

*A Summary Statement on Assurance (1 Jn 5.14-21)*

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**And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. <sup>16</sup> If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life-- to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. <sup>17</sup> All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death. <sup>18</sup> We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. <sup>19</sup> We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. <sup>20</sup> 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. He is the true God and eternal life. <sup>21</sup> Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 Jn 5.14-21 ESV)**

Introduction

The topic of love, God's love, our love for Him, and our love for others is present on every page of this book. It is easy to conclude that God's love for His children is really at the heart of everything. Therefore, it is not a surprise to find expressions of family love throughout that include words of hope, comfort, encouragement, and assurance.

This letter directs us to a vision of the working love of God that is full of incentives to abide in God knowing that He abides in us. Even the last section (5.1-13) about world-overcoming faith is about the right kind of love, instead of a world-loving spirit. The writer has brought us to our text (5.14-21) by an exposition of the sending of Christ into the world (1.1-4) and its implications for faith (5.1-13), for true faith that flows from the working love of God (4.12-21). So, John ponders the love of God and reflects God's heart when he expresses great desire to comfort and reassure the children of God in their walk in faith. Therefore, he closes the book, the truest of a true love letter, with "a summary statement on assurance." He discusses assurance regarding fellowship with God, sin in the saint, and the truth of our standing in Christ.

I. Assurance regarding fellowship with God

He approaches fellowship as a matter of confidence that we have (NAS) **before Him** in prayer (5.14): **and this is the confidence which we have before Him...if we ask anything**. Boldness in prayer has been on the table before in the context of having hearts that do not condemn us when we approach God. Hence the promise in 3.22: **and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him**. In confident boldness we enter into the presence of the triune God to ask for things, and **whatever we ask we receive**. This is truly an amazing promise. Of course, receiving whatever we ask is qualified by obedience that pleases God. Now, here in chapter 5, the apostle talks about fellowship in the language of God hearing us; we address Him with our petitions and He listens, He hears. Moreover, He grants our requests for whatever we ask... with the important qualification that we ask (5.14b) **according to His will**. Notice that in both chapter 3 and 5, the whatever of our sinning (3.20; 5.16) is matched by the whatever of our asking and the matching is remarkable because the promise that we hold dear with confidence is that **whatever we ask we receive from him**. Sinners all, sinners ask, and sinners receive!

Clearly John wishes to reiterate and confirm these thoughts about assurance regarding fellowship with God by prayer; that the Lord attends to our prayers with listening ears and a longing heart to grant whatever we request from Him. Hence, the relevance of commandment-keeping and knowing the will of God as to what pleases Him. It is true beyond a shadow of doubt that when we ask for things according to His will, He both hears and answers: He listens to

what we request and He grants what we seek. This is how the apostle revisits God's love that comforts and assures; he feels compelled to do so before he pens the last sentence of the letter.

## II. Assurance regarding sin in the saint

As he leaves the subject of assurance regarding fellowship with God in verse 15, John continues with the lofty theme of prayer, including answered intercessory prayer in verse 16. So the passages overlap. In one sense 5.16 illustrates the point made earlier that the Lord hears and answers prayer that accords with the will of God. But in another sense, 5.16 transitions the core thought from fellowship in prayer to sin in the lives of God's children. John brings up the matter of a brother committing a sin and ties it to prayer. What he says about prayer here is quite striking and a challenge to understand, as the inclusion of prayer falls away when the subject of sin comes center stage. There are two main points: assurance that comes from the help of others and assurance that comes from the work of God.

A. On one hand, regarding sin, we have assurance due to the help of others (in 16-17)

This side of the story, breaks out into promise, problem, and summation.

1. First, we have the promise of life through prayer

Praying for a struggling Christian is surely being a help to him before the Lord regarding his need of sanctification. He is in a constant battle with sin in the cycle of being exposed in the light, confessing his sin, seeking righteousness in the word, and then -full circle- being exposed by the light of the word again. This is not just going in circles; it is a rising spiral of progress in godliness, as taught by Jesus in the beatitudes (Mat 5). Clearly the godly are sinners still. Our brothers and sisters need intercession on their behalf. The exhortation is that we intercede for them at times of need when we observe them committing a sin (1 Jn 5.16a, **If anyone sees his brother committing a sin**). The sin in view takes place within the limits of the godliness spiral. So, the sin we see, he says, is **a sin not leading to death**. Literally, he speaks of **sin not to death**. In the letter, this sin has the context of Christ as the eternal God (1.2) who gives eternal life to those who confess His name (2.23-25). Therefore, the sin is remnant sin in the life of the saint who commits sin with a repentant disposition (1 Jn 1.9). The consequence is not eternal death for he knows God's love and does not fear punishment, as he is being perfected in God's love (4.18). The life he possesses is eternal; therefore, he cannot sin to death.

Now we have to enquire about God giving him life in answer to prayer: **If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life**. He has eternal life; his life is permanent so this cannot be the life God will grant to him through prayer. It has to be the life of the sanctified. He will grow in the Christian life, in the life of a sinner-saint. John repeats the point that he is speaking about **those who commit sins that do not lead to death**. He repeats for emphasis. The bottom line is that our prayers for one another in regard to our sanctification are an effectual means in the hand of God for meaningful growth however hidden to our eyes or unseen. For brothers and sisters, we need not doubt; God will use our prayers to help them along the way, even if we cannot see how it all works out. That is the promise of life through prayer.

2. Now, second, the problem of death without prayer

Very precisely, he identifies the kind of sin he has in mind for which intercession is right and proper. Then, to make his meaning clear he puts forth a contrast stating that **there is sin that leads to death**. This has to be the opposite of the life of a sinner-saint and the repentant life. It is sinful conduct of a person who is not a saint, who does not live in tension with his sinfulness, who does not live in the spiral of progress in godliness. Instead, he commits himself to lawlessness; his sinning manifests that commitment (1 Jn 3.4) and the end is eternal death.

At this point, a difficulty presents itself: the problem of death without prayer. The contrast of a sin not to death and sin that is to death is part of the discussion of prayer and particularly intercessory prayer. It is part of the story about petitions that God hears and answers. We have confidence before the Lord (5.14): **that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us;** and (5.15): **And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.** The difficulty is that he explains that it is not God's will to pray for people that we see committing a sin that leads to death (16b): **There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.** Again, the sin that leads to death is conduct of a person who does not live in tension with his sinfulness, who does not live in the spiral of godliness. Instead, he commits himself to lawlessness; his sinning manifests that commitment (1 Jn 3.4). To be lawless is to live outside the boundaries of God's holy law. It is more than transgressing the boundaries at specific points. It comes to expression in the claim of autonomy, independence, and self-law. It is not simply to fail to measure up to God's standard, the standard of His own holiness and commandments, but it is to oppose His holiness, His law, and His glory. To be lawless is to be antithetical to God's standards and to the fact that in Him is no darkness at all (1.5). Simply put, it is to be anti-God and anti-Christ. When the sinful conduct we observe is of that type that is of the antichrist, then John does not give a command that we **pray for that**. At the least, he does not commend prayer for people who sin in this way. This means that we do not ask that they live; that they grow in the fruitful life of those who battle with sin. It means that we do not ask that this walk in lawlessness not bring them eternal death. Do not intercede for them in that way that contradicts the will of God who pronounces eternal death upon those who practice lawlessness.

If this reading of the text is correct, then he precisely tells us that such a prayer would not accord with the will of God. It is a different matter to bless those who curse you and to love your enemies. But the text informs us that even our prayers for our enemies have necessary limits. Comparably, we give the gospel to all people everywhere, but with limits because we are not to throw the pearls of the gospel to swine and dogs when we observe the swine-like and dog-like response to the precious words of truth. Likewise, there are times when the persons we observe sinning are to be left to themselves, left to their sins without our prayers that their sinful conduct not lead to eternal death. Without more information here, it would seem (as in the swine response parallel) that there may be times in the future (other times) that we might pray for these specific people when they express less adamant determination to live without God. So, we need to be charitable even as we interact with false prophets, antichrists, and their followers. It would seem

that a time may come when they trample on the pearls of the gospel with less intensity and then we may pray for them for the gift of the repentant heart.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Third, the summation about life and death

Now, to catch our breath, in 5.17 John repeats the point emphatically that saints are sinners who are not bound for eternal death... yes... sinners who are not bound for eternal death: **All wrongdoing is sin, [thus to death] but there is sin that does not lead to death.** The contrast about prayer confirms the confidence that we have before the Lord in fellowship with Him in prayer. It confirms the importance of intercessory prayer for God's children in their struggles on the path of sanctification. Therefore, we are to pray for them for their progress in holiness, and we do so boldly and confidently in the presence of the triune God (1 Jn 3.19-24). That is how assurance regarding sins we commit comes from the help of others.

B. On the other hand, regarding sin in the saint assurance comes from the work of God in Christ, from what we know about His work.

#### 1. First, God prevents us from sinning

God's people continue to commit sin but they do not sin the sin of death, which is a meaningful way of interpreting the claims that they do not sin (5.18a): **We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning.** More pointedly the NAS has: **We know that no one who is born of God sins;** that is, in the way of the sin that is to death. This strong language is also in 3.6, NAS: **No one who abides in him sins** and in 3.9, NAS: **No one born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.** That he "cannot" sin (3.9b) means he is not able to sin, **because God's seed abides in him.** Remember: reference to **God's seed** builds on the analogy of human procreation; seed is literally sperm (the Greek is σπέρμα, *sperma*). Hence the translation offspring who are the descendants that come from the sperm of the father. John thus graphically and powerfully underscores the fact of the new birth by which fallen sinners are made family members. They are born into the family; God gives them birth. His work is based on the accomplished propitiation of Christ. Therefore, once they become His children, they always remain His children because His birthing work keeps them in His family forever. Membership in the family of God is unending because (3.9): **His seed abides in him;** that is, His originating work in the new birth is once and for all. To be emphatic, he repeats that a saint does

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to find the right way to state this. Does this mean that there are particular times when we may not (are not to) pray for people for their repentance; i.e., when they have a swine-like attitude to the gospel? It seems helpful to keep a number of things in mind at once regarding the sin to death. This sin is the sin of antichrist that is more than denying that Jesus is God in the flesh. It includes proclaiming to be God's prophet in fellowship with God and attempting to deceive the children of God point blank. Add the fact that they are in and around the church and thus are not brothers but brothers in name only (a so called brother is to be treated differently). Thus, they seek to trample the gospel and God's beloved. Eyeball to eyeball, you know that Jesus is God by the testimony of the Spirit and this false prophet tells you not to believe it; he says "Jesus is not God in the flesh." He sins the sin to death and you know it unquestionably. At the least, John says you do not need to pray for him. The implication is that this would not be praying according to God's will; this is a prayer that God will not hear and answer. And we must keep in mind that the main point of the text regarding prayer is that God will hear and answer our requests for the sanctification of our brothers and sisters in their struggles with sin.

What else may take place in the future after this observation of the sin that is to death, John does not say. For now, like Jesus, the apostle teaches that you are to shake the dust off your feet in a virtual consigning to the day of judgment (Mat 10.14-15). We must also factor in our Lord's command not to cast your pearls before swine. Obviously, there is no rush to judgment here for charity and non-censoriousness must guide us along with the golden rule. There is no temporal execution; nor a giving over to Satan explicitly, as in 1 Cor 5.5. The sin is in your face, you know Jesus to be God in the flesh and the antichrist seeks to deceive you into denying Jesus yourself. But this you cannot do because you know Christ by the Spirit's witness (5.7), you are kept from this sin by the new birth so that you cannot sin; i.e., the sin to death (3.9), and Jesus will not let the evil one and his antichrists even touch you to your eternal harm (5.18).

not sin (3.9c): **because he has been born of God**. So our text, 5.16, makes it clear that Christians continue to have relapses. They must live out their lives in this incomplete state of affairs, but at no time are they in danger of eternal punishment. That was settled at the cross, in their new birth, and in God's abiding work of love in them by the Holy Spirit (1 Jn 4.12-21).

## 2. Second, Christ prevents us from sinning

John also presents the assuring fact that we are kept by Christ who Himself was in a sense born of God (5.18b): **We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning** [does not sin], **but he who was born of God protects him**. Being born of God does not pertain to our Lord's eternal and unchanging relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit. His birth of God is a matter of the fulfillment of the covenant of redemption in history. Jesus is the only begotten, preeminent, firstborn, incarnate Son by the Holy Spirit through Mary. John is saying that Jesus was sent into the world by the love of God (4.9) **that we might live through Him**. By this He resolved the problem of punishment due to us by being **the propitiation for our sins** (4.10). But He also settled the matter once and for all that we can never return to the state of sin as lawlessness, which is to live outside the boundaries of God's holy law. We can never return to the adamant claim of autonomy, independence, and self-law in out and out opposition to His holiness, His law, and His glory. We cannot, we know we cannot commit the sin of the antichrist, of being anti-God and anti-Christ. Without the preservation of God in Christ by the Spirit, we would return like a pig to the mire or a dog to its vomit. But, praise the Lord, this will not happen because Jesus the begotten Son protects us!

Furthermore, this means that the evil one cannot harm the Christian (5.18c): Jesus protects him, **and the evil one does not touch him**. It is an outstanding promise that all the powers of darkness and of the god of this world who is like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, cannot lay a finger on the believer to his eternal harm. Nothing in this life can separate us from the love of God in Christ our Lord, as Paul exclaims in Romans 8.35-37 that **even in tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us**. What we know assuredly is that there is a radical contrast between us and the whole fallen world (5.19): **that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one**. The temptations of the flesh and the devil notwithstanding, the child of God cannot fall back into the sin of autonomy and lawlessness to stand with antichrist against Christ because of the work of God in His beloved and begotten Son.

## III. The final main point is assurance regarding the truth

We read in 5.20: **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. He is the true God and eternal life**. The apostle succinctly reminds us of a collage of beautiful summary assurances that we have as the people God. We know that Jesus came into the world sent on a saving mission by the Father (**the Son...has come**). We know that He has **given us understanding** that He efficaciously brought us to the knowledge of the true God (**that we may know him**). And by implication, there are more things we know. We know that **we are in Him who is true and in His Son Jesus Christ**. We know that He came to give us a true understanding of God at work in Christ that brought about our union with Him. Finally, He has given us to know that *Jesus* is the true God and that *He is eternal life*; He embodies it and is the source of eternal life as the gift of God to us, as we read in 1.2-3: **the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us...so that you too may have fellowship ... with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ**.

## Epilogue

The apostle John closes with a single verse epilogue (5.21) that touches the concerns of the immediate context and of the large context of the letter as a whole. Since the readers have full exposure to who Jesus is, then literal idol worship is surely not in view as something to warn them about. Idolatry must be here in at least two senses. It is here as worldliness in that worldly lust for money and things is covetousness, which is idolatry (Col 3.5) and distinctively lawless (1 Pet 4.3). It is also surely here as doctrinal idolatry that elevates false ideas about God. Antichrists elevate a false god in their rejection of Jesus as God in the flesh. By this they deny the sending of the Father's beloved Son, they deny the profound love of God, they deny the eternal covenant of the eternal God, they deny the work Jesus did as God in the flesh, and they deny the gift of God the Holy Spirit, given to apply the effectual propitiation of Christ. Their image of God is false in every way. Likewise, they deny His holiness by their false denial of sin and false commandment-keeping. So, we need to listen and learn, John is saying, because there is a battle raging with the evil one, deceivers, and deception on many fronts regarding false ethics and orthodoxy. They claim to walk in the light without sin that reminds us that *we* are *not* without sin; we admit it and struggle with it. Moreover, false claims of fellowship with God (4.1-11) exacerbate the confusion and complications. Therefore, the importance is unquestionable that the apostle warn the church in a final and decisive way, a way that sticks like a sharp arrow to its target, namely, that the family of dear little children have full assurance but are not be naive. Hence the conclusion (5.21): **Little children, keep yourselves from idols.**

**Let us fall down in worship and awe before the majesty of God our Father, God the Holy Spirit, and God the Son incarnate; may the Spirit grant us the deep and full assurance that is ours here in the first letter of John; to the glory of the triune God in Christ's church now and forevermore, amen.**