HE HEARS US

1 John 5:13–21

Key Verses: 5:14,15

“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.”

In the previous passage John wrote that even our faith gives us the victory that overcomes the world. Now, in this final passage of his letter John encourages us to apply our faith to our prayers. Through this study may God help us each to know him better and grow in our prayer life.

In this letter John repeatedly has been teaching about who Jesus is, emphasizing the importance of believing in him (1:1–3,7; 2:1,22; 3:16, 23; 4:2,3,15; 5:1,5). Now he writes to those who do. Read verse 13. John wants believers to know that they have eternal life. Why does he say this? It’s because the Gnostics had been telling them they were lacking in knowledge. They’d been trying to make believers in Jesus feel inferior, and then, get them to follow *them*. John strongly contradicts them. He wrote back in verse 11: “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.” Now John wants believers to know with certainty that in Jesus they really do have eternal life. Why is this so important? If we realize we have eternal life in Christ, we have the best thing possible; we have everything we could ever need. We won’t wander after other things of this world, or other teachings that lead us away from Jesus. In this world it’s so easy to feel lacking or inferior, especially when we compare ourselves with others and see that we don’t have much money, status or security. But when we believe in Jesus, we already have eternal life! Are we really sure about this? Is this really our personal conviction? It needs to be.

John wants us not only to know that we have eternal life, but also, to have a whole new mindset about God himself. Read verses 14–15. John first mentions “approaching God.” For many people, God doesn’t seem real. Or God seems pretty remote and far removed from their real lives. For others, God seems inapproachable, mainly because they feel they’re too full of sin to really come to him. And all of us have probably felt that it’s futile to approach God, because we’re pretty insignificant, and God must have so many other way more important things to pay attention to than us. Some of us may have struggled because even though we prayed for something so sincerely and for so long, God never seemed to answer, and so we kind of gave up on approaching him anymore.

Let’s read verses 14,15 again. Here John says that we need the confidence that God hears us. On what basis can we have this confidence? John writes later in verse 20: “We also know 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 by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” Here the word “true” is repeated three times. In Greek the word actually means “real.” So the verse could be translated: “We also know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is real. And we are in him who is real by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the real God and eternal life.” We can have confidence in approaching God, first of all, because God is real. He’s the living God. People may think God is not real, or living as if God is not real. But God is *real*. Secondly, this verse tells us that we can have confidence in approaching God because Jesus has come and has given us the understanding to really know God. The Gnostics thought they had a monopoly on knowing God, and that people could know God only through them. But Jesus is the one who has come and given us understanding, to truly know God. We can have confidence in approaching God as we get to know Jesus better and better, because Jesus helps us get to know God more and more personally. Thirdly, we can have confidence in approaching God because, by his grace, we are “in his Son Jesus Christ.” When we’re in his Son Jesus Christ, we’re forgiven; we’re made right with God; we’re his dearly loved children. John wrote earlier: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the righteous one. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:1,2). Our confidence in approaching God starts with who Jesus is and what he does for us.

Earlier in this letter John already mentioned having confidence in approaching God: “This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him” (3:19–22). According to these verses, we can be confident when we realize that God is greater than us, greater than what our hearts may be saying to us, and greater than what we know. Also, we can be confident as we keep his commands and do what pleases him. If we’re doing our part to really love God and to really love our brothers and sisters, if we make it our goal in our daily lives to please God, then we can have confidence in approaching God. Ephesians 3:12 sums it all up simply: “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” May God give each of us this freedom and confidence in approaching God.

Let’s read verses 14,15 again. Here John repeats two times an amazing promise of God: “He hears us.” Throughout the Bible it’s repeated again and again that God listens to and answers prayer (e.g. Job34:28; Ps31:22; 34:17; 65:2; 69:33; Pr15:29; Jer29:12; 33:3; Jn9:31). God who is real is a God who listens to prayer; he hears us. He hears us because he loves us as his children. He is our loving heavenly Father who actually *wants* us to come and talk to him and tell him all that we have in our hearts, whatever it may be. How should this affect us in our real lives? Jesus said, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Mt7:11). Peter said it simply: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1Pe5:7). And Paul taught us: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Php4:6). If God really does hear us, then there’s no reason to bottle up our problems or feel helpless or lost, or fearful to make important decisions in our lives. Based on the truth that God hears us, Jesus taught: “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Lk11:9,10). Through prayer we exercise real faith in real life, and we start to see real answers from God.

We shouldn’t feel like “whatever” or “I don’t know” when we pray; we need conviction about our prayers. Read verse 15. If God really hears us, then we should believe he’ll answer our prayers. Jesus said plainly: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” If we don’t believe God is listening, or that he’ll never actually do what we’re asking, then what’s the point of praying? James wrote: “But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do” (Jas1:6–8). It’s so important when we pray, to actually believe God hears us.

But there’s an important qualifier in verse 14. John says, “…if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” Prayer isn’t a means by which we manipulate God to do what we want. If that were true, God would be like our genie in a bottle, and we would use him to get all kinds of foolish and harmful things we think we’ve got to have. Again, James wrote about this plainly: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (Jas4:3). Jesus taught us: “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt6:9,10). As God’s children, we should be praying for his will to be done. Why should we pray for God’s will and not our own? It’s because God knows way better than we do what is best. To pray for God’s will to be done, our way of thinking needs to be changed. Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” As we reject the world’s selfish, materialistic values and pursue God, God renews our minds and gives us discernment to see how wonderful his will is.

And what is God’s will? God’s will is generally revealed in the teachings of the Bible, where God tells us what he wants of us. God’s will is also in a sense mysterious and unknowable to us, so we just have to trust him. And God’s will is specific for each person. God’s will for one person may not be God’s will for another person. But there’s a general principle in God’s will. 1 Timothy 2:3,4 reads: “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” 2 Peter 2:9b says, “Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” God wants people everywhere to turn from their sins and turn to Jesus in faith, be saved and come to know the truth. In fact, God’s will is to save all peoples of all nations—especially all the people we’re not even thinking about.

To fulfill God’s will requires self-sacrifice and involves a great personal struggle. Jesus showed us the best example. He knew what God’s will for him was, to die on a cross, but in his humanity he really didn’t want to do it. As the hour approached, he told his disciples, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch” (Mk14:34). Then he came to God alone in prayer and said, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Lk22:42). In his humanity he was too weak to do it. But it says that an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him (Lk22:43). Then he kept praying “Yet not my will, but yours be done.” When he was in anguish, he prayed for this more earnestly, it says, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground (Lk22:44). When we pray earnestly to overcome our own desires and do God’s will, it is certain that God hears us, will answer and will help us.

John goes on to tell us something specific to pray for. Look at verse 16a. We should be watching out for our brothers and sisters. Our prayers shouldn’t be self-centered, but deeply concerned for our fellow believers. We should care about their spiritual lives. We should care about any sin that may start influencing them. When we see people going the wrong way, we should pray to God. Through our prayers, it says, God will give them life. How important prayer is to Christian fellowship! It helps us all to walk in the light of Jesus and have real fellowship with one another. Believing prayer helps people who are sick—both physically and spiritually—to get well; believing prayer helps people who’ve been wrong to be forgiven (Jas5:15).

In verses 16b,17 John says we should distinguish between the sin that leads to death and the sin that does not. Many people wonder what this might be. He’s not saying that we should take any kind of sin lightly. But he is saying that we probably shouldn’t even bother praying for the sin that leads to death. What is that? In the context of 1 John, it’s the sin of the Gnostics, who went out from the fellowship, denying the truth about Jesus (2:19; 4:1–3). In the light of the whole Bible, it’s the sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (Lk12:10), or the sin of apostasy, of turning away from Christ (Heb6:4–6; 10:29). Of course Jesus taught us to pray for those who persecute us (Mt5:44). But John’s point here is that we should focus our prayers on those who’re struggling to follow Jesus and may be failing sometimes and falling into sin.

In verses 18–20 John concludes this letter by summing up what we know. We know that people apart from Christ are under the control of the evil one. We know that people born of God don’t continue or persist in sin, because Jesus keeps them safe and helps them. We know that we are children of God through faith in Jesus. We know that Jesus has come and has given us understanding. We know the real God, and we are in him by being in his Son Jesus Christ. John especially wants us to remember what we know about Jesus, who keeps us safe, helps us know God and live in him.

Today we mainly thought about John’s encouragement on prayer. As God’s children, we should pray, because God is real, and because he hears us. May God help us know him better by getting to know Jesus more and more. May God help us to grow in practical faith that prays. May God help us especially pray to do his will, and pray for one another.