

# 10

## Prayer

*1 John 5:13–17*

**J**ohn's first letter—the letter we are studying in this book—does not stand alone. John wrote another book called the Gospel of John, and the two need to be read together. The Gospel of John and the First Letter of John are unified in their message and theology, but John writes each with a different purpose in mind. Taken together, John's Gospel and his first letter complement and reinforce each other.

If you remember from all the way back in the introduction to this book, we looked at how John's primary goal in his Gospel is to evangelize—that is, to tell the good news of Jesus to people who do not yet believe. He does not reveal this purpose until near the very end of his Gospel, where he writes the following:

<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup>but these are written *so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* (John 20:30–31)

So, John tells us that his purpose for writing this Gospel was to introduce us to Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God so that by believing in Jesus, we may have life in his name. For

## THAT YOU MAY KNOW

this reason, the Gospel of John narrates the story of Jesus, telling us about his disciples, his teachings, his miracles, his enemies, his crucifixion, his death, and his resurrection—everything we need to know and believe to be saved.

John wrote this letter, however, for a different purpose. Instead of writing a letter to evangelize those who do not yet believe, he wrote it to perfect and strengthen the faith of those who already believe in Jesus. As in his Gospel, the Apostle John does not reveal his purpose for writing until the end of 1 John. Here, John uses strikingly similar terms to what he wrote in his purpose statement from the Gospel of John:

These things I wrote to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, to those of you who believe in the name of the Son of God. (1 John 5:13)

John's Gospel was written "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," but John's letter was written "to those of you who believe in the name of the Son of God." The goal of John's Gospel was "that by believing you may have life in his name," but John's letter was written "that you may know that you have eternal life."

In other words, the Apostle John wrote 1 John as a primer for disciples. His goal in this letter is to help people know and love Jesus better who already believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God, so the entire letter is filled with warnings against falling away and instructions on how Christians ought to behave on the basis of the love of God we have already come to know.

This doesn't mean 1 John has no value for non-Christians. I have personally seen someone come to know Jesus through studying 1 John. Because of the way 1 John gives such a clear picture of what lifelong, faithful discipleship after Jesus should look like, people who do not yet believe in Jesus can learn a lot about Christianity from studying this letter. Likewise, the Gospel of John has extraordinary relevance for disciples of

Jesus, so it's important we don't make the mistake of pushing this generalization too far.

What this means, though, is that all the subjects John tackles in 1 John—his explanation of the gospel, his instructions about love, his insistence on truth, and even his encouragements about perseverance, persecution, and discernment—have been written to teach those of us who believe in the name of the Son of God that we indeed have eternal life. John has a practical purpose in mind for gaining this knowledge, but for now, let's take a closer look at what John is telling us in verse 13.

### **CONFIDENCE IN ETERNAL LIFE**

Eternal life is a serious matter to John. He does not promise it to everyone claiming any kind of affiliation with Christianity at all but only to believers in the name of the Son of God. John has no tolerance for a vague, Christian-ish faith. In the previous verse, John had just written, “The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12), and he means it. Only in the Son do we find life, and only in his name do we find salvation.

When the biblical writers talk about the “name” of God, they are referring to his reputation, his character, and his deeds. Most of all, they are talking about the way in which God demonstrated his free grace, love, and mercy toward us. God so loved the world, the Scriptures tell us, that he fulfilled his ancient promise to save his people by nothing short of sending his own Son into the world to die for our sins and to rise from the dead in victory over sin, death, and the devil. Jesus has now received all authority in heaven and on earth, and he reigns at the right hand of his Father in heaven. John's phrase “the name of the Son of God” here is a reference to this full gospel message.

This is one of the reasons I love 1 John so much: the apostle holds the gospel of Jesus high throughout his entire

## THAT YOU MAY KNOW

letter. Everything he writes points us to Jesus, the eternal Son of the Father who became man, whose blood was shed to cleanse us from our sins. The Son of God actually became the sacrificial appeasement to his Father for us so that we would escape condemnation! The Son of God himself drank his Father's foaming cup of wrath, and in doing so he gave up his own life so that we could live.

*The one who has the Son has life.*

This doctrine is not something reserved for uptight, dry theologians to write boring books about it. Rather, this is the message that embodies all of our hope and confidence in this life and the next.

And so, John is writing so that those of us who believe in the name of the Son of God (i.e., we who believe the gospel) may know that we have eternal life. John wants us to have a deep, confident, joyful knowledge that the eternal life Jesus offers is ours through faith, despite the fact that all through this letter, he has written several statements that very possibly might cause us to doubt our salvation: "The one practicing sin is from the devil, for from the beginning the devil has been sinning" (1 John 3:8); "But whoever has the livelihood of the world and sees his brother having need and closes his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17); "If someone says, 'I love God,' but he hates his brother, he is a liar: for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). Who could measure up to such high standards?

But in 1 John 5:13, the apostle is explaining that he has not written those warnings to cause believers to doubt. Instead, he writes these things so that we who believe in the name of the Son of God may know we have eternal life. He wants to give us assurance of our salvation and our eternal life! In the face of the antichrists who preach a different, false gospel, John wants us to know with certainty that we may find restful, confident assurance by putting our faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

So, we need to hear John's message of gospel comfort in

this passage. If you are someone who struggles with assurance so that you cannot seem to get the doubting feelings of your heart to line up with the gospel's promise that Jesus loves you, then these verses are for you: "The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I wrote to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, to those of you who believe in the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:12–13). Meditate upon these verses and claim them through faith. Believe the promise that if you have the Son of God, you do have life—even eternal life! Satan wants you to wander around endlessly in your doubts, because through doubt he can take your eyes off of Jesus and destroy you in your despair.

The truth of the gospel is this: you have never been—and you will never be—worthy of the salvation Jesus offers, and yet Jesus has made you worthy through his own worthiness. Stop trying to find something of your own that you can offer to God in the hopes that he will accept you. If you have Jesus, then you have eternal life, because whoever has the Son has life.

### **CONFIDENCE LEADS TO PRAYER**

After assuring his readers that he has written his letter to confirm that they have eternal life if they believe in the name of the Son of God, John begins to unfold what this confidence looks like, practically speaking:

<sup>14</sup>And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask something according to his will, he hears us. <sup>15</sup>And if we have come to know that he hears us *in* whatever we ask, *then* we have come to know that we have the requests that we have asked from him. (1 John 5:14–15)

John wants us to see prayer as the practical result of our confidence. A confident Christian is not arrogant or dismissive of people who do not yet believe in Jesus. A confident Christian

is a praying Christian. If we genuinely believe we have life in the Son of God, then we will claim, utilize, and depend upon that life in Christ through our communion with him in prayer.

We often struggle to understand this principle because we share a common misconception about prayer. Too often, we think about prayer almost exclusively in terms of asking for a list of things—finding a new job, being healed from a sickness, discerning God’s will for our lives, and so on. It is not wrong to ask for any of those things, but the confident prayer that John writes about here is so much more than that.

Prayer is not a spiritual shopping list. Prayer is direct access into the throne room of God Almighty in the highest heavens. Our prayers bring us into true worship. Through prayer, we request and receive forgiveness, according to the shed blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. In prayer, we plead for God’s kingdom to come to earth, as in heaven. Prayer brings us into close communion with God so that we can pray in boldness, joy, and purpose, knowing that God has made us alive to such a privileged life of prayer. We are no longer slaves who merely do God’s bidding but friends who may petition God to intervene in this world—and by doing so, we could alter the course of history.

John does not give us a blank check to ask for anything that our selfish hearts might desire. Our confidence is a great privilege that we should never abuse. Instead, John promises us that “if we ask something according to his will, he hears us” (verse 14). The confidence we have before God gives us the right to pray according to God’s will, and not according to our own will.

So, how do we go about determining God’s will in our prayers? We shouldn’t go to the opposite extreme of fearful paralysis as we wait to discern God’s will perfectly before coming to him in prayer, because prayer is the place where God teaches us his will. John Stott helpfully explains:

Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will upon God, or bending His will to ours, but the prescribed way of subordinating our will to His. It is by prayer that we seek God's will, embrace it and align ourselves with it. Every true prayer is a variation on the theme "Thy will be done."<sup>1</sup>

Part of our confidence is that God will not abandon us to our sinful, selfish cravings but that he will actually transform our hearts while we pray, teaching us more and more to love the life that is in the Son of God. Just as my wife and I have to train our young children not to eat rocks on the playground but to enjoy a balanced diet of good foods instead, so also God is training us to desire and to pray for things that are truly good.

And as God teaches us to pray according to his will, we learn to pray with confidence that God will unwaveringly grant us what we ask according to his will. God loves to give good gifts to his children, and God gives us prayer not only so we can ask for and receive God's good gifts but also so he can teach us what to ask for in the first place.

### **PRAYING FOR THE PRODIGAL BROTHER**

In 1 John 5:13–15, John has so far explained that the confidence we have about our eternal life ought to translate into prayer. Now, in verses 16–17, John gives us a specific application for this prayer:

<sup>16</sup>If someone sees his brother sinning a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life, to those *whose* sinning *does* not *lead* toward death. *There* is a sin *leading* toward death; I do not say that he should pray concerning this. <sup>17</sup>All unrighteousness is sin, and *there* is a sin not *leading* toward death. (1 John 5:16–17)

Here, John applies the general principle of prayer to a specific prayer for reclaiming a wandering, prodigal brother. John always uses "brother" to refer to a believer in his letter,

## THAT YOU MAY KNOW

and so the situation John has in mind here describes one believer observing a fellow believer who is falling into sin. The believer who observes his brother's sin should neither resort to gossip nor ignore what is happening. Instead, he or she should pray for the wandering believer with the confidence and assurance that God will restore life, faith, and obedience to this prodigal.

Praying for someone who begins heading down a path toward sin is a fairly natural response for believers. It is frustrating and painful to see a fellow believer starting to choose sin over Jesus. Suddenly, we realize how incapable we are of altering the course of someone who is pursuing hard after sin. Only God's Holy Spirit can change hearts, so we have no choice but to pray once a fellow believer's sin is exposed.

This is where the context of this passage is important: John is writing about confident prayer. We are not praying to a god that we otherwise do not know, hoping against hope that someone, somewhere will hear us and answer our prayers. Again, this doesn't mean God will do everything we ask him to in the exact way we ask him to do it. Rather, it means we are praying to the God who loves us and who has granted us eternal life, even though granting us eternal life meant that the Son of God had to become human and die on a cross for us. We are confident that he hears us and he will grant our prayers according to his will—even if he has to change what we pray for along the way.

John does include one qualification, however. John tells us that we can pray confidently for prodigal believers and that God will restore life to those prodigal believers, but John also specifies that he is talking about believers who are "sinning a sin not leading to death" and then again that God will grant life "to those whose sinning does not lead toward death" (verse 16). So what do these phrases mean?

Based on the context of this entire letter, the "sin leading to death" is most likely a persistent rejection of Jesus as the



Christ and the Son of God, which inevitably leads to a sinful separation from the church of faithful believers (see 1 John 3:18–27 and 4:1–6). This interpretation is debated among biblical scholars, but given the fact that John has warned multiple times in this letter that we should not follow the antichrists and false prophets who “went out from us, but... were not from us” (1 John 2:19), it seems likely that this is what John means by “a sin leading to death.”

In regard to such people, John writes, “There is a sin leading toward death; I do not say that he should pray concerning this” (verse 16). John warns us that we cannot pray with the same level of confidence for those who are committing this sin that leads to death. Still, we should not read more into John than what he says here. There are two cautions about this passage that we ought to keep in mind.

First, while John enigmatically says, “There is a sin leading toward death; I do not say that he should pray concerning this,” we should keep in mind that he does not forbid us from praying for those who commit the sin that leads to death. I point this out so we aren’t hindered in our prayers by a concern about praying for the wrong people. God may, at some point, instruct us to stop praying for a particularly hard-hearted person, just as he told Jeremiah to stop praying for the hard-hearted Israelites, but that is his business. We should pray until God tells us not to.<sup>2</sup>

Second, this text is meant to lead us to confident prayer and not to obsessive speculation on what the sin leading to death might be. John’s point is that praying for such a brother is the will of God (“if we ask something according to his will he hears us”) and that God has made special promises to restore such wanderers through our prayers—with the warning that God will occasionally direct us not to pray for them any longer. Praying for the prodigal believer is the rule; not praying on the basis of the sin leading to death is the exception.

It is important that we keep our focus on prayer, since we frequently make praying for the restoration of wandering believers too complicated for ourselves. We hope problems

## THAT YOU MAY KNOW

will go away on their own. We worry that we might offend our friends. We justify our non-action by Jesus' warnings to avoid hypocrisy (Matthew 7:1–5). Or, we simply don't take the time to listen to the hurts, doubts, or struggles of our fellow believers.

Throughout John's entire letter he has been preaching the necessity of loving one another, and now he outlines one of the key ways we demonstrate such love: prayer. God's will (1 John 5:14) is that we would love his other children so deeply that we would not cease to pray fervently for their souls, to prevent them from further chasing after sin.

But do keep this in mind: typically, when we begin to pray for our friends in this way, God starts to call us to play a role in confronting and leading them back to Jesus. Thankfully, God works in our hearts as we pray to wipe away the pride and judgmental attitudes that Jesus condemned so that we can proclaim nothing but the gospel when we approach our friends: "I'm not worthy, and you aren't worthy, but Jesus died for us anyway. Don't make shipwreck of your faith. Don't wander into sin leading to death. Repent and believe the gospel again!"

In fact, the text of verse 16 suggests that God will use us, in and through our confident prayers, as the vessels through which he grants life to our fellow believers. There is some debate on this, but I would paraphrase verse 16 this way: "If someone sees his brother sinning a sin not leading to death, he [the one who sees his brother] shall ask, and he [God] will give him [the one who sees his brother] life *for the sake of* those who sin the sins that do not lead to death."

The second "him" ("...and God will give him") and the phrase "to those whose sinning does not lead toward death" are probably not referring to the same person, because the former is singular and the latter is plural. Greek doesn't necessarily always follow that rule, but the grammar here is strong evidence for the interpretation I am outlining. God gives one person (singular) life, and he gives it on behalf of

those (plural) who commit sins that do not lead to death. The best explanation is that God intends us to pray confidently because he plans on using us as the vessels of conveying life to prodigal believers. R. C. H. Lenski writes:

Here is a brother that is living in some sin (present, durative participle), and one of us (singular) sees it. Knowing what we all know about asking God and about God's hearing us, one of us asks God, and God gives this one life for this brother, "for those sinning"; the plural indicates that there will be others that sin from time to time.... What God does when he gives life for these sinners is to strengthen their damaged, declining spiritual life, which they have not as yet lost.<sup>3</sup>

God is calling us to deep love for our neighbor that will not only commit to fervent prayer for their holiness but that will result in being the means through which God restores life to them. What a privilege to minister to one another in this way—God actually uses us, through our confident prayers, to restore and heal one another!

But remember, this great privilege of prayer is built on our confidence, and our confidence is built on our assurance of eternal life, which we find in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The one who has the Son has life, and everyone who has eternal life in the Son ought to demonstrate their confidence through prayer—especially prayer for prodigal believers.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. Has your understanding of what discipleship training should look like changed at all through studying 1 John? If so, how?
2. In what ways has 1 John helped you to know that you have eternal life?
3. When you feel confident, are you inclined to pray more or less? How does John's definition change how we normally think about confidence?
4. Who are the prodigal believers whom you need to pray for?

## THAT YOU MAY KNOW

in 4:3: “every spirit that does not confess *the* Jesus having come in the flesh is not from God” to differentiate the having-come-in-flesh Jesus from the various false versions of Jesus promoted by the prophets of the spirit of error.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 39.
4. Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 163.

### **CHAPTER 9: FAITH (1 JOHN 5:1–12)**

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 172.
2. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 103.
3. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 372.

### **CHAPTER 10: PRAYER (1 JOHN 5:13–17)**

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 185.
2. Jeremiah 7:16–18, 11:14, 14:11; see also Kruse, *Letters of John*, 193.
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 534–35, emphasis added.

### **CHAPTER 11: ETERNAL LIFE (1 JOHN 5:18–21)**

1. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 393.
2. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 194.
3. Appian, *The Civil Wars*, book 1, §120.
4. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 544–45.

### **CHAPTER 12: THE CASE STUDY OF THE ELECT LADY (2 JOHN)**

1. The only other New Testament letter that does not