

Charles Swindoll tells this story. I know two young men who grew up in the Northwest, and whenever they reach critical moments in their lives, they read letters written by their mother—letters in her handwriting, sent to encourage her boys as they grow from childhood to manhood. There are letters written for birthdays, for Christmas, and for graduation from high school. To these boys, these letters from Mom are expressions of her enduring love for them. They are frameable.

Why do these sons hold these letters from Mom so dear? Because their mother died of cancer years earlier, when they were very young. The disease was taking its toll on her day after day, but instead of lying there wasting away, she spent her time writing letters to her two boys to be delivered to them at specific times in their lives. And on these occasions, the boys' father would deliver the letters. They would hear from their mother in her own words – words of enduring love.

In the same manner, the Apostle John has left all of God's children a frameable letter – a letter of encouragement – a letter of warning and instruction – a letter of assurance. This letter of **1 John** is a straightforward letter of enduring love written to the followers of Jesus Christ.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **1 John 5**, and we will start with **verse 13**. We are told,

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

We ended last week with the words – *“God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life.”* These were great words of assurance from John to born-again believers, and now, in **verse 13**, he begins to wrap up his letter with additional words of assurance, whereby he presents in a clear statement the purpose for his letter – that being they would know – intuitively know they have eternal life.

When John wrote his Gospel, it was evangelistic in nature. It was written to unbelievers so that they might believe in the Son of God, and that by believing they may have eternal life, but in this letter of **1 John**, it is written to those who already believe in the Son of God, it was written to those believers who were unsettled and unsure in their faith due to the false teaching of the Gnostics. This letter was written so that these believers may know, with assurance, that they have eternal life.

That word “**know**” is a word used by John over 30 times in his letter to the church, and John wants true believers to know – not hope, not guess, not assume, not speculate, but know – continue to know, intuitively know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that eternal life is already their spiritual possession. To help these believers to know, throughout his letter, John gave them tests – tests concerning doctrinal truth about Jesus, tests pertaining to obedience of God’s commands, and tests of love for God and for others. All these tests were given by John to create assurance in their standing with God. This had nothing to do with *feelings*, and everything to do with the *facts* of who Jesus is and what He had done.

A man once came to D. L. Moody and said he was worried because he didn’t feel saved. Moody asked, “Was Noah safe in the ark?” “Certainly, he was,” the man replied. “Well, what made him safe, his feeling or the ark?” The man got the point. “How foolish I’ve been!” he said. “It is not my feeling; it is Christ who saves!”

Jesus is the object of our faith, He is the One who saves, our right standing with God is only because of His finished work – He is the Great Shepherd who guards His sheep – none will be lost, and because we are assured of this truth, John now moves us to another assurance enjoyed by the believer – we can approach God in prayer and He will hear us. Let’s look at **verses 14 and 15**. John says,

¹⁴ This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

These verses are connected to the previous verses, as our confidence in prayer is grounded in our relationship with our God who has given us eternal life. We know God and we know we are already in possession of eternal life, but before we get to experience the fullness of that life in the hereafter – in the here and now, we have still have needs and wants. So, as children of God – and this promise is only given to His children, we can openly and confidently pour out our hearts before the One who loves us, who sees every outcome, who does what is best for His children, and we know He will hear us.

Now, we need to be careful here because so often when reading passages like this, we tend to focus on the idea “*I can have anything I ask for.*” Yes, that word “**anything**” seems all-encompassing, it covers a lot of ground, but with that said,

John reminds us that there is a fundamental condition attached to God's promise of answered prayer, and the condition is this – we ask **according to His will**.

Now, that tells us a lot about prayer, **doesn't it?** We must never fall into the trap of using prayer as a method for manipulating God or attempting to bend His will in our direction. We cannot force God to do something He does not want to do as if we know what is best for our lives and He does not. Prayer is not a process of getting what we want, rather, it's a means of aligning our will to His.

“Not my will, but Yours be done.” That's what Jesus taught. *“God I am not here to try to bend You in my direction, I am here to be bent in Yours.”*

We can approach God with confidence when praying according to His will. Not our will – but His will, and that can be difficult because God's ways are not our ways, and we often think that God has to work in the way that makes sense to us.

So, how do we know His will? Often times, God's will is expressed in His Word and that's why we need to be in His Word. Jesus touched on this very thing in the **John 15:7** when He said,

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

If we are walking with God and praying according to His expressed will found in His written Word, we have whatever we ask. Some of the most powerful prayers in the Bible are prayers which understand the will of God. We may be annoyed when one of our children says, *“Hey, this is what you promised, now please do it,”* but God is delighted when we pray His promises. It shows our dependence is on Him, and that we take His Word seriously.

Well, all of this begs the question – if something is God's will, **why doesn't He just do it, apart from our prayers?** **Why would God wait to accomplish His will until we pray?** Well, God does have a sovereign will and He has decreed that some things will happen with or without us, some things must happen, but often times God wants us to work with Him, and that means bringing our will into alignment with His. God wants us to care about the things He cares about, and He wants us to care about them enough to pray about them.

Now, we need to be mindful that things happen in God's time, for He knows what is best for His children, but from His perspective – it's already a done deal. Let me also say that I know there are those times where we don't know what God's will

might be – Do I marry that person? Do I take this job? Do, I buy the Ford or the Honda? – of course, it's the Honda because God says we should be in one accord. Duh!

In all seriousness, in those cases where we don't know God's will, we can always bring our needs and our wants – big and small, confidently before Him with the attitude, *“Not my will, but Yours be done.”* The purpose of prayer is that God's will done here on earth. It may be offered in a thousand different ways, with a thousand different details, but every true prayer ultimately comes under the words, *“Not my will, but Yours be done.”*

That's the general principle that if we ask anything according to God's will, if our prayer lines up with His will, we have confidence that God hears us and He will grant our request.

Now, John extends this principle to intercessory prayer, meaning the assurance of eternal life ought to lead us not to only think of ourselves, but also to think about others. Let's look at **verses 16 and 17**.

¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. ¹⁷ All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

Okay, everybody got that? This is a very difficult passage – maybe one of the most difficult in the entire Bible – it's been my nemesis all week, and as you might imagine, it's open to a lot of interpretation and speculation because there are terms that John uses here for which he gives no explanation.

For example, there is the word **“brother.”** Is that a fellow born-again believer or is John referring to the Gnostics who claimed to be brothers and he identified as “antichrists”? What exactly does John mean by a sin not leading to death and then saying there is a sin leading to death? Is there a specific sin that John has in mind? Is it a single sin or is he referring to a category of sins? And when it comes to **death**, is John talking about physical death or spiritual death, and if it's spiritual death, then who sins that kind of sin? And, if we can't answer that, then how can we follow the suggestion by John not to pray for those kind of people as if leaving them in God's hands?

Now, I suspect that John's original readers needed no explanation – in their day, it was clear to them and that's why no explanation was given, but for us who are far

removed from this early church by both time and culture – it’s not so clear and we are left scratching our heads and drawing our own conclusions, and also let me say, I have read multiple of interpretations on this passage, and each one has a hole in it, but with that said, I am going to share two common interpretations of this passage, and again, neither are perfect.

Here’s the first. In the context of prayer – and that’s the context here, John tells us that if we observe a brother or sister in Christ committing **a sin not leading to death**, and remember John already said that Christians sin back in **Chapter 1**, then instead of gossiping about them, instead of whispering behind their back, instead of posting something on Facebook or Instagram, we should intercede for them in prayer to God for their repentance and restoration of fellowship. That’s God’s expressed will for us who are praying for others. *“Father, bring them to repentance. Help them to see their sin for what it really is. Forgive them Lord and restore their fellowship with You.”*

Now, continuing this train thought that a brother or sister in Christ is committing a sin – but this time it’s **a sin leading to death**, then John could be speaking about discipline by God leading to physical death, and let me explain with an example.

Turn to **Acts 5**, beginning with **verse 1**. This is a story that many of you know. We are told,

¹ But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet. ³ But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” ⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. ⁷ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” ⁹ Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” ¹⁰ And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

In this case, given the time and place, given the circumstances – in His wisdom, God took the physical lives of Ananias and his wife Sapphira because they publicly lied to God in front of the whole church. Apparently, there are those cases where God determines it's best to remove a believer with physical death, probably because they have compromised the church and the testimony of Christ to the degree that they should just be taken home. A Christian who wanders in a season of sin should not presume upon the mercy of God because there could come a time when God says, *enough is enough* and in His discipline, He brings you home. John would say there is no point in praying for this situation for they are in God's hands alone. Now, I understand this interpretation, it makes sense to me, but there is hole. When it comes to biblical interpretation, typically if one is speaking of eternal life, which John has been doing, then in contrast, if death is mentioned it would be eternal death, spiritual death – not physical death.

So, that's the first common interpretation of this passage. John is talking about true believers who sin, and apparently there is some sin – whatever it may be, given the circumstances, which could lead to physical death.

Okay, let's get back to our passage. Again, John says,

¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. ¹⁷ All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

There is another common interpretation, and it pertains to those who only claim to be Christian, like the Gnostics, but are not. In that context, the sin that leads to death would be what we refer to as the unpardonable sin – the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit – which ultimately is the rejection of Jesus Christ and leads to eternal death.

Jesus said in **John 6:44**,

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to draw people to Jesus, but there are those people who have become so hardened, so rebellious, so resistive to the drawing and the convicting influence of the Holy Spirit, that by default, they place themselves on the road to eternal damnation by rejecting their Savior. Now, in regards to this interpretation, I also understand it, but that word “**brother**” really bothers me.

As a third possible interpretation, and I admit that I may be forcing it, maybe John is talking about two different people. If you notice, he only mentions brother regarding a sin not leading to death, but for a sin that leads to death, John does not say the one committing that sin is a brother.

Anyway, since we cannot be sure of the interpretation, let's focus on what we do know. We are to pray as much as we can, and we stop only when God tells us to stop. We pray, we pray in accordance to His will, we pray with confidence, and we pray knowing that He hears us and He will answer us.

Ruby Hamilton, a businesswoman in her fifties, was stunned at the loss of her husband of 32 years in a car accident. Her anger and disappointment went deeper than the typical expression of grief. She had become a follower of Christ in her late twenties, but her husband didn't share her newfound interest in spiritual things. Nonetheless, she had set about praying for him feverishly and unceasingly that he would come to know the Lord. And one day when she was praying, she felt a wave of peace wash over her, and that still small voice assuring her that her husband would be okay. She eagerly awaited the day when her husband might surrender his life to Jesus, but now he's gone.

What do you do when God disappoints and doesn't seem to be answering prayer? Well, for Ruby Hamilton, she stopped living for God.

Five years earlier, Roger Simmons was hitchhiking his way home. He would never forget the date – May 7th. His heavy duffle bag was making him tired and he was anxious to take off that Army uniform once and for all. Flashing his thumb to the oncoming car, he lost hope when he saw it was a black, sleek new Cadillac, but to his surprise the car stopped.

The passenger door swung open. He ran toward the car, tossed his duffle bag in the back and thanked the handsome, well-dressed man as he slid into the front seat. "Going home for keeps?"

"Sure am," said Roger.

"Well, you're in luck if you're going to Chicago."

"Not quite that far – do you live in Chicago?"

"I have a business there, the driver said. My name is Hamilton."

They chatted for a while, and then Roger, a Christian, felt a compulsion to share his faith with this fiftyish, apparently successful business man. But he kept putting

it off, till he realized that he was now just 30 minutes from his home. It was now or never.

“Mr. Hamilton, I would like to talk to you about something very important.” Then he simply told Mr. Hamilton about the plan of salvation and ultimately asked him if he would like to receive Jesus as his Savior and Lord.

The Cadillac pulled over to the side of the road. Roger expected that he was about to get thrown out of the car. Instead, the businessman bowed his head and received Christ, then thanked Roger. He said, “This is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me.”

Five years went by. Roger was now married, with a couple of kids and a business of his own. Packing his suitcase for a trip to Chicago, he found a business card that had been given to him by Hamilton five years earlier. In Chicago, he looked up Hamilton Enterprises. The receptionist told him that it was impossible to see Mr. Hamilton, but he could see Mrs. Hamilton. A little confused, he was ushered into a beautiful office where he found himself facing a keen-eyed woman in her fifties.

She extended her hand and asked, “You knew my husband?”

Roger told her about how Hamilton had picked him up while he was hitchhiking home after the war. “Can you tell me what day that was?”

“Sure, it was May 7th, five years ago, the day I was discharged from the Army.”

“Anything special about that day?” she asked.

He hesitated, not knowing if he should mention how he shared the message of Jesus with her husband. “Mrs. Hamilton, I explained the gospel to your husband that day. He pulled over to the side of the road and wept against the steering wheel. He gave his life to Christ that day.”

Explosive sobs shook her body. Finally getting a grip on herself, she said, “I had prayed for my husband’s salvation for years. I believed God would save him.”

“Where is your husband now, Ruby?”

“He passed away. He was in a car crash after he let you out of the car. He never got home. You see, I thought God had not kept His promise. I stopped living for God five years ago because I thought He had not kept His word!” But He did.

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