are not. We rejoice in the assurance that we have the certainty of eternal life, but it would be a travesty if we were to tell people that they were saved if they weren't! This letter was written to give assurance to those who truly believed, but it was also written to expose those who may have false security

Secondly, John explains the certainty of answered prayer as one of the benefits of our faith in Jesus. Verse 14-15 says, *"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him"*. The word 'confidence' in verse 14 could also be translated 'boldness' - this is the boldness that we have in Him. This word 'confidence' has already been used twice in 2: 28, and in 4:17 regarding the confidence of the believer at the judgment because we are clothed in the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. But he also uses it on a third occasion in chapter 3 regarding this issue of prayer that he is now coming to. If you look at 3:2, 22: *'Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, then*

we have confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight'. What is important to answered prayer is that we have a clear conscience, not only with God but with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

He comes again to the certainty of answered prayer. The topic of prayer may be one of the hardest things that we find in our Christian life. Certainly, if it's not the hardest, it's the area where most of us have doubts from time to time. We ask questions like: 'I'm praying about this thing, but can God really do it?' Another is 'Does He really hear what I'm saying? I don't feel like He hears. Will He answer? Does God answer prayer today?' What John is telling us is that if we have the assurance of our salvation, there outflows from that - or at least there ought to - a firm and unwavering conviction that God hears and answers our prayer.

We ought to have, because of our faith in Jesus, a boldness - not an arrogance or flaunting oneself in the presence of God, or some brazen attitude before the Lord but the sense of freedom of speech - a boldness and a confidence so that when we come to speak with God, whether publicly or privately, that we are uninhibited, we are open; even a sense of being relaxed, not informal or over familiar, but a baring our heart before God that speaks of intimacy.

Hebrews 4:14-16 speaks of this: *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

If we trust someone, we will open up our heart to them. We will speak confidently to them because we believe that they only want the best for us. We trust them, we understand their character, we know their motivation - and it is the same with God: we ought to have the same boldness and confidence, because we know what He says in His word, that His plans are to save us, and that all things will work together for good to them that love God. We know His character, that He is holy. We know His motives; we know that they're always pure, because He loves us as sons and daughters.

So what John is saying is just what Hebrews 11:6 says, *'And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.* Faith will manifest itself

in boldness in prayer that believes that we are accepted with God, that God hears us, and ultimately that God will answer our prayers. If we come with such certainty in faith, what certainties can be ours in prayer? He hears us, and we have whatsoever we ask.

What does this mean? First, 'He hears us' literally means 'He answers us'. Secondly, 'We have whatsoever we ask' literally means that 'We get immediately what we ask for'. There are conditions and qualifications other than just simple faith for answered prayer in the text, but let's not miss the clarity of John's words, because I think we often do. What John is saying here is just what he recorded in the life of Jesus when He said: 'Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it'.

Do we believe that? In John 15:7 He said similar words: *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.*

Daniel 10:12-13 *"Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. ¹³ But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia*

The context of the story is that Daniel prayed and fasted for three weeks regarding a battle that God had told him about. Daniel was not aware of the battle that was going on in the heavens - as Paul tells us in Ephesians 6: *'We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness in heavenly places'*. As far as Daniel was concerned his prayer wasn't answered until the twenty-first day, but God said: *'From the very first day that you lifted your voice to me, Daniel, I heard, I answered your prayer, I dispensed Michael the archangel - and though he got into a battle on the way with the prince of Persia, it didn't alter the fact that the first day you prayed I heard and I answered immediately'*.

Someone might say: 'Well, that's only one instance, and certainly it was immediate for Daniel, but it was not immediate in his experience' - and I agree with you, and it's not in ours either. But are we missing the fact that we are engaged in a spiritual battle! But from God's perspective there is no "prayer pending" tray. God does not have all of our requests piled up in a file, working through them one by one. That's

not the way God works! Maybe the problem is that we don't understand that we're in spiritual battles.

We also need to understand that confidence in prayer must be met by the conditions of the certainty of prayer. What are the conditions? First is that prayer is based on the Christian faith. 'We have to be confident', verse 14, in 'confidence concerning Him, confident toward Him' - we have to believe in Him and have the faith of Jesus Christ. But then he says that we ought to ask, verse 14, 'anything according to His will' - and that is always the regulator concerning answered prayer. In 3:22 that we read he gives the same qualification: we get what we ask because we obey His commands - another qualification. Not only praying according to God's will, but living according to God's will. Even in those portions that we read from the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels, He qualifies and gives the conditions of answered prayer: 'Pray in my name', 'Remain in me and my words in you' - and ask what you will, and so on. You have to be obeying and living in Christ, and He in you - and therefore you will pray according to God's will that is found in His word.

Prayer is not a blank check, where you just ask for anything and everything. 'Prayer is asking God for things which He has promised to give' - that is profound. What kind of parent you be if you indulged your child by giving them everything they wanted? What kind of children would you raise? Some might say: 'But it says we have what we have desired of Him' - **but here's the key: it's after our desires have fallen in line with His will, after we are abiding with Him in His presence, getting into this fellowship that John talks about.** When we see it that way, and we can only see it through faith, then we understand the meaning of this text. Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of God's willingness. Where is His willingness found? In His word, that's where His will is found. We've got to get into God's word, and with boldness and confidence plead our faith before the throne of God. Those are the qualifications: confident in faith, but praying according to God's will - and we will have what we ask if our desires reflect His desires in His word.

The third thing our praying should be is found in verses 16 and 17 and that is it should be for others. *'If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death'*. What John was talking about is the Christians who were failing on occasion into sin - not those who are living a lifestyle of constant sin. They were the false teachers. They weren't brothers at all, they were unconverted. But those who occasionally stumbled (and we've all done that), the rest of the brethren were to pray for them -

and this is a promise, if you pray for those brothers who stumble on occasion, they will be restored! That's a promise of God - you might have to work it through, but perhaps the reason why our prayers are not answered from time to time is because of what James says in James 4:3 that we don't get what we ask because we ask that we might consume it upon our lusts. In other words, we can be selfish in our prayers.

He also makes clear that there is a certain prayer that won't be answered. If you pray for someone who has sinned unto death, verse 17: 'All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death', in verse 16.

Now the great issue, 'What is this sin unto death? Some people say it's the unpardonable sin that Jesus mentioned in Matthew chapter 12: *'wherefore I say unto you, all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come'*. The unpardonable sin, something that God can't forgive, was attributing the ministry of Jesus, which was also attested to by the working of the Holy Spirit, was that the devil was behind everything that Jesus did rather than the Spirit of God. Some scholars say that can sin can still be committed today by people who refuse to listen to the Holy Spirit's testimony through the word that testifies that Jesus is the Son of God.

Keeping this statement in context with the letter, could it be that this sin unto death is the denial of saving truth through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the salvation that He has procured? It could be that John is singling out those who had walked out of the community of God's people and openly denied the doctrine of salvation and the true nature of Jesus. No matter what they may have once believed, they had put themselves beyond the reach of the Saint's prayers.

A similar teaching is found in Hebrews 6:4-6, *It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace*. In this text, the author is talking about those who were once saved, and had walked away from their salvation (Christ) and had walked so far from God that they were no longer able to repent. Notice that is not God's ability to forgive that is the issue, but their inability to repent that is the issue. I like the

way Dr. Lightfoot at ACU said it, “It is not God’s forgiveness mechanism that is broken, it is the sinners repenting device that’s broken”. Just as a starving human body, there will come a time that the digestive system begins to reject food, and eventually it will become impossible to digest food and to live. The same is true if one, after receiving salvation from the Christ, if they walk away, refusing the offers of God's grace, they will lose the ability to repent and return.

We have the assurance of our salvation. John does not want us to think that we cannot know if we are saved. But with that assurance is always the opportunity to turn back and give it up. But why would someone want to return to a life of doubt, confusion and uncertainties? And why give up the knowledge that the creator of this universe hears, and answers our prayers? The only thing I can think of is that they love sin more than they love God.