

“Be Confident, Christian”

I want you to be sure. I want you to know for certain. I want you to have confidence to act. But there are going to be challenges, many challenges. There will be people who tell you that I don't know the real truth, or at least that I don't know the whole truth. They will say that you can't trust the Bible. They will say that people don't rise from the dead. They'll say that instead of listening to my advice about godly living you should just go ahead and do whatever you want to do.

Sound familiar? These are some of the important points that John was trying to get across to Christian congregations when he wrote the letter, the epistle, that we call 1 John. John was a beloved disciple, perhaps the closest friend to Jesus during his earthly ministry. John was an eyewitness to sermons and instruction that Jesus presented. He was an eyewitness to Jesus' death by crucifixion. And he was an eyewitness to the risen and living Jesus.

As an apostle, God put John into a position to offer certainty to early Christians. But the certainty that he preached and taught found opposition from false teachers. Satan did not sit quietly as the Church grew. He attacked it. People claimed that Christians needed deeper knowledge than what they had from the Bible or even from Jesus himself. They claimed that it was impossible to rise from the dead, and so that even Jesus had not risen. Some taught that Christians needed to follow strict rules to be saved, while others taught that since only spiritual things really matter, anyone should be able to do whatever they wanted to do.

And you may have noticed that many of the false teachings from John's day have been recycled and repackaged to fit our setting today. That is precisely why we turn to the last chapter of 1 John to hear the apostle's encouragement. He says, “Be Confident, Christian. You have eternal life, and you have the answers to your prayers.”

Our text begins, **“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.”** For four chapters plus, John has been writing about how Christians obey God's commands out of love for God. He wrote, **“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”** (1 John 4:11). He encouraged his hearers to watch out for false teachers and to remain in Christ. In this final chapter, he touches on many of the same issues as one last reminder.

Everything that he had written was so that people might have certainty. John wanted his listeners to know that they had eternal life. He didn't want them to hope that they had done enough. He didn't want them to think or assume that God loved them. He didn't want them to guess that one day God would probably let them into heaven. He wanted them to know.

And that sort of certainty is only found in Jesus. John was writing to people **“who believe[d] in the name of the Son of God.”** The love that God has shown to us he showed by sending his own Son to die for our sins. **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16). But the false teachers of John's day were taking the focus off of Jesus. They were putting the focus on what people did, or some secret and special knowledge. Today, too, there are many, both inside and outside of the visible Christian church, who would take our focus off of Jesus Christ. They would have us focus on the things we do, or the secrets we know, or they might even force us to question whether we really have faith. John instead tells us about Jesus and tells us that we can have confidence in him, confidence that eternal life is ours.

And as surely as we have eternal life, so surely we have the answers to our prayers. John continues: **“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.”**

What an amazing promise this is! We can have confidence not only that God has given us eternal life, but also that he will answer our prayers. John actually walks us through our confident prayer life in two steps. First, God hears us when we ask according to his will. Second, if God hears us, he will answer. We have the answers to our prayers. And those very facts, that God hears and answers our prayers, move us to pray persistently, as has been described in our other Scripture readings today.

But we don't always pray in this way, nor do we always recognize the answer to our prayers. What I mean is this: how often do we pray for something specific only to later be discouraged when it doesn't turn out the way we wanted, the way we prayed. Or how often do we hear others try to discredit our faith because they insist that prayers don't work. And they have very little trouble thinking of examples of the failure of prayers. Someone might say, "I prayed that God would heal my grandmother's cancer, but instead she died. Why didn't God hear my prayer?" Others say, "Well, then, I'll pray for a million dollars, but I won't get it, will I?" And some troubled Christians will get caught in the middle, saying, "I want to believe that God answers prayers, but I just don't know."

So let's consider some of the prayers we find in the Bible. The Apostle Paul says that he prayed for God to remove from his life some difficulty or challenge. He called it a "thorn in the flesh." Three times he prayed that God would take it away. But God didn't. Instead, God taught Paul that his weaknesses made God's strength even more apparent, and that even Paul's difficulty could serve God's glory. Paul wanted what was best in God's eyes, and that is exactly what he received.

Abraham in the Old Testament was concerned for his nephew Lot, who was living in the wicked city of Sodom. God told Abraham that he was going to destroy the city, but Abraham prayed that he would reconsider. "What if fifty righteous people are in the city?" he said, "You won't destroy it then, will you?" And he continued praying until he had received God's assurance that he would spare Sodom if ten righteous people were in the city. By the next morning, the city had been destroyed. God didn't do what Abraham had asked, but God did answer Abraham's prayer. Before Sodom was destroyed, angels went in and ushered Lot and his family out. They were spared, just as Abraham wanted.

The key to understanding the spectacular promise from God in our sermon text this morning is to determine what it means to pray according to God's will. This promise is similar to the one Jesus made in John 14:13 when he said, **"I will do whatever you ask in my name."** To pray in Jesus' name or according to God's will begins with believing in God. As believers, we have access to God in prayer because through Jesus the sins that otherwise stood in our way have been removed.

As Christians, we also want to pattern our lives and our thinking after what God wants for us and for those around us. And in his Word, in the Bible, he tells us what he wants. He wants **"all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth"** (1 Timothy 2:3). He wants us to **"love one another"** (John 13:34). He wants us to **"Forgive as the Lord forgave [us]"** (Colossians 3:13). And we could go on. To understand what we ought to pray for, we look for God's will as he tells us about it in the Bible.

In the fascinating account that we read in our first lesson, we heard how Jacob wrestled with God and then refused to let him go until he blessed him. Of course, blessing Jacob was exactly what God wanted to do. Jacob had received the same promise as his ancestor Abraham, that the Savior would be born from his descendants. God answered his prayer.

Of course, we don't always know what God's will is for a particular situation or occasion. God doesn't spell out for us in detail exactly what our lives should look like or what decisions we ought to make. We do well, then, to include in our prayers that we do want God's will to be done above our own. That's exactly what Jesus did when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed that God would remove his impending suffering, but only if that was his will. God's will was that Jesus would die for the sins of the whole world. Jesus' prayer was answered, and God's will was done. And we are blessed because of it.

We are blessed with the certainty that our sins are forgiven, that God hears our prayers according to his will, and when he hears them, he gives us the answers. Be confident. Pray. Pray persistently.

Sermon Text: 1 John 5:13–15 (NIV84)

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> This is the confidence we have in approaching God: 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 what we asked of him.