

Answered Prayer

A sermon in the series
Life in the Son

A sermon delivered Sunday Evening, March 17, 2013
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
by S. Michael Durham
© 2013 Real Truth Matters

I John 5:14-15

Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 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.

I'm not for sure any of us here would want to stake their life on their prayer life. If your life depended upon your prayers, how would you fare? I heard a story one time of a ship that was sinking in the middle of the ocean and the captain called out to all on board, "Does anybody here believe in prayer?" And one said, "Yes, Captain, I do." "Wonderful, we'll all put our life jackets on and you pray, because we're one life jacket short."

I'm not for sure I would want to be the one on that ship without a life jacket praying and depending only in prayer. But yet we ought to be. We ought to be confident not in our ability to pray but in our Father's ability to hear us and to respond. This is why John is confident that he can say what he says in our text tonight.

We're all quite uncomfortable about praying. A preacher called me this past Friday evening and we were talking about his walk with God. He was confessing to me how prayer is one of the most difficult things in his entire Christian life. If this is the case with the pastor, how much more the man or the woman in the world who doesn't have the time to pray and study like a preacher would? I hope tonight this text will encourage all of us to pray and not only to pray, but to pray with confidence and therefore pray more because we have such confidence.

I. SONSHIP CONFIDENCE IN PRAYER

A. The Confidence of a Son.

John is stating here the confidence of a Son and we know this by the context of the preceding verses. The context of these most famous two verses is a context of knowing the Father, knowing His Son and thereby knowing we have eternal life. Look at verse 12,

"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These

things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.”

John writes his epistle so that you can know that you are a child of God. How do I know I'm the son of God? Because I know Christ on an intimate, personal level and He is eternal life. Harken back to last Sunday's message, eternal life is the Son, Jesus Christ. Eternal life is not something He doles out to us, it is Himself and if you possess the Son you possess eternal life. That makes you a child of God. We have been adopted by God into His family and now we have relationship with the Creator, not just as our Maker, but more importantly as our Father.

B. It a Son's Confidence in His Father.

There is a Father/child dynamic here that is saturated in our text. The confidence we have in God is the confidence of a child in his or her father. It's the confidence we have in our heavenly Father. Notice what it says here clearly in our text in verse 14,

*“the confidence **that we have in Him**”*

The confidence is not in your prayers. I was reminded just a little while ago in our men's prayer meeting that I cannot put any stock in my prayer life or even in my prayers. The first time I prayed with them tonight I was stammering, trying to find the mind of God and trying to figure out what I should pray for. I finally gave up and let the next man pray. Somehow while they were praying God began to move and warm my heart so that after they were done praying I could pray. I had to pray again and this time there was a touch of heaven in it, but if not for that I could not pray. I do not have confidence in my prayers. Do you have confidence in your prayers? No, none of us do.

Our confidence is not in us or in our prayers, our confidence is in Him. Why do we have confidence in Him? This is God Almighty. This is the Holy One for whom seraphims will take two of their wings and cover their eyes so they will not look upon Him. Why should we have confidence in Him that He will hear our prayers? Because He's not just your Creator, He's become your Father through Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son. Now you are begotten children. Hallelujah! I'm begotten of the Spirit of God and I am now His son and therefore I can go to Him with the confidence a child has in a loving Father.

C. It is this Confidence that is the Basis of Prayer.

“... He hears us.”

The foundation of your prayer life is not your holiness. The basis of your prayer life is not the eloquence of your prayer. The basis of your prayer life is not that you read your Bible today. The confidence and foundation and basis of your prayer life is that He hears you and not only that He hears you but that He accepts you.

“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus,” (Hebrews 10:19)

I know He hears me because He accepts me in the Beloved, He accepts me in Christ and He delights in me. Do you remember the passage read earlier today from the Song of Solomon? God’s heart is ravished by you so much so that when you look up and glance at Him, His heart leaps within. Why would that be? Why would God be so excited by someone as worthless as me? Because He’s so good that He can find delight even in we who are His children.

We are also accepted, says the writer of Hebrews, because of the blood of Jesus. I don’t go to Him in my own name. You don’t go to the throne of heaven in your own name. What is our name compared to the name of Christ? What is it about our name, our authority, our status, our position that can merit us one thing from heaven? Nothing. But it’s at the name of Jesus that angels bow. It’s at the name of Jesus that demons tremble. It’s in the name of Christ and by His effectual and substitutionary death I have access to God as my Father. We don’t come in our own strength and merit, we come in the name and merit of Jesus Christ and that’s why He hears us. Take confidence tonight. Even though you pray weakly don’t put stock in the prayer that’s weak, put it in Christ who’s every prayer uttered has been heard by the Father, received and answered. He hears us. This is the confidence of a child.

II. THE CONDITIONS OF PRAYER

A. The Right Motive.

“... if we ask anything according to His will ...” (verse 14)

There it is, the first condition. This is not as some in the prosperity movement claim, that if you have enough faith you get what you want. This is not the teaching that says, “If you can believe it, then you will receive it.” This is not a verse that says “Whatever you want, just go to God and offer it to Him and it will happen.” It does not work that way because God cannot be reduced to a genie in the bottle. *Rub the magic lamp and you’ll have your wish.* That’s not prayer. Far from it! God says the first condition for your prayers to be answered is to ask with the right motive. If you do so, then you can be confident they will be answered.

So many times our prayers aren’t answered because we’re not asking for the right reason.

*“You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”
(James 4:3)*

There is the amiss. You want to fulfill your own desires. You could care less about the glory of God and His renown, you just want this thing you are asking for. I confess to you that I’m speaking to me just as much as I’m speaking to you because I have made prayer a means to my own end. I’ve approached God as a Santa Claus in the sky or a grandfatherly person who is so benevolent

that He would not withhold any good thing just because I asked it. No, I am to ask according to His will.

I have asked things that I'm sure were not in His will and for whatever reason He gave it to me. I remember praying one time, I won't tell you what I asked for, I said, "Lord, I don't know if this is Your will and I'll be honest, I don't care if it is, I still want this." I said that and God gave it to me. It wasn't but a few months later I was asking Him to take it away.

Preachers can be the worst at this. Since I am one I'll just talk about my kind. Sometimes we can be so blind to the motives of our heart. A good many men ask that their churches would grow and be enlarged not because they are concerned about the glory of Jesus Christ but because they want to see their ministries expanded. They want men to pay attention to them. Some pray for people to be saved. That is a wonderful thing to ask for, *God, save people!* But they ask not so people would be spared hell, not that people would know the blessedness of Christ, but that they would be honored and glorified. They want to be known for their powerful preaching, that many come into the kingdom by them. God, in His wisdom, often will not grant those prayers because He loves the man too much. God is not interested in our kingdoms or our comfort or even our pleasure. He's interested in your pleasure being in Him. He wants you to be most satisfied when God is most glorified. If that is not the motive for which we pray, then you have no assurance that your prayers will be answered.

B. Faith.

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

He doesn't use the word *faith* or *believe* he says we *know*. We know He hears us. In other words, God responds to people who believe that prayer is being answered so they can turn around and say, "I know God is going to do this." Let me elaborate on this for a few moments because there is much false and reckless teaching on this.

I've heard and read writings from some who say when you offer a petition to God, if you can really persuade yourself that you've already received it, well then you've got it. They believe that's what faith is. That's mere psychology. Can I say it this way? That's mere self-delusion and self-deception. "If you can just get yourself to believe that you've already got the answer to your prayer then it's yours and it's on your way." They base that kind of thinking on verses like our text and others like it, including their most favorite verse, Mark 11:24,

"Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them."

"See," they say, "whatever you want, Jesus said it. Just believe you receive it and you'll have it." And from this verse they've established this idea that if you can convince yourself that you already

have what you've asked for, then it will show up and be yours. I say to you that is nothing more than a mind game. That is playing with psychology. It is not Bible and it certainly isn't faith. Faith is not the byproduct of you straining with your mind to believe something. If you have to strain to believe it's true, then my friend, you are not living by faith, you're living by the power of the intellect. The intellect is a very powerful thing and can do extraordinary things. If you set your mind to it, it's amazing what the mind can actually do, but that's not faith.

If we're not careful such kind of teaching can lead to demonic activity. I'm convinced of this. A lot of things happening in the name of Jesus as the result of "faith in His name," but are nothing more than demonology at work. Using God's name and verses in prayer as incantations, as if we can order God is demonic. The teaching that says, "What the mind can conceive man can achieve" as in teachings of Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller, and those kinds of men, is witchcraft and the superstition of devils. It is not Bible-believing faith and confident prayer in Christ according to His will.

Faith is not about self-persuasion, but being persuaded that what you're asking is the will of God. Do you see the difference? The persuasion here is that I know what I'm asking is the will of God and if I'm asking according to His will, then I should have faith because He said if you ask according to His will He hears you and you will have what you've asked for. The key to a vibrant prayer life is knowing the will of God.

III. THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S WILL

"Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, 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 the petitions that we have asked of Him." (1 John 5:14-15)

It seems to me it's altogether important to know what the will of God is so I can pray according to God's will and therefore receive the answer. Now how can I know the will of God when I pray?

A. The Word of God.

The Bible is a prayer manual if it's nothing else. I cannot pray without my Bible. Don't be confused, I'm not suggesting that the Bible is not a book to be studied and the means by which we gain intellectual understanding and knowledge of God, it is. But it's not to end with your mind. We don't study the Bible just to learn more information about God, we learn more information so that we might have a greater fellowship with Him. It's reciprocity—He's giving, I'm receiving, I'm giving, He's receiving. That's what the word *reciprocity* means. There is an exchange taking place. This book is the means to that end.

Growing up in the denominational religious background I did, I had this concept of prayer that it

ought to be a Mount of Transfiguration every time you get on your knees. I believed that every time I got on my knees God and heaven should come down and I should be like Moses. I should leave the prayer closet and my face should shine. I should have to put a veil over it or you all couldn't look at me because I've been with the Lord. That was my concept of prayer. And how many times did that happen? Not once. I've never had my face transfigured so that it shone and you couldn't look at me. I don't think that will ever happen. I do remember my father telling me about an experience he had when he was younger. He had gotten involved with a Baptist church in Springfield, Mo. and the young man pastoring there was a man of prayer. One night my father walked into the church on a particular errand and the whole building was dark except for the pastor who was at the altar praying. He said, "Son, I tell you the truth, there was no light on in that sanctuary but there was a light around that man as he prayed." Well, I'd love that to happen every time I prayed but it doesn't happen.

I began to ask the Lord, "Why, when I pray, don't I always feel You or experience You or see Your activity?" And God finally responded and said, "Why are you always asking to hear My voice? I've recorded everything you need to hear." God has spoken and this Book is a living Book when the Holy Spirit is involved. If the Holy Spirit is not involved this Book just becomes black ink on white pages, but when the Spirit of God comes and breathes into these words, these words become life to me and it's as if my Father is speaking to me directly. It's as powerful and as real as the burning bush was to Moses.

Now in the Bible we have two ways to know the will of God.

I. Clear statements of Scripture tells us what God's will is

Do you know there are verses that tell you what God's will is for your life? I'm going to give you just one, not the one you're going to want. You're going to want a verse that says the will of God is that you will be a millionaire. Some of you younger ladies would like the Bible to say, "This is the will of God that you marry this young man," and it have a picture right beside that verse. Wouldn't you like that?

This is why we see so little of our prayers answered. We are asking God to do what we want Him to do and we are not interested in what He wants done.

I Thessalonians 4:3 tell us what He wants done in you.

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality;"

There is the will of God for every one of us. Those of you who are single, His will is that you should possess your body in holiness, keeping it pure for your future spouse. Those of us who are married, His will is that we keep ourselves from wandering eyes and lusting hearts and keep our bodies reserved only for our spouses. We have many clear statements like this in the Bible that tell us the will of God.

2. Promises of Scripture

There are promises in the Word of God that I can read and believe that I have God's will on that matter. His Word says He has given us exceedingly great and precious promises. Why? So we could be partakers of His divine nature (2 Peter 1:2-3). There are promises in Bible that tells me that God has already committed Himself to me and all I have to do is stand upon that promise knowing when I do, I am praying according to the will of God. And if I am praying according to the will of God, I know He hears me, and if I know He hears me, I know I will have the petition I am asking because it's His will.

God is not sadistic. He does not pull the rug out from under you, yet many of you feel that way and that's how you approach prayer. *I can't really ask this of God because I can't get my hopes up because the moment I do He'll jerk the rug out from under me.* If the Bible says it you can believe it and you can pray for it with confidence.

B. Learning the Ways of God.

The Bible is very important in learning His ways, but watching how God works in your life also teaches us the ways of God. I have learned much in the years I have walked with Him. I wish sometimes I could go back and start over with what I now know but I am not afforded that, nor are you. That's part of the process. God is excited watching His child learn how to trust Him; it's like us watching our children learn how to walk. It's a thrill and it's part of the process of learning. We don't start out with full knowledge and we don't end with full knowledge. We shall forever be learning about our great God for all eternity. But I have watched His activity in my life and I have an advantage that maybe some of you don't have—I get to watch God's activity in your life. There are many, many, many miracles and answers to prayer that I've watched take place in your life, some of which don't always get testified about because they can't always be shared, but I know about them because we've prayed together, talked together and seen God answer them together with you and I've learned how God works through that.

For this reason I want to encourage one more time and it probably will not be the last time—learn how to write, some kind of journal of God's activity in your life so that you can go back and remember. I've always taken some pride, probably wrong, in my memory and ability to remember things. But as I get a little bit older, I forget. I have so much up there, you see, to remember. I've got all these years of learning and the brain has only so large a capacity, so I have used up my hard disk space and the mind has to eliminate something. That's why I forget certain things. You believe that right? I only wish that were the case.

I've had God teach me something about a verse of Scripture many times and because I didn't write it down and would later forget it. A short time later I'll go back and read that verse and scratch my head trying to remember what the Lord said about that verse? So, I have learned to write down what God shares with me. I love my iPad because I can make notes now and they don't cloud the pages. I can't read some people's Bibles for all their trackings, scribbles and marks.

I think that's a beautiful Bible. I love to look at Bible's like that but I don't know how you read them. I can make notes electronically with the iPad and the note is hidden away and I can just tap on it and it will be there.

I do that because I want to remember and see what God did three years ago, three months ago, yesterday, and learn His trajectory in my life. There is a trajectory. You can look back from this perspective and see the points, the stepping-stones, whereby you can gauge where He's headed. You learn the ways of God so you know what God's will is.

C. The Holy Spirit's Direction.

The Holy Spirit will aid us in our prayer lives because, frankly, I don't always know how to pray. Meaning, I know how to cry, I know how to beg, I know how to plead, but I don't always know how to pray or what to pray for. The Apostle Paul addresses this for us and this is such a beautiful companion verse to our text that we cannot end this message without going to it. Romans 8:26-27.

The Holy Spirit will direct your prayers, but as I often say you can't steer a parked car. God can't give direction in prayer unless you are praying. So this is the confidence I have when I pray, I look to the Lord to give me direction on how to pray and what to pray for, based upon this text.

“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.”

So how can I pray and God hear? With the Spirit giving direction. And how does He do that? With groanings that cannot be uttered.

That's a hard phrase to really translate and put into English and understand what Paul is trying to say, but this is what I believe he means, at least I've experienced it this way. There are times when the Spirit of God will sigh within you. That's what he means by this word *groanings*. You can't find words to express what you're feeling deeply. There's just this inward sigh, this inward longing and Paul is saying that's the Holy Spirit. You can believe that every time that happens the Holy Spirit is praying according to the will of the Father. Sometimes in fact you even know what He is asking. Not only is it so supernatural that there are groanings that cannot be uttered, but there are also times when the Spirit of God will come and put a burden on your heart. A deep desire that you can't run from which intensifies with time. And when you're praying there is this sense that God is helping you and you know this is what God wants. This is the work of the Holy Spirit of God, and in those moments, please pray with all confidence because you are praying according to the will of God.

I want to give you one last caution and then I'm going to be done. Do not judge this by how you

feel or by how you sound in your prayer.

Often I have felt my prayers to be so ineffectual because they weren't grammatically right or they didn't sound pretty, but rather they sounded crude and unpleasant. I would get discouraged because I couldn't put into words what I was trying to say, but I've learned over the years that's not what God's listening to. Rather He's listening to your heart's desire. And if that desire is according to His will, the text is saying the prayer doesn't have to be beautiful or poetical. You don't have to get loud, you don't have to lift your hands, tears don't have to flow for your prayer to be effectual. All you need to know is that you are praying what God wants you to pray.

That is the heart of this text. Do you really want what God wants? If you want an effectual prayer life you will because God will not honor any prayer outside of His will. What I need is to come under His will and that's why God has given us prayer. It's the means by which to teach us what His will is. I can pray for something and with time it doesn't happen. I then pray asking if it is His will. The Lord will show me, "I'm not leading you to pray about that." And then I say, "Okay, Father, I hear you."

There are things I have prayed for and have done so for years and they haven't yet come to pass, but I keep praying because I know it's the Father's will. On the other hand, there are some things I have prayed for and nothing happens and I say, "Okay, Lord, what's going on here? I thought this was what You wanted?" He shows me it wasn't and redirects my heart and mind. So by praying God is working sanctification. He's working growth, He's working maturity, He's bringing me into conformity to His will. That's why God gave us prayer—to bring us into His will. And when we know we are praying according to His will, we know He hears us and if we know He hears us, we know He already—past tense—has given those petitions we ask for. Dear friend, if you don't have it in your hand tonight, don't despair. If God has put that burden in your heart it's yours. You just wait and God will bring it to pass and will put it in your hand. Amen.