

Confidence Before God
1 John 5:13–15
August 30, 2017

The word *confidence* shows up in regular conversation. With the football season approaching, coaches will talk about certain players, musing, ‘We’ve got a lot of confidence in Joe that he will perform well for us.’ By that he means, we’ve worked Joe a lot at his position and we really hope that he comes through, but who knows if he will!

Other times we hear someone trying to bolster a student or musician as they prepare for a test or a concert, ‘Come on! Be confident! I know that you can do it!’ What we mean is that you need to believe in yourself. You need to approach your task with the idea that you have prepared well and have the ability necessary to perform it.

Still other times we use confidence as a synonym for cockiness. With a bit of swagger, as I read one up-and-down athlete recently saying, ‘I have confidence that I can run a 4.3 forty.’ Even though he has not been clocked at that speed, he had enough swagger to claim that he could do it.

But that’s not how John uses the word *confidence* in this letter. There’s no bravado or cockiness or wishful thinking. In 1 John 3:21, we find an example similar to our text. “Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.” Then John moves forward with encouragement in prayer. So does he mean that if one’s heart doesn’t condemn him then he can approach God with swagger? Or that he has great confidence in his own abilities, so he can come before God with expectancy? Surely not.

This idea of confidence does convey *boldness* or an idea of *a joyful heart* instead of one sullen, withdrawn, and despairing [BDAG]. But that’s not found by looking inward and finding how much untapped ability lies waiting to spring forth before God. Instead, John sees confidence before God as the fruit of assurance of salvation. That’s why he spends so much time weaving and circling back to the necessity of assurance in relationship to God. If we lack assurance then we’re paralyzed in spiritual progress, prayer, witness, worship, fellowship, and battling sin. *But assurance that we belong to Christ gives us confidence before God to live the Christian life with fullness.* How does confidence with God change the way that we approach the Christian life? Let’s think about it.

1. Confidence with God flows out of assurance

John’s recipients felt the sting of lost confidence. That loss resulted from some, maybe a good number and maybe some quite popular, leaving their fellowship to embrace another teaching (2:19). Those that departed did so with swagger and confidence in their experiences (4:1–6). They lobbed verbal assaults and amplified innuendos at the church that they’d left, all in an attempt to crush their zeal and confidence with God.

So these believers struggled to move ahead and continue the race of the Christian life. At the root of their struggle was the assurance that they belonged to God through Christ. That struggle didn’t end in the first century. We face it today. What keeps us from assurance that we truly know Christ and the eternal life in Him?

Quite obviously, some have no assurance because they’re not born of God. That’s why John gives characteristics of the new birth: “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (4:7); “whoever believes [goes on believing] that Jesus is the Christ is born

of God, and whoever loves [continues loving] the Father loves the child born of Him” (5:1); “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world” (5:4). Loving God and loving His children, believing Jesus Christ revealed in the gospel, and battling sin give evidence of the new birth. Absence of those characteristics gives reason for doubting.

Struggles with assurance

Generally, though, we struggle with assurance for a number of reasons. It may be that some particular sin has snared us and left us wondering how we could belong to Christ with that kind of grip by sin. Or there is a persistency in several sins that causes us to feel condemned.

Or it may be that we’ve gotten lazy and neglected the means of grace given to us through the spiritual disciplines, corporate worship, and relationship to the body of Christ. Such laziness and neglect robs us of assurance.

Or sometimes it’s our wiring—our emotional and mental make-up. A perfectionist tendency or proneness toward despondency or the inability to concentrate for sustained periods may be part of our physiological and psychological wiring. We feel hopeless because we don’t seem to have power to get a grip on these tendencies which stand between us and assurance. We need the Lord to conquer our hearts to overcome the tendency to doubt and unbelief attached to our wiring (3:20–21).

Others have been duped by false teaching. That’s why John warns us to test the spirits to see if they are from God (4:1–3). Teaching that appeals to our desires and sounds interesting and merely stirs our emotions while bypassing the mind may lure us away from assurance.

Sometimes we go through periods of doubt that just cannot be explained by anything but an attack of the adversary.

Confidence through assurance

So if we’ve succumbed to any of these things, assurance may seem to be on another planet, beyond reach, and something we can never attain. But John objects in every case. He shows the application of confidence before God in our prayer lives, “**And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.**” Yet that *confidence*, as we noted, is not a swagger before God or reliance on our abilities or trust in our merit with this holy God. Instead, it flows from assurance.

“**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.**” John takes a look back at the entire letter as he draws it to a close and explains, ‘Here’s the reason that I wrote you who trust in Jesus, God’s Son who came to redeem us. I want you to know that you who believe in Him have eternal life. Knowing changes everything. Knowing keeps you persevering. Knowing gives you courage to live as Christians in the face of the world. Knowing spurs you to love one another. Knowing gives you confidence in prayer.’

For those thinking it impossible to know that we’re eternally saved, First John goes right to the heart of that faulty belief system. John declares that assurance of relationship to Christ is the reason he wrote to them. In this case he identifies one qualification for assurance: “**you who believe in the name of the Son of God.**” Believing in or trusting in

or relying upon *the name of the Son of God*, is not just a theological concept. It's a relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Some in Ephesus whom John wrote denied that Jesus is the Son of God who came in the flesh to bear our sins away through His substitutionary death at the cross (cf. 4:2, 9–10). But for those relying upon Jesus Christ and what He did at the cross, **“you who believe,”** then there's the certainty that you have eternal life. You didn't earn it. You don't deserve it. You can never do enough to merit it. You cannot offer your deeds as down payment and let God do the rest. It is in Christ alone, propitiating God regarding your sins (4:9) that you have eternal life.

John equates relationship to Christ or abiding in Him, as **“eternal life.”** In 5:20, the language makes this clear. “And we know 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, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” That's exactly what Jesus declared in His high priestly prayer, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). Eternal life is more than a place and more than an unending era and more than eternal mansions with golden streets—it's relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Knowing that changes everything.

2. Confidence with God spurs God-centered praying

The ESV correctly adds the conjunction “And” at the start of this verse. That's critical to understanding John's explanation for *confidence with God*. Notice the flow of the language. **“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 this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”** How does that confidence with God work deeply into our minds and hearts, giving us impetus to seek His face and ask for our needs in prayer? It's not because we upped our giving or helped the poor or did acts of service or led someone to Christ. It flows out of assurance, which in turn spurs us to God-centered praying with expectancy.

So John explains that the roots of a God-honoring prayer life spring out of assurance that we belong to God through Christ. That certainty gives us **“confidence with God,”** the assurance of relationship that allows us to boldly approach God's throne because He counts us as His own sons and daughters through Christ.

Now, imagine that scene for a moment. Who of us would just traipse into the Oval Office or the Royal Quarters at Buckingham Palace? There's protocol, for one thing, and then you have to know someone to get in.

But that's small stuff in comparison to what John talks about. Weak, sinful people who had lived as rebels and anarchists, expressing our hatred for God in multiple ways until God pursued us with the gospel, can *now* approach Him with *confidence*. And we don't sneak in, for none can do that, but He welcomes us into His presence with open arms, warmth beyond anything that we can comprehend, and infinite love.

Knowing Him through Christ gives us confidence to come before Him and bare our souls, unloading the weight of concern and need at His feet. And He welcomes us, and our loads! As Tim Keller quaintly expressed it, “The only person who dares wake up a king at 3:00 AM for a glass of water is a child. We have that kind of access” [[@timkellernyc](#)].

Praying according to God's will

This confidence is so experientially real that **“if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”** Now, someone says, ‘There’s the kicker! So we can’t just ask whatever we want and expect God to hear.’ To that I’d respond, why would someone who has been given assurance that he belongs to Christ want to bring a haphazard grocery list to God? If we belong to Him, don’t we want to do His will? Don’t we want, not just our living, but also our praying to center in His will?

Here’s where I think that we can get sidetracked from praying according to God’s will. Do we know God’s will perfectly? No we don’t, but we do know a lot of it since it is found in His revealed will in Holy Scripture. So when we pray the Word—in its biblical context, of course—we faithfully pray in the will of God. If God has promised it—again, consider the biblical context instead of random promises that may be for a particular person or nation and not applicable to us—then zero in on it in prayer. By the way, that’s another important reason to learn how to rightly interpret Scripture. It reinforces and strengthens our prayer lives because we’re learning to pray the will of God accurately.

But what of those situations where we don’t have a promise from God or some kind of clear precedent to guide our praying? Paul acknowledged that we don’t know how to pray as we ought, so God has given the Holy Spirit to help our weakness, so that “the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).

Such praying **“according to His will,”** means that we approach the Lord with hearts of submission. We humble ourselves before Him—which knowing that we have confidence with Him and that He hears us generates humility in His presence. We seek His will in a matter. Jesus even gave us an example of that in the Garden just before His betrayal and arrest: “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). He felt confidence in asking, knowing that the Father heard His prayer, and yet entrusting the response to the wisdom and purpose of the Father for His life.

When we pray **“according to His will,”** we pray His promises and we trust His purposes as He hears and responds.

God hears and responds

This confidence goes even further, **“He hears us.”** We’re not tossing up random prayers hoping that they will overcome the deafness of a stone deity, as we find in so many religions. We pray to a God who has redeemed us at the cost of the bloody death of His Son. This God gives those who believe in His Son the assurance that they have eternal life, and with this assurance, confidence to ask according to His will. And **“He hears us. 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.”**

Have you ever thought, ‘Why would God listen to me?’ Honestly, the Creator of the universe, the one who holds the cosmos in place, the one who sustains life and breath, and the one for whom all exists for His pleasure—listen to us? Oh, it’s not because we eloquently word our prayers with such language that would make the ancient orator Demosthenes blush. It’s not that we can do something for this eternal God to whom the worlds belong. He hears us because out of His great love, He sent His Son “so that we

might live through Him” as His people (4:9). And now He turns His ears toward our faint cries and pleas with readiness to grant what we’ve requested of Him.

Confidence with God flows out of assurance; confidence with God then spurs God-centered praying, and that confidence with God leads to expectancy in prayer. If He hears us, John declares, **“we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.”** As Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it, “It means that His ears are open to us; it means that His heart is enlarged toward us” [*Life in God*, 119]. If that’s the case, then brothers and sisters, let us pray with expectancy. John Newton penned it well, “Though art coming to a King, large petitions with thee bring.” Let’s not be like the religious unbelievers who rattle off pre-formed prayers with monotone regularity, not expecting this god to whom they pray to do anything. Let’s pray as His children. Let’s pray as those He has pursued through Christ to redeem us as His own. Let’s pray knowing that He welcomes us confidently into His presence. Let’s pray knowing that He hears us. Let’s pray expecting that in His wisdom, timing, and power He will answer us.

And that kind of praying flows out of assurance for those who believe in the name of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Let us look to Christ, rest our hope and eternity in Him as Redeemer and Lord. Then let us come before God with confidence that He hears and answers. That is confidence with God through faith in Christ.