

## More Than Three Wishes

### Without a Doubt, Part 6

*1 John 5:14-15*

Many years ago, Rod Serling penned an episode of that old television series – some of you are old enough to remember called, *The Twilight Zone* – in which a kind old antique dealer happens to release a genie from an old bottle.

The Genie immediately promises to grant the man 3 wishes, but is warned by the Genie to choose carefully.

The man's first wish was for a million dollars, which the Genie granted immediately. When word got out that this man and his wife suddenly were millionaires, they were nearly drowned with requests and angry appeals from needy friends and family members for help . . . and they tried to respond to them all. As their money dwindled, the IRS also caught wind of this unusual amount of money, performed an audit and found this couple to actually owe the government all but 5 dollars of what remained in their bank account.

The Genie told the man, you know, you should have been more specific and asked for a million tax free dollars.

Next, the man wished for power – to be the leader of a powerful country in which he could never be voted out of office. That would solve his money problems and put him at the top of the food chain.

And so the clever genie immediately granted his request and the man found himself in a military bunker, deep underground, surrounded by frantic Nazi soldiers – and he himself was sporting a style of mustache that has never since come back into style.

Again, he hadn't been specific enough with the Genie and the mischievous Genie had simply made him take the place of Adolph Hitler.

The poor antique dealer had no choice but to use his third and final wish to restore his life as it had been.<sup>i</sup>

Ask the average believer about going to God in prayer and you're likely to hear a combination of similar concerns and frustrations.

- Maybe I'm not asking God in just the right way.
- Maybe He's not answering me because I'm leaving something out.
- Or maybe God doesn't really want to help out.
- Is God like a Genie who grants wishes only to Christian's He really likes?
- Do my prayers really matter at all to God?
- In fact, with all that He has going on, is my presence welcomed . . . or am I just getting in the way?

The Apostle John knows that every Christian asks those kinds of questions and has those kinds of doubts nibbling away at his faith.

And John is on a mission as he wraps up his first letter. He wants to remove all doubt that God loves His children; that God's purposes have already won the victory for His children; that God's children are forever secure in their salvation; and that the Christian can actually know for sure he's truly saved.

And now, we arrive at a text where John wants to remove all doubt about another critical issue for the believer.

He not only wants us to know – k n o w – that we are saved *by* God, he also wants us to k n o w that

we can talk to God – anytime, anywhere, about anything.

In the *14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> verses of First John 5*, John speaks to three critical issues regarding our prayer life.

He will talk about our direct confidence in our praying; He will bring up a defining condition to our praying. And He will reveal an interesting daily consequence of our praying.

Notice first:

### **1. The Direct Confidence of the Believer in Prayer**

Look at just the first phrase of *verse 14. This is the confidence which we have before Him . . .*

Literally, *this is the confidence we have* – in facing Him (or) face to face with Him.<sup>ii</sup>

Again, John uses this word confidence. He’s already used it 3 times in this letter – one related to our confidence in His soon appearing (2:28); in our confidence at the Day of Judgment (4:17) and then in chapter 3, verse 21 and here in chapter 5 he refers to the believer’s confidence in prayer.

Let me go back for just a moment and remind you that this word *confidence* is a compound word (παρρησια) which woodenly translates, free speech . . . it refers to open and honest speech. It’s a word that originally came out of the political scene where a candidate spoke openly and truthfully.<sup>iii</sup>

Over time it came to refer to openness in communication.

John is telling us that without a doubt we can have an open and transparent and honest conversation with God.

He invites that.

In other words, we have a listening audience.

God is not a Genie that you can briefly talk to or petition only 3 times in your lifetime and then, “poof” He’s gone.

He’s available 24/7. And His schedule is never too cluttered for one more appointment.

I read recently of a prank pulled years ago by the New Yorker magazine when the internet and email were just coming into popular use. They published Bill Gates email address, and in no time, he was swamped with thousands of messages. He had to install filters and systems to receive only the important messages and send all the others into cyber oblivion.<sup>iv</sup>

Maybe you’ve reached the point where you’re wondering what to do with all *your* email?

I love what one Christian school kindergarten teacher reported when she was teaching her students to memorize and quote the Lord’s Prayer. Andrew, age 5 and already very much into computers, was saying it out loud, but mixed it up a bit to say, “And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from email.”<sup>v</sup>

That’s a great prayer, isn’t it?

The truth is, John reminds us with this promise, that God is omniscient and omnipresent – which means He’s available to you personally and individually – face to face – whenever you so desire.

George Mueller once wrote, “When you go to God in prayer, you are not overcoming His reluctance – you are laying hold of His willingness.”<sup>vi</sup>

I love that – you are not overcoming His reluctance – “Oh no, here you come again!” – no, you are laying hold of His willingness.

Which is exactly where John begins to remove all doubt from the believer’s heart – This is the confidence which we have before Him.

Secondly, John not only addresses the confidence of the believer in prayer, he also addresses:

### **2. The Defining Condition for the Believer in Prayer**

*Notice again, And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us.*

In other words,

- We have a listening audience
- But we also have a limited arrangement

*If we ask anything according to His will He hears us.*

Now let me quickly point out that God hears everything you pray. But you’ll find in the New Testament that this idea of God *hearing* us relates to our sense of God *answering* us in the sense of us seeing something take place.<sup>vii</sup>

And if we really want to get technical, every prayer a believer prays is answered –

- it might be yes – because it is the will of God, which is what John is referring to here;
- it might be no, because it isn’t the will of God;

- it might be no, not that, God has something else in mind;
- and it might be yes, but not now.

There are at least four possible responses and they are *all* answers from God:

- Yes!
- No!
- Not that!
- Not now!
- If you prayed and nothing happened – that was God’s answer.
- If you prayed and something happened later – that was God’s answer.
- If you prayed and something different happened, that was God’s answer too.

John is actually referring to the confidence we can have as we mature in our praying – as we recognize that we’re not copping out when we ask God for whatever it is on our hearts and then close by saying, “*Not my will but Thine be done.*”

That’s exactly what Jesus Christ prayed in the Garden and that’s exactly how Jesus Christ taught us to pray.

We should always pray with the submissive spirit of “Thy will be done.”

Sometimes all we *can* pray is “Thy will be done” because we really don’t have a clue what His will is.

But would we ever dare to pray at all if we weren’t certain that God would always do what is best for us?<sup>viii</sup>

We might make a wish and end up in a bunker we don’t want to be in, or with money that only ruins our lives.

We might ask for that job, that relationship, that promotion, that cure, that opportunity, only to realize later that was the last thing we really needed.

Howard Hendricks, now with the Lord, was fond of telling the story as he spoke on the subject of prayer – in class one day he told us how as a young, single man preparing for the ministry, he would often be invited over by an eager mother in the church who had an eligible daughter. She would at some point say to him, “Howie, I’m praying that you’ll marry my daughter.” Hendricks would look at us with a grin on his face and say, “Have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayer?”

John is actually removing the mystery of prayer that can so often be discouraging to the believer.

If the answer doesn’t come that you’re looking for, you might be led to believe God isn’t listening or He doesn’t care.

No – it just so happens to be outside His divine purposes for your life – and He’s committed to giving you only what’s best for your spiritual growth and health.

Warren Wiersbe puts it, God has promised to meet your needs, not your greeds.<sup>ix</sup>

Someone might ask, “But if it’s God’s will for me to have something, they why should I even have to pray for it?”

Because according to God’s word, God not only ordains the end – the answer – but He also ordains the means to the end – and that’s prayer.<sup>x</sup>

In fact, while you’re praying in faith and confidence, the greater good is taking place in your own heart and character and life.

Kent Hughes in his excellent book, *The Disciplines of a Godly Man* writes that prayer is like time exposure to God. Our souls are like photographic plates, and Christ’s shining image is the light. The more we expose our lives to the sun of His [presence] for say five, ten, fifteen, thirty minutes or an hour a day – the more His image will be burned into our character – His love, His compassion, His truth, His integrity, His humility.<sup>xi</sup>

When we pray according toward a greater desire to see the will of God accomplished, our wills are bent toward His.

And that’s part of John’s point. He writes – have this confidence, as you pray according to His will” – the words, according to can be translated literally, down along, or in harmony with”.<sup>xii</sup>

So you pray in harmony or literally, down the line of God’s will.

Like children who learn to color over they learn to stay within the lines – and they also learn to choose the right crayon.

Your kids learned the same way, right? You start with pictures on your refrigerator; people with purple hair; green clouds; orange cows and horses.

Learning to pray is learning to pray according to the divine lines – according to this divine limitation – a limitation which is to God’s glory and our benefit – thy will be done.

But still, why pray?

I mean, if God is sovereign and His will is going to be accomplished, wouldn’t our growing confidence in Him actually lessen our need to pray?

Wouldn’t we just get up in the morning and say, “Okay, Lord . . . it’s all Yours . . . take it away!

You could reach that conclusion if all you think prayer was designed to do was change God's mind – or convince God to respond.

But God intends to change us through prayer. He intends to develop us and empower us and reshape our thinking through prayer – face to face communion with the Father.

And then, in the mystery of God's purposes, He actually uses our prayers to become the impetus for His own divine action.

R. A. Torrey, the president of Moody Bible Institute and later the Dean of BIOLA, once wrote out 10 reasons why you should pray just as the Apostle Paul exhorts us to pray about everything and without ceasing:

- **Number 1** – we should pray because there is a devil and because prayer is the God-appointed means of resisting him;
- **Number 2** – because prayer is God's way for us to obtain what we need from him;
- **Number 3** – because the apostles considered prayer to be the priority business in their lives;
- **Number 4** – because prayer played a very important part in the earthly life of our Lord – who is our example;
- **Number 5** – because prayer is the present ministry our Lord, since he is now interceding for us
- **Number 6** – because prayer is the means God has appointed for our receiving mercy from Him and help in time of need
- **Number 7** – because prayer is the means of obtaining the fullness of God's joy
- **Number 8** – because prayer with thanksgiving is the means of obtaining freedom from anxiety and peace which passes all understanding
- **Number 9** – because prayer is the means by which we are to keep watchful and be alert
- **Number 10** – summarizes everything else as Torrey writes – because prayer is used by God to promote our spiritual growth, bring power into our work, lead others to faith in Christ, and bring all other blessings to Christ's church.

So the question is not, should we pray or why should we pray but why in the world wouldn't we want to pray?

Prayer actually unites puny people like us with Almighty God in a miraculous partnership which He designed to fulfill His purposes – and by actually including our prayers, this then is the most noble and essential opportunity God has given to His children.

This is the direct confidence of the believer in prayer;

This is the defining limitation for the believer in prayer;

Thirdly, John points us to:

### 3. The Daily Consequences for the Believer in Prayer

*Notice verse 15. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask* – by the way, that word “if” – “and if” is a fulfilled condition in the Greek language – so the English reader can read it like this – and since we know that He hears us in whatever we ask – notice, *we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.*

- John's first point was that we have a listening audience;
- Secondly, we have a limitation to our appeal – that is, we pray for His will to be done.
- And now, we have a lifelong answer.

*We know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.*

Again, John uses the verb oida (οἶδα) translated *we know* – in other words, this is what we know, not by experience, but because God says so.

Which is a wonderful verb to use in this case; you might assume John would use ginowsko (γινώσκω) – knowledge gained by experience. But instead he uses oida (οἶδα) – knowledge gained by revelation.

You see, you would have expected John to write, “Listen, based on my experience, God answers prayer.”

But instead John effectively writes, “Based upon what God has revealed, God answers you.

I fear we're more like that preacher's kid who was out with his family for dinner. Pastor Bryan Wilkerson says they were seated at one of those themed restaurants for kids and there were TV's mounted on the walls, playing cartoons. Bryan writes, our youngest son, who was about 4 years old at the time, was glued to the TV screen above him where he was introduced for the first time to Road Runner cartoons. He watched a continuous loop

throughout dinner as Wile E. Coyote strapped on rocket-propelled roller skates, or shot himself out of a cannon, or launched himself from a giant slingshot in pursuit of that elusive Road Runner. After watching intently for nearly an hour, without taking his eyes off the screen, he quietly announced to our family, “No matter what he does . . . he’s never going to get that chicken.”<sup>xiii</sup>

He’s never going to get that chicken.

Maybe that’s how you would characterize your experience through prayer . . . you never can seem to catch that chicken – or that dream – or that desire – or that promotion.

Our experience isn’t to dictate to us the truth about prayer.

And to make matters even more challenging, everybody’s experience might be different than yours!

Would you notice that John gives us confidence in prayer, based, not on the experience of the moment, but upon the revelation of the Spirit; notice how John uses the present tense – *verse 15* again, the latter part – *we know that we have* – right now, in the present – *the requests which we have asked from Him*.

This is stunning confidence.

Present tense – *we have*, right now, *the requests which we have asked from Him*.

What does that mean? It means that whatever and whenever you are praying in a way that aligns with the will of God, you have – right now – His answer – even though it might not arrive for weeks or months or years – or in your lifetime!

I mentioned George Mueller earlier – a man who ran several orphanages in England, caring for several thousand orphans in the mid-1800’s. They reached a point where they were out of money and had begun to sell whatever they could do without. Then a woman arrived at the orphanage who had been traveling for four days, bringing with her enough money to cover all the bills and more. In other words, Mueller and his staff had been praying for four days for something God had effectively already answered. Mueller wrote the following observations in his journal – and I quote – Since the money had been so near the orphanage for several days without being given is proof that it was in the heart of God to help us; furthermore, God delights in the prayers of His children; further, God had allowed us to pray so long to try our faith, and to make the answer so much sweeter.<sup>xiv</sup>

I’m afraid we too easily reach the conclusion that God must not be involved, or interested, or caring . . . He hasn’t answered us in the way we’ve wanted for four days . . . or four months . . . or forty years.

Can I tell you that I am here today – having been exposed to the gospel because of the grace of God in a line of immigrants who settled in Minnesota – and way back there in my family tree was a great grandmother who was a believer; and she prayed for her husband to come to faith in Christ – she gave him a Bible nearly 100 years ago – and after 40 years of praying he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior – and it became obvious to everyone. All his children came to faith.

My own father can remember seeing his grandfather reading that Bible at their kitchen table on the farm – in fact, my father now has that Bible as a keepsake to remind him of the grace of God and the persistence of prayer.

Her request was in the will of God and yet God didn’t allow that request to be experienced for 40 years – so that for several generations, people would be marked by the discipline and diligence of prayer.

So where would John want this confidence to lead us?

I think John would say, “Let’s pray!”

Is our confidence in praying only for the sake of intellectual confidence?

John isn’t removing our doubts about prayer so that we’ll just be a little smarter – he wants us to be a lot more serious about it.

This is our glorious union with our sovereign Lord.

I want to close with an application to this exposition that might lead us to act upon our confidence.

The truth is, we struggle with consistency and passion in prayer because prayer isn’t an easy sport – its work.<sup>xv</sup>

We might not fully understand how prayer works, but we know that prayer works and we all know that prayer *is* work – hard work.

Let me encourage you and, as I have prayed for myself and for you, let me exhort you with this closing testimony.

J. Sidlow Baxter was a pastor in the early 1900’s. A prolific writer, powerful expositor, Baxter graduated from Spurgeon’s Pastor’s College in London and went on to be used greatly in his generation, on both sides of the pond. His life

literally spanned the 20<sup>th</sup> century – from 1903 to 1999.

He struggle with prayer as a pastor. He let his schedule get in the way of private communion. One morning he took a good look into his heart, and found there was a part of him that did not want to pray and a part that did. The part that did not was his emotions; the part which did was his intellect and will. He writes – and I quote, a rather lengthy page, but we’re finished when I’m through and I believe you will be equally inspired and challenged by this – As never before, my will and I stood face to face. I asked my will a straight question, “Will, are you ready for an hour of prayer?” Will answered, “Here I am, and I’m quite ready, if you are.” So Will and I linked arms and turned to go for our time of prayer. At once all the emotions began pulling the other way and protesting, “We are not coming.” I saw Will stagger just a bit, so I asked, “Can you stick it out, Will?” and Will replied, “Yes, if you can.”

So Will went, and we got down to prayer, dragging those wriggling, unruly emotions with us. It was a struggle all the way through. At one point, when Will and I were in the middle of an earnest intercession, I suddenly found one of those traitorous emotions had snared my imagination and had run off to the golf course; and it was all that I could do to drag the wicked rascal back. A bit later I found another of the emotions had sneaked away with some off-guarded thoughts and there I was in the pulpit, two days ahead of schedule, preaching a sermon I had not yet finished.

At the end of that hour, if you had asked me, “Have you had a good time?” I would have had to reply, “No, it has been a wearying wrestle with contrary emotions and a truant imagination from beginning to end.” What is more, that battle with the

emotions continued for weeks. If you had asked me at the end of that period, “Have you had a good time in your daily praying?” I would have had to confess, “No, at times it has seemed as though the heavens were brass, and God too distant to hear, and the Lord Jesus strangely aloof, and prayer accomplished nothing.”

Yet something was happening. For one thing, Will and I were teaching emotions that we were independent of them. In fact, one morning, just when Will and I were going for another time of prayer, I overheard one of the emotions whisper to the other, “Come on, you guys, it is no use wasting any more time resisting; they’ll go just the same.” That morning, for the first time, even though the emotions were completely uncooperative, they were at least quiet, which allowed Will and me to get on with prayer without distraction.

Then another few weeks later, what do you think happened? During one of our prayer times, when Will and I were no more thinking of emotions than of the man in the moon, one of the most vigorous of the emotions unexpectedly sprang up and shouted, “Hallelujah!” at which all the other emotions exclaimed, “Amen!” And for the first time, the whole of my being, intellect, will and emotion –was united in the coordinated operation of prayer.<sup>xvi</sup>

This is not only our directive . . . this is to be our delight.

Prayer is more than three wishes and a genie that soon disappears – it is face to face communion with the Almighty.

And there’s no doubt about it; God hears! God answers!

So let’s go pray.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/27/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *New Testament Insights on Romans* (Zondervan, 2010), p. 173

ii D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John* (BJU Press, 1991), p. 254

iii Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 789

iv Craig Brian Larson, *750 Engaging Illustrations* (Baker, 2007), p. 414

v Gusty Chartrand, *Kids of the Kingdom*, Today’s Christian (July/August 2003), p. 15 [www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2006/june/9060506.html](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2006/june/9060506.html)

vi Quoted by Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Real: First John* (David C. Cook, 1972), p. 176

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- vii James Montgomery Boice, The Epistles of John (Baker, 1979), p. 38
- viii Sam Gordon, Living in the Light: 1, 2, 3 John (Ambassador, 2001), p. 207
- ix Ibid, p. 178
- x Ibid, p. 176
- xi R. Kent Hughes, Disciplines of a Godly Man (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 81
- xii Hiebert, p. 255
- xiii Bryan Wilkerson, from the sermon, "What's Your Story?"; [www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2013/march/3031813.html](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2013/march/3031813.html)
- xiv Ibid, p. 283
- xv Adapted from Hughes, p. 102
- xvi Hughes, p. 103