



“Who is Running the Show?”

- 1 John 5:14-21

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1 John 5: (14) *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.* (16) *If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.* (17) *All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.* (18) *We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.* (19) *We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.* (20) *And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.* (21) *Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.*

It is certainly difficult to find any *absolutes* in our present day. It's not because such does not exist, but rather just seemingly impossible to find and even less possible to verify their authenticity. I remember the old “X-Files” slogan... “The Truth is Out There.” Well...no doubt it's “out there,” but *where* is anyone's guess. One is easily jaded by news outlets, politicians' promises, and cultural advertisements. Then along comes the Apostle John who has been driving home some issues that he claims are truths that we as Christians can know for certain. Things we can stand upon...things we can “stake our lives on.” However, I qualify that by stating one **can**, not necessarily “**will**.” Some folks will hear these truths multiple times in their lives. They may also even corporately acknowledge them as truth. But will they actually live them out as truth? Because *therein lies the rub*. Paul said in 1 Timothy 2:3-4 “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ...who *wants all men to be saved ...and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*” So apparently the two do not necessarily go hand in hand!

Many of us...yes even some confessing Believers...will in fact spend literally our whole lives struggling to find another path to peace, fulfillment, identity, and purpose. I find that for such folks it is effectively useless to try to wave them off from such a search, because the result of pride is always the dark of blindness. However John is clearly still going to give this thing a try, no doubt with the hope of perhaps reaching one or two. Indeed, “His way is narrow and few shall find it.” The problem...as always...is the “world.” It is so loud and so overwhelming and the truth is that for the most part, we just like it so much! We *want* to trust and believe Jesus and His Word, but we in reality believe the world, with its science, its medical council, its promises, and its perception of security.

Scripture is quite clear on this matter and certainly emphatic in its interpretation. We are called to “die” to this world. We will tend to incorporate many other verbs here...all of which tend to find a welcome compromise.

But there is no compromise...no wiggle room... in the word "die." Scripture itself is seemingly baffled about this mystery, saying in Colossians 2:20 "*You have died with Christ, ...and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world.... So why do you keep on following the rules of the world...?*"

John in chapter 2, verse 3, wrote, "*By this we **know** that we have come to **know** Him, if we keep His commandments.*" He writes to the fathers, because they **know** Him who has been from the beginning (2:13). He writes to the children, because they **know** the Father (2:14). He says (3:14), "*We **know** that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren.*" In fact there are 36 instances of the word *know* in this letter. Clearly, John believes himself to be "in the know" as far as the truth goes herein.

Now...as he is moving to conclude this letter, John is staking his claim on the truth. In chapter 5, verse 13, he says "*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.*" And now in 5:15, "*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.*" Again and again even in this final section he uses this word: verses 18, 19, 20: "*We know... we know... we know....*" John wants us to be certain about these important truths, and moreover to 'know' that there is empirical truth. To **know** we can **know**.

Now, as we close in on the finish line of this letter, we can quite incredulously declare "ya...we got it John." We can plant ourselves firmly in the philosophy of the whole matter, yet, ironically, still live out a whole other belief system. In our perceived "place of safety"...our "happy place" of compromise, John suddenly throws a final fastball right by us in verse 21: "*Little children, guard yourselves from idols.*" **Wow**. We were standing there flat-footed at the plate as that came by and are left thinking, "Where did that come from? John hasn't been talking about idolatry! In fact, He hasn't mentioned it in the entire letter!" Such may on the surface appear quite out of context, but if you think that, you did indeed miss what John has been saying. In fact, that warning kind of sums up the entire message. Because idolatry is, in fact, the making up your own god as a substitute for the one true God, the one who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, and the one John has so revealed in this letter.

Before John gets to that verse however, he leads in with a few other remarks that are hard to grasp, controversial in their play, and contrary to most of our experience. Is John really saying that whatever we ask for we will receive and do so unequivocally? Because it sure sounds like that is what he is saying! The fact is, over the years, there have been plenty of things...*truthfully, countless things*, that I have prayed for that have not come to pass as per my request. I have prayed for the salvation of people who have not gotten saved. I have prayed for the restoration of sinning Christians, who have not repented and are today lost out there somewhere. I have prayed for the reconciliation of Christian marriages that have broken up. What exactly is John saying here?

Let's take a closer look at this: Clearly verse 14 is intimately connected with verse 15, and we know this because the Greek text opens verse 15 with the word, "and." When we read in verse 13, we see that our confidence in prayer is found only through our assurance that we have eternal life. If you do not have eternal life, there is no way that you can pray according to the will of God, except to pray that God would save you from your sins. The promise of our text is only for God's children. The promise is: "*As believers we have confidence that God will answer our prayers, if we pray carefully according to His will.*"

Secondly, let us not miss the critical phrase "according to God's will." If that fact is not included in this matter, then God is not God, but in fact **we** are. Anything other than this would relegate God to a subservient roll wherein He becomes our genie in a bottle and makes all our wishes come true like a children's Disney film. What we *are* told however, is that He will **hear** us. But that does not mean He is actually listening. For if we are

not genuinely His child, the phone is dead. We read "*If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.*" (Ps 66:18) Remember that John is effectively writing this letter specifically to faithful believers! If we are truly His, then He hears us. He is not asleep nor is He ignoring us.

Yet we need to remember that God can, at times, be very quiet. There are multiple instances in scripture where God was indeed present, but He was also quiet. Once...prior to the grand opening of the New Testament, God was quiet for 400 years! On more than one occasion, with Paul and others, God's response to a request was simply "*My grace is sufficient for you now.*" We also know that without a true faith in Him, scripture tells us that it is impossible to please Him. So sometimes He is going to simply tell us to stand on what He *already* said He *would* do, and what He *already* told us *to* do. Because...*and be sure to hear this...* never will our prayers negate what He already has said and what He always is by nature.

In Luke chapter 11, the apostles asked Jesus to teach them to pray. In this teaching moment was the instruction to pray "*thy will be done.*" Not *my* will be done, but ultimately and universally "*HIS* will be done!" In that passage in Luke, as well as three times in three connected verses in Matthew 6, Jesus says "*WHEN* you pray..." Not "*if* you pray." Prayer is a critical and mandatory part of a Christians life! Many folks throughout my years of ministry have tried to tell me that their place in the body of Christ...their spiritual "gift," was to pray. I always tell them the same thing: everyone who calls themselves a child of God better have that gift! Prayer is not a spiritual gift in that context, but rather an innate aspect of Christian life for every one of us.

How many of us are continually trying to circumvent **God's will** for our **own will**...our own plans and desires? When we try to get God in a "holy headlock" we are effectively saying that we know better than God, that we don't really trust Him. He becomes rather *OUR* servant... just here for our comfort and pleasure. Many of us need to stop and ask that critical first question: ***just who is God in our personal world?*** If I asked you to answer that question in one word, what would it be? King? Master? Buddy? Comfort? Counselor? What would be your description? For the answer actually gives volumes of information and enlightenment as to your strengths, your weakness's, and whether I would bet a nickel on your ultimate success as a Christian or not.

John seems to implicitly understand us because that is no doubt from where he garnered the 'mo to throw that final 'fast ball' ..."*keep yourself from idols.*" If I were inclined to add anything to John's message herein, it would be "*even if that idol is you.*" If we are to pray...if we are to *ask*, according to God's will, we therefore need to actually know God's will. *Or do we?* Because scripture intimates that if anything could happen outside of His will, then He would not be in control of the universe. Isaiah 14:24 expresses this succinctly, saying "*The LORD Almighty has sworn, 'Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen.'*" He would not be the sovereign who plans it and does it if He just goes with what you want and ask for! This is problematic for so many of us, not just because we are indeed trying to get Him to do what we want, but even more than that, we really have no idea what His will is for us individually!

1 Thess 5:18 says it is God's will for us to give thanks in all circumstances. 1 Thess 4:13 tells us that it is God's will that we be sanctified and that we abstain from sexual immorality. 1 Peter 2:15 says that it is God's will that we do good deeds. Certainly, scripture is full of both explicit and implied directives as to God's will for us. But that is not the problem, is it? The problem arises when we want to peer into the glass ball of future days and receive an answer to specific personal questions and agenda. And the fact is again, God sometimes answers our inquiries with clarity and sometimes simply asks us to do what He has already told us, ...and He will keep the position of God and handle the rest. Jeremiah 29:11 "***I*** know the plans ***I*** have for you," declares the LORD..." But He doesn't say that in every case YOU will.

To BE and LIVE as a born-again individual, we must, by the very definition and character of God, trust in Him to oversee our lives. He has to be the King, not just Savior and friend. This is the essence of scripture and, in fact, the heart of Christianity. To truly walk in the light, our prayer must always be "*your will be done*".... and yes, "*even if I don't know it or understand it.*" Indeed, God does not prohibit us from asking. In fact, he encourages it! James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." And James 4:2 says, "...*you do not have because you do not ask.*"

But James goes right on to say immediately after that passage, "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*" So when we ask "wrongly" or for something that is out of His will for us, the answer is 'no.' And after that smackdown, we still have to accept that God has 'got it' and He isn't just messing with us or holding His will for us behind His back and asking you to "guess which hand." Furthermore, we have to know that He isn't just ignoring us or putting us off. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that "*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise...*"

The truth is, there will be plenty of times in this life that God's plan will simply not be seen or recognized by us in our mortal bodies. "*His ways are not our ways*"...they are in fact "*beyond our finding out.*" (Isa. 55:8-9). If they were not, who would need God at all?

Verse 16: *If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.*

What we gather from this text is that we...on earth, have some mystical participation in another person's standing with the Father and, *it seems*, on their eternity. I do not pretend to understand it clearly. John tells us here that if we pray for someone...a 'sinning brother"...God will give "life" to that brother. Another critical reason to belong to a strong and active community. But does that mean **salvational** life? No, it can't mean that, for no one of us can play a part in the salvation of another or dictate what God does with another. But the word "life" has some apparent positive ramifications for sure, even if we do not totally understand it.

But then, to muddy the field even more, John speaks of a "sin leading to death." Apparently, there is no advantage to anyone to pray in that situation. What 'death' is John referring to here? Eternal salvational death? Or just cessation of mortal life? Indeed, there are some sins that will definitely kill you! It could be that this is not complicated at all, and John is simply referring to the sin of unbelief which prohibits salvation and eternal life. It seems clear, however, that, on some level, we can indeed supernaturally intervene in another's life journey through the exercise of prayer on their behalf. This is, after all, some powerful stuff we are dealing with here when we talk about the practice of prayer, even if we fail to see it that way most of the time.

In 1921, the great Thomas Edison was quoted as saying, "*We don't know the millionth part of one percent about anything. We don't know what water is. We don't know what light is. We don't know what gravitation is. We don't know what electricity is. We don't know what heat is. We have a lot of hypotheses about these things, but that is all. But we do not let our ignorance about all these things deprive us of their use.*" (cited by Lehman Strauss, *Sense and Nonsense About Prayer* [Moody Press], p. 122). Clearly, Edison was at least inadvertently speaking concerning this issue of intervention and prayer. It is literally and supernaturally reaching into the "God Realm" ...a dimension that on many levels lay beyond our grasp and ability to understand. You use your

cell phone every day, but who knows how that crazy little thing does what it does. We just care that it does what it does.

Verse 18 says "*We know that whoever is born of God does not sin;* ("perfect tense;" meaning, He will not continue in and make a practice of sin.) *but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.*" John has clearly said that believers **do** sin (1:8, 10; 2:1; 5:16), so he is saying that no genuine child of God lives in a **state of sin**. The fact is, when it comes to sin, the fight is on, or there is indeed no fight at all, *because the guy is lost...*

In verse 18, John says that "*he who has been born of God keeps himself...*" Again we are reminded concerning one's personal involvement in his own personal sanctification. This fact is denied by many, despite multiple verses that expressly state such as fact. The false teachers of John's day... as well as ours, will say it's all God, so if I fail, it is essentially HIS fault, because I play no part in sanctification. Someone is lying, and I'll stand with John.

The fact is, there will always be spiritual and life aspects that we do not totally understand just how they work. He is God. We are not. However, we generally see the outcome. John has spent 5 chapters telling us that this is a fact. When someone is on a road that I know for a fact has no crossroads and no exits, then that person is going to eventually come to what is waiting at the end of that road...the thing that is and always has been there. The only salvation is to turn around. That's called repentance. Unless that happens, then the end will happen for him or her like every other time and for every other person. In that, there is no doubt.

The bottom line is this: are we willing to pray and then let God lead? If not, we have made an idol of ourselves, and the letter of 1 John is a bust. Not in ultimate truth, just for us...

So I leave you with this letter, so succinctly encompassed in verse 19: "*We know that we are of God...*"

Do **you**?