

# IF WE ASK, GOD HEARS US

by Steve Zeisler

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I have a picture of a shepherd standing among some sheep on the wall of my office. I've found myself gazing at that picture a good bit in the weeks that I've been studying 1 John, preparing for these messages, because more and more I have come to think of 1 John as a shepherd's book. As we've said a number of times, John was an old man when he wrote this. He was the last of the apostles, the final one who had known Jesus in the days of his flesh and who had been specially commissioned by the Lord to care for the church and to write the Scriptures. And John did the work of a shepherd.

Shepherding is a hard and dangerous business. Remember the words young David spoke to King Saul when Goliath stood before the armies of Israel and called for a champion to come out and fight him. Saul had told David, "'You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth.'" But David said to Saul, 'Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God'" (1 Samuel 17:33-36).

Shepherding means to take risks for the sake of the sheep, to endanger oneself, to take enemies seriously. There was a serious heresy that threatened the church to which John was writing. There were those who had become enemies of the people of God and enemies of the gospel who were telling lies and threatening the sheep. John engaged them directly in this book. He did the hard work of a shepherd to tell the truth in the face of error.

We've come to the end. Verse 13 of chapter 5 is a theme verse for the whole book: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." What was being threatened was the knowledge or the assurance that belief in the Son of God had given them real eternal life, and the ability to trust that what God said was true. The particular heretics against whom John was writing were known as gnostics, a name given to them some decades after this book was written. The word gnostic comes from gnosis in Greek, which means knowledge. And the battle that was taking place between John, the shepherd, and the heretics of gnosticism, whom we can think of as the lions and the bears, recalling David's words, was in regard to whether people could know for sure that what Jesus had done for them was real, sufficient, trustworthy, and life-changing.

In John's gospel he gives the theme of that book in these words (20:31): "But these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The gospel of John was written to persuade people to believe. It was written for those who were not Christians, who were seeking and wondering, who had heard about Jesus and were now being told the truth about him. But the letter 1 John was written to those who already believed but were having their assurance threatened, to persuade them that they had eternal life.

There are a great many stories in our literature, some ridiculous and some less so, that are about reality that has been hidden. Remember the story of the ugly duckling. The ugly duckling thought it was a failure. It was raised among other ducks, but it didn't look like them; it was differently colored and awkward in its infancy and youth. The fable of the ugly duckling is a story of an individual who had great beauty but didn't know it, who would become, of course, a glorious swan some day, much more beautiful than all the ducks. For the swan, knowledge of its true nature went unrevealed for a long time.

A much more ridiculous version of the same idea is the story of Jed Clampett and his clan, who lived in the Appalachians until they discovered oil on their land and became the Beverly Hillbillies. By owning a farm they acquired great riches, but they didn't know it until a life-transforming discovery was made.

What the shepherd wants to make sure the sheep know is that though they do indeed have everything in Christ that they'll ever need, there are some who would remove their assurance and deny them the hope that goes with their salvation. We must not only have life in Christ, but know that we have it for certain.

There are two main ideas in the passage before us. One has to do with confidence in the presence of God. The other has to do with confidence, or being unthreatened, in the presence of the evil one. First John 5:13-21:

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

If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death,\* he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him. We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also 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---even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

\* In the RSV this is translated mortal sin, which grew out of Catholic theology regarding mortal and venial sins. But a strict translation is better as rendered here.

## **Confidence in prayer**

John's point is to strengthen those who believe so that they can live lives filled with confidence and vitality. He begins by talking about prayer, or life lived in God's presence:"approaching God." John gives us a wonderful description of the life of prayer---prayer that is not entered into grudgingly, foolishly, or fearfully; prayer that we do not shy away from because we're unsure of whether we'll be heard. For many of us, prayer is a confusing matter characterized by a great deal of fitful effort and then long periods of dryness.

This message on prayer is not complete. There is a great deal that John doesn't raise here. He doesn't talk about praise of God. Prayer, as we discover in the Bible, is often wonderful, thoughtful, heartfelt praise and adoration offered to the Lord God. Other sorts of prayer revolve around thanksgiving as we thoughtfully review what God has done for the human race and for us as individuals, expressing our thanks to him without reservation. But John doesn't write about that either.

John is writing about the kind of prayer that is probably most familiar to us, and that is asking God for things or making petitions of him. It is going to him with our lives---our needs, our burdens, our confusions, our hopes and dreams---and saying, "Lord, please help me with these things." And John expects us to do it boldly, confidently, enthusiastically, regularly. There are four points we'll focus on in verses 14 and 15.

The first point is that there are no religious categories for prayer. I know many of us fall into the habit of thinking that if we pray to God about world evangelization, that counts. Or if we pray to the Lord about greater humility of spirit, that counts. But if we talk to the Lord about the soreness in our foot, or the difficulty about a job interview coming up, or the fact that we don't get along with our brother, or some other mundane, ordinary sort of thing, that's really way down on the list of the things that ought to be spoken of in the presence of God. But that's not at all what John is saying here, because he's very clear twice in verses 14 and 15 when he says, "if we ask anything according to his will," and "whatever we ask," that he is specifically

expecting us to have a broad range of things that we're going to speak to God about. There are no limits on it; everything that is important to us is the proper subject of prayer. There's no spiritual graduate degree expected for those who will be successful in prayer. In fact, childlikeness is recommended in general.

This freedom to "ask anything" directly challenges a frequently encountered appeal to God--the bargaining prayer. It goes something like this: "Lord, I've never presumed to ask you for anything before. But now I promise that if you'll save the life of my child (or whatever the issue is), I'll give you my whole life, I'll change utterly, I'll be different forever." Such prayers may sound impressive, but they are not very mature. When we say, "I've never asked you for anything before, Lord," the question we should hear the Lord asking back is, "Why not? What do you mean, you've never asked me for anything before? I've been waiting all this time for you to ask me for things!" There's no advantage to withholding requests from him. He wants to hear from us. We don't bargain with God to get him to give us the one or two things that we hold off until the end--as if that's wiser than being people who have long ago learned to walk into our Father's presence and talk to him about our lives, because we know that he is trustworthy.

The second point in John's teaching on prayer is that God hears us. Prayer is not an attachment to an impersonal force, like the Star Wars experience in which Jedi knights tap into the Force, which enhances their ability to fight with light swords and so forth. That is completely impersonal. Prayer is not like that. The living God, who is a person, listens to us, hears our words, hears the heart behind the words.

My daughter took a class for her psychology degree last year, and she would periodically describe it to us. I'm sure it has a much more profound title in the catalog, but the students call it Rat Lab. Each student is given a rat at the beginning of the semester, and they put it through its paces in various ways. It learns to press a lever to get food or water.

Speaking to God about the things that matter to us is not learning to press levers to get pellets, or learning to access some impersonal mechanism that will get us what we want. It's learning to talk to a person who hears us.

The third point flows from the second. If there's a person who loves us and attends to us and hears us when we pray about what matters to us, then he grants our requests if they are in accordance with his will. We're told that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. That makes sense if you realize that you're in conversation with somebody who is much wiser than you are, who knows you better than you know yourself, who knows the future completely, and who is committed to your well-being. Then the best possible thing that you can pray about to such a person is what he knows is best for you. And so the heart of the life of prayer is learning to understand our Father so much that we are asking him in this conversation for things that he delights to give us, learning to care about things that he cares about. Thus prayer changes us more than it changes anything else.

It would be an insult to ask God for things that were not his choice to give. Suppose we were to say, in effect (presumably we would couch it in different language), "Lord, make this business venture of mine successful. I'm asking you for great wealth, because in the long run, if I have enough money I don't have to pay so much attention to you after all. I can be independent of all this religious bit, and money will be my security." If that were the nature of our prayer, it would be insulting to the One who hears us. He wants to teach us to depend on him, not to become independent of him.

In this regard I was thinking of an incident that happened to me when I was nine or ten. I was hanging around with the wrong sort of kids, some older hoodlums. We lived in a town near Chicago that had railroad tracks that went through it. Also in our town was a yard that had large towers under which a train could pass, and which would open up and dump their contents into the open freight cars. There were a number of these towers lined along the tracks. A couple of other young guys and I wanted to emulate the older kids, so we went along with them one day to the railroad yard, climbed one of these towers, which had gravel in it, and spent the afternoon throwing rocks at the trains that went by. Of course I knew it was wrong and felt guilty about being there, but I wanted to impress these older guys.

After awhile, it occurred to somebody that the trains actually stopped at the next station, where they could call

the police and report what was going on. So we hustled down the tower and were hurrying through the train yard. Two other younger guys and I got pushed to the back as the older boys leaped over a fence into the alley to make their getaway. But just as it finally became our turn to leap over the fence, two cop cars pulled into the alley at either end and busted the older guys. If they'd been smart and had thrown us over the fence, we would have been the ones caught. We younger guys sneaked out of the train yard and eventually made our way home.

I'm sure I was completely distraught when I got home, because my parents immediately knew something was wrong and asked me about it. I blurted out the whole awful story. I remember saying to my dad, "The police are after us. Will you tell them I wasn't there? Will you call the police and tell them it wasn't me?" He said, "No, I won't. You're asking me to lie for you. I'm not a liar. I'm not going to do what you're asking me to do because it's wrong. It's not who I am, and it's wrong for you." I finally broke down and said, "Dad, will you help me?" And he said, "Yes, of course, I'll help you. You need help, you're my son." He took me to the police station and stood nearby as I was lectured by a stern, frightening officer. He even continued with some stern lessons of his own about peer pressure and how to choose friends.

My first request of my father was an insult, although I didn't know it at the time. I was just desperate. But the request for him to help me lined up with what he himself desired and knew was best. That is what John is teaching about praying according to the will of God. God knows better than we do what we need. He will not give us what is contrary to his will because it would demean him and ruin us for him to do so. But he will give us what is best for us because that's what his will is. So we need to pray according to the will of God.

The fourth point regarding prayer is that there is no uncertainty as to the granting of requests. John is very clear about that in verse 15. If God hears us, we know that whatever we have asked of him, it becomes our possession. We have what we have requested if it is according to his will. What John does not comment on, however, is how and when God will grant the requests that are according to his will. Of course, that is one of the great dilemmas of faith. We already have things that we may not be able to put our hands on yet. The request has been granted, but in God's timing. It may actually come about in a way, a time, or a place that surprises us, because that is better for us.

### **The consequences God wants for us**

Now John gives us an enormously difficult example in verses 16 and 17: "If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death." These verses have been the dilemma of commentators as far back as we have records of them. John is illustrating his point, and it's not hard to see that that's what he's doing, but it's not clear what he means. He is speaking of making a petition according to the will of God. Doing so is a wonderful expression of life in the body---we're for each other, members of one another, and if I see my beloved brother or sister caught in a sin, I'm encouraged to pray for them, and then God will give them life.

But then John tosses in the part about sins that are unto death or not, and that's where it becomes confusing. It's confusing in a number of ways. First of all, how can a brother, someone who is clearly a Christian, be subject to the penalty of death? Second, how is it possible to say that there are some sins that are not unto death, as he does at the end of verse 17? From elsewhere in Scripture we know that the wages of sin is death; sin leads to death as the inevitable outcome. Either Jesus died for us, or we're going to die in our own sin. What can John be talking about, therefore?

There are three options, and they have to do with the ways that life and death are described in the Bible. These terms mean different things in different contexts. The ideas are related, but they're not the same. For instance, in Ephesians 2:4-5 Paul writes about salvation as a life-and-death issue. We pass from death to life in coming to Christ. We were dead in our sins, but we are made alive together with Christ. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions---it is by grace you have been saved." I don't think that applies here, because John is talking about someone who is already a brother, not someone who is moving from eternal death to eternal life.

A second way in which the Bible talks about life and death is in regard to ordinary mortality. You're either dead or alive. Everybody reading this is alive. But if someone were to have a heart attack and stop breathing, they would be dead. Again, there are hundreds of examples in the Bible. For instance, 1 Samuel 28:3: "Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel mourned for him and buried him in his own town of Ramah." It just means he died in the ordinary course of things. So the terms life and death can refer to mortality.

But there's a third and in some ways more subtle way in which life and death are used, and I think this is the one that applies to these verses. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Here life doesn't mean just breathing, and it doesn't even mean salvation. It means vitality, abundance, joy, delight, enthusiasm, when life tastes good, when you can't wait to bound out of bed the next day. That can be called life. The opposite is boredom, dryness, restriction, and depression, when everything caves in, when our experience is increasingly tasteless. And that can be called death. Psalm 116:3:

"The cords of death entangled me,  
the anguish of the grave came upon me;  
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow."

This psalmist living a very sorrowful life talks about it as the cords of death.

If that's what John means here, I think the point of his teaching is this: There are times when our sins lead to hard consequences, restriction, dryness, sorrow, to this kind of death; and it is God's will that they do so, at least for a time. And at least for the season that God intends it, we aren't to pray that our brother be relieved of his difficult consequences because God is going to use them.

There are other sins in which struggle, hurt, restriction, and hardship need no longer be born by the individual, when they are suffering false guilt, living under burdens that don't have to be there. These are not consequences intended by God to instruct us. In such cases a brother is living with sorrow or unnecessary restrictions. We can pray for them and the Lord will set them free. Past sins that continue to demean us don't have to anymore. Self-imposed loneliness and lack of joy can be left behind.

Let me say that thoughtful commentators have many positions on this passage. There are a great many who will say that death means physical death here, that there are individuals whose sins are going to lead God to call them home. That also is possible, but I think this other interpretation makes more sense.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 has seen exalted visions and has been to heavenly places, and he says, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" There was some physical torment, difficulty, restriction, or struggle that God had placed in Paul's life to keep him from the sin of arrogance. He might have had glaucoma or malaria; there are a number of guesses as to what his illness was. But when he asked God to deliver him from this experience of death and loss, God said, "No, I'm not going to take it away. We've been over this three times, now stop praying about it."

It may well be that what John is referring to here is the case when the Lord leaves some difficulty in our life---which John calls a form of death---because in the long run it's better for us. So don't pray for that to change, because it's God's will. We learn to think like the Lord. There are times when we shouldn't muddle around trying to make consequences go away for people who need those consequences in their lives.

### **The One who keeps us safe from sin**

The last paragraph is also difficult. Verse 18: "We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin [present tense]; the one who was born of God keeps him safe...." The latter clause is a reference to Jesus. Jesus is called our older brother in Scripture, the first-born from the dead. Notice the past tense, he was born. Jesus comes to the aid of those who are born of God, and the one born of God doesn't sin. John has been over this territory a couple of times.

It makes the most sense to me to believe that here John is not arguing the point anymore, but asserting it. In 1:7-9, for instance, he had to argue the point: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins...." There he was saying, "You cannot continue to lie to yourself and be a Christian. You can't cover up sin, hide it, defend it, promote it, like it, and be a Christian. There are creative ways to be hypocritical. Stop doing it. Confess your sins."

In 3:9 he says, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin...." And he argues against false teachers who were telling people it was okay to sin. But here John is no longer trying to teach the point, he's just asserting it.

What he is saying is, "The one born of God will not continue to sin, but we're tempted every day to continue to sin. And it's the same kinds of sins, and we wish we were different. So we feel vulnerable, and that's when the liars have access to us. Who is going to help us straighten our lives out? Where can we turn for help to be made different?" John is very clear. It's Jesus who will help us, not the guru with the magic potion or the new spiritual dance or some bizarre expression of some new insight and exalted speech. It is not the next guy in the next church holding the next seminar with the next new idea. The One who was born, our older brother, the Lord Jesus, keeps us safe. The evil one can't touch us. We're never going to be completely subject to the wiles of the devil again, because Jesus is going to help us. That's John's point. He's not trying to persuade us to not continue in sin, but rather to identify the Champion we can turn to for help.

He says in verse 19, "We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one." Everywhere you turn human beings do terrible things. They give way in either subtle or overt fashion to all kinds of destructive habits. Everywhere you look the world seems in the grip of the evil one. But we're different, something has changed: God is present in our lives, and he can be trusted. So we come back to the issue of knowledge a third time in this paragraph. Verse 20: "We know also 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...." The word true here is the opposite of phony, not the opposite of false. We know him who is real, "---even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true [real] God and eternal life."

The argument John wants his children to understand is that we already have everything we need. We are swans, however it appears to us. We have capabilities that go beyond our ability to measure. We don't need to be taken in by the next religious bandwagon. We are already in Christ, and he has given us understanding, he can be trusted, he will save us, it is he who will keep the evil one from touching us. It is him we approach boldly in prayer because he hears us.

### **Little compromises**

And then comes the final verse of the shepherd: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." I think what John is doing at the very end is acknowledging that most sheep fall into trouble in stages. We don't get taken off by the lion and the bear first thing. What usually happens is that we compromise---a little bit of faithlessness, seeking some minor help from that which is not God, such as luck or a talisman. The ancient world was filled with idols. When Paul walked into the city of Athens, he said that city was overwhelming with its idols. Remember, Demetrius the silversmith in Ephesus led a whole guild of people making figurines of Diana and selling them. There were gods and goddesses, incense burners, scarabs, and all kinds of other things that people could carry around in their pocket, hang around their neck, or stick on their doorpost. There were little gyrations that they could go through, and burnings of incense and all kinds of things, just for luck, just as an additional way of promoting their best interests. John is saying, "Don't play around with faithlessness. Don't give in to the little ways in which you can be persuaded that something other than the Lord is going to meet your needs."

To continue with the analogy of the shepherd with the sheep, in the long run it can be the little burrs that get under your skin, the insects that fly in your face, the small ditch that you might stumble into, that can be as dangerous as being carried off by the lion or the bear. The good shepherd has to be concerned that we don't

even start down the path that's going to lead to our destruction.

That's the end of the story. It begins with a little bit of selling out. So the good shepherd ends with the warning, "My little children, keep yourself from idols." This shepherd who cares enough to talk about the important things, who cares enough to challenge what is wrong, who speaks in loving terms and hard terms, who holds high the truth and makes sure that we know what the source of our hope is, ends his book in a great way: Don't compromise.

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Steve Zeisler  
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