

1 JOHN 5:14-17

WHEN A CHRISTIAN PRAYS

“This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 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.

“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. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.”¹

What is the one answer to a prayer you presented before the Master that looms large in your memory? Take a moment and write it down. Tragically, many listening will not be able to write anything down. What is the most recent answer to prayer that you can recall? I mean, what specific request did God answer and you know it was because you asked? Again, I fear that many who listen will not be able to recall an answer.

Let’s face it, few Christians could be convicted of praying excessively! We say prayers, but prayer is hard work. Perhaps we will fling a perfunctory plea heavenward, but prevailing prayer is at best a vague hope. We Christians struggle to stay engaged in prayer. We know that we should pray, and we even have the desire to pray as the Spirit of God prompts us to pray. However, prayer is hard work, and we are often overwhelmed by the needs before us. Of course, it is easy to say that we should not pray in our own strength, but that we should pray in the power of the Spirit. The words flow easily from our lips, but the work is considerably more demanding.

It is not the purpose of the message today to condemn anyone for a lack of prayer. This is not one of those simplistic messages with “5 easy steps to prayer.” I make a continual effort to call your names before God’s eternal throne. I am often prompted by the Spirit to pray for your burdens of which you have informed me. It is not unusual that I am awakened in the night by the urging of the Spirit to call your name and to mention the needs you have expressed. Yet, I know that I do not pray as often or with the perseverance that should mark a child of God.

I see the Apostle admonish the saints, “Pray without ceasing” [1 THESSALONIANS 5:17], and I know that I have failed. I realise that the Master taught that His disciples “ought always to pray and not lose heart” [LUKE 18:1], and I am chagrined by the knowledge that His teaching condemns my failure. Please, do not imagine that I am speaking from some superior position to censure you; I am speaking today as a mere man who longs to do the will of God. Before ever Ezekiel spoke, he sat where those whom he would address were dwelling—he sat overwhelmed among them [see EZEKIEL 3:15]. In similar fashion, my message comes from sitting where you sit. My words are not meant to condemn; they are meant to instruct, to equip, to strengthen.

In the text before us, the Apostle of Love makes a startling statement when he testifies, “If we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him” [1 JOHN 5:15]. Twice does he speak of the certainty that marks the Christian. Admittedly, he couches the first statement of confidence in what could be thought a conditional form; however, when read in context with the second assertion of confidence, it is obvious that John is making a statement concerning the confidence that marks the Christian.

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When John writes, “If we know that he hears us in whatever we ask,” he is not saying that prayer is an “iffy” proposition; John is laying the foundation for a powerful assertion that is the heritage of each child of God. In other words, we do know that Christ hears us when we pray. Because this is true, “we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.” These words are a powerful confidence builder for each Christian.

CONFIDENCE IN PRAYER — “This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 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” [1 JOHN 5:14, 15]. Is the act of prayer a sort of sanctified whistling in the dark? To watch some professed people of God, you might come to that conclusion. Does prayer consist of repetitious recitation of pious statements designed to flatter God, compelling Him to move His hand on our behalf? The evidence would indicate that for many professing Christians, prayer is reciting memorised couplets as though that will compel God to act on her behalf.

Early in His brief ministry in the days of His flesh, Jesus warned those who would follow Him, “Whenever you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, because they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. When you pray, don’t babble like the Gentiles, since they imagine they’ll be heard for their many words. Don’t be like them, because your Father knows the things you need before you ask him” [MATTHEW 6:5-8].

After warning those who heard His warning, Jesus continued by giving the prayer we commonly identify as “The Lord’s Prayer.” Perhaps we shouldn’t speak of this prayer as the Lord’s Prayer, but rather identify it as “The Model Prayer.” Truly, the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples is a model for communication with the Living God.

Very quickly, note that prayer is *addressed to God*—He is identified as our Father! There is to be a personal relationship between the one asking and the Lord Whom we petition. If there is no personal relationship, there is no prayer! God makes His view of lost people evident in a couple of the Proverbs.

“If one turns away his ear from hearing the law,
even his prayer is an abomination.”

[PROVERBS 28:9]

“The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.
The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,
but he loves him who pursues righteousness.”

[PROVERBS 15:8, 9]

That is not harsh! That is gracious as God warns against presumption.

Then, the one praying is taught to *seek God’s honour*, to seek His glory. We are to hold God in awe, treating Him as holy. We are not to think of Him as so many do, as the “grandfatherly little man upstairs!” He is God. We are to honour Him as God. God is not a convenience kept in reserve for our use—we serve Him.

The one praying is to *seek the advance of God's Kingdom*—now! That one praying is to *seek God's will in all things*. When we have worshipped, adoring God as God, then we are to *ask for those things that He has promised* to give. We are to cultivate a dependence on Him, rather than imagining that He is dependent on us. Thus, we *ask for "our daily bread."*

As we pray, we will *confess our sin to God*, asking that He forgive us. We ask this, confident that He will do this because we have cleansed our own hearts through forgiving others. We ask Him to protect our steps, guiding us and guarding us, especially *keeping us from evil*. This is the prayer Jesus taught His disciples; this is the model for our prayer to this day.

Prayer is not flinging a hurried request heavenward; prayer is hard work, demanding that we persist in seeking the things necessary to serve God with honour. This was the reason Jesus taught His disciples to persist in prayer. Perhaps you will recall a parable Jesus told to teach this. "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"

Then, in order to drive this matter home, the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth" [LUKE 18:2-8]?

I wonder what would be required to bring Christians to the point of praying. I'm speaking of praying and not merely reciting prayers. Can you honestly, before God, say that you have ever prayed through the night because of the weight of concern for a child? For a loved one? For a fellow believer? Before God, can any of us say that we know what it is to pray, knowing that we already have what we are seeking? I began the message by asking you who listen to recall an answer to prayer—a specific answer that you knew was from God. I asked you to recall the most recent answer to prayer—an answer you knew was granted because you asked. We need to be encouraged to pray, and to pray in faith. Perhaps a brief review of the words of the Master would encourage each Christian to begin to pray.

You may remember an incident that occurred during the final hours as the Master faced His Passion. The account to which I now direct attention is in Mark's Gospel [MARK 11:20-25]. "As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.' And Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses'" [MARK 11:20-25].

Stand in the place of the Lord Jesus Himself, as though you were standing before the throne of the Father. Would you ask Him for trivial desires? Does a new car really matter more than the salvation of a lost child? Does a new item of clothing actually matter more than safety of your spouse? I'm not suggesting that God is uninterested in our quality of life; I am saying quite plainly that we too often have our priorities out of kilter! Our greatest deficit in our prayer life is a matter of priorities. If we have the Master's heart, we will pray for those matters that move His heart. And when we pray as Jesus would pray, we will receive what we ask.

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Jesus also urged disciples to develop forgiving hearts. Did you note that in this passage? “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” [MARK 11:25]. Matthew notes Jesus saying, “If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” [MATTHEW 6:15]. This concept of cultivating a forgiving heart is expanded when Paul writes, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” [COLOSSIANS 3:12, 13].

Let’s bring together a number of statements of encouragement to pray that Jesus spoke during the final days of His ministry in the flesh. Preparing His disciples for His exodus, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” [JOHN 14:12-14]. The qualifying requirement is *seeking the Father’s glory* through the Son. God is gracious; and He will do what we ask when we are seeking the Son’s glory. This one truth will transform prayer.

Soon after He had spoken these words, Jesus encouraged His disciples to pray when He said, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” [JOHN 15:7, 8]. Quite obviously, the Master was urging His disciples to seek the Father’s glory through bearing fruit. This must, of necessity, embrace seeking the salvation of lost people. God is glorified when we seek the salvation of the lost, beginning with our own family and friends!

Immediately after He had spoken these words, Jesus again urged disciples to pray. Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another” [JOHN 15:12-17].

The issue of prayer loomed large in the Master’s concerns for His disciples since He continually returned to the subject. Prayer and bearing fruit were central to Jesus’ concern for disciples. The fruit desired does speak of souls gathered to the Father’s glory, but it also speaks of growth in faith and grace for the disciple. Jesus sought our growth and the extension of the Kingdom of God; and these tasks require that we be people who pray in faith.

He had only spoken the words we just read, when Jesus again brought up the matter of prayer. This time, the Master said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also, you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” [JOHN 16:20-24].

Asking and receiving is intimately tied to the ascension of the Saviour. Because He lives, having ascended to the Father, He is able to give what we seek in His Name. The problem of prayer is perhaps two-fold: we don't ask, and we ask for pitifully small things. If we believe that God is able to do anything and yet ask him for petty things to consume on our own desires, we dishonour Him. That is precisely the censure James gives to those who would be disciples. "You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" [JAMES 4:2, 3].

PRAYING FOR OUR BROTHERS — "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" [1 JOHN 5:16]. "He shall ask" leaves no wiggle room; God expects that those who follow the Christ will be people of prayer. Specifically, God expects that His people will pray for their brothers. This is nothing less than the natural expectation of those who accept the Master's statements concerning our relationship to the brotherhood of believers.

James, the brother of our Lord, instructed believers among the early churches, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" [JAMES 5:16]. He focused on the power of prayer, writing, "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit" [JAMES 5:16b-18]. Now we see John say that God will give what we ask!

Germane to the issue of prayer for wayward saints, James urged those reading his letter, "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" [JAMES 5:19, 20]. I must believe that James learned this lesson from his half-brother, Jesus. What can these words mean except that prayer is integral to bringing a wandering saint back into the fold? In this, James anticipates what John writes.

James is focused on one who wanders from the truth; John is focused on a "brother." James' urges us to confess to "one another" and to "pray for one another," understanding that he is addressing Christians. According to these writers, *those for whom we are to pray are fellow believers*. There is good reason to pray for outsiders, asking that God will grant them repentance resulting in life; however, the focus of this present study is prayer for those with whom we share the Faith of Christ the Lord. Is this where we are most likely to fail in our prayer life?

I know the admonition to pray for wayward saints is well-known among the churches; however, such prayer seems often to be ignored. Preparing His disciples for His departure, Jesus taught them, and thus He teaches us, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" [JOHN 13:34, 35].

If there is a distinguishing mark of the Christian, it must be love for fellow Christians. Though this characteristic is often subsumed by culture, the divine command has not changed. Furthermore, this expected characteristic is emphasised throughout the Apostolic Letters. Paul writes in the Letter to the Christians in Rome, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" [ROMANS 13:8-10].

Earlier, I cited the Apostle's words penned to the Christians in Colossae. You will no doubt remember what we read in **COLOSSIANS 3:12, 13**: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." Reading just one verse farther, take note that we are commanded, "Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" [**COLOSSIANS 3:12-14**]. Indeed, we are to cultivate—put on—positive qualities that characterise the believer in Christ the Lord—"compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another" in addition to a forgiving heart. However, even if these graces mark our lives, if we lack love, these qualities will be reduced to a cacophony of lost opportunity. Without love, our life will be a mess of attempted graces that never come to fruition.

Writing Timothy in his first missive to the young theologian, the Apostle urged the younger preacher to caution those who would teach not to deviate from the truth of the Word, especially avoiding specious and speculative philosophies. Then, he gives this rationale for what he commands: "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions" [**1 TIMOTHY 1:5-7**].

You begin to get the idea that genuine love for fellow Christians is not only expected, it is mandatory. Peter, the Apostle to the Jews, has likewise written to the saints of the Diaspora, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" [**1 PETER 1:22, 23**].

The love for fellow Christ-followers seen in one who follows the Saviour, should reflect the love of Christ for His redeemed people. The Apostle's command is incumbent upon each Christian. He wrote, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" [**EPHESIANS 5:1, 2**]. The evidence that we love as Christ loved us is witnessed through willing sacrifice for the welfare of fellow saints; that willing sacrifice is revealed when we are walking in love. We must willingly invest ourselves in one another rather than breaking fellowship, wearing our feelings on our sleeves, demanding that we get our own way and that others accede to our wishes.

Perhaps you will remember that Jesus taught those who professed to be His disciple, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" [**JOHN 15:12**]. He illustrated His expectation by His life. The Master taught us, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another" [**JOHN 15:13-17**].

I am left with few alternatives as explanation for our lack of prayer for wandering saints, our failure to risk what relationship we have through intervening, except to conclude that contemporary Christians are suffering flawed love, an eclipse of the heart. We don't love our brothers and sisters; we don't love those with whom we share the Faith of Christ Jesus the Lord. We love our own comfort more than we love the souls of our fellow believers and more than we love the Saviour. If this proves true, we are hard-pressed to claim that we love Jesus our Lord.

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Let me ask some hard questions to confront any issue of neglect. Other than flinging a perfunctory petition heavenward, do you pray by name for those who are wandering from the Faith? We have witnessed a disturbing number of people who tentatively dipped a toe into the Faith through attending services with us, only to withdraw for a less demanding religious experience, services that appeared easier to take, a message that didn't strip away their pride. Have we prayed for these individuals? Do we pray for them? Among those who departed were some who were undoubtedly fellow believers. Do we name their names before God's throne? This becomes especially critical if these individuals are known to be walking in disobedience. We have a promise that God will hear our prayer if we ask. I'm not speaking of presumptuous sin that leads to death; rather, I am speaking of disobedience that leads even Christians to exalt their own desires over obedience to the Master. I contend that we are responsible to ask God for the life of these individuals so that they may be reclaimed and so that God may be glorified.

An additional point of emphasis is that to pray for one who is beginning to stray means that we have *invested ourselves in the life of that individual*. John pleads for followers of the Master not to simply fling a request heavenward, he is issuing a command for us to take the time necessary to know the needs of those with whom we worship. We need to invest our lives in one another. It should be obvious that this command means we are to be the church, we are to act as the Community of the Faith, we are to be the Body of Christ.

I find that we need to be reminded on a regular basis that the assembly is not simply a meeting of like-minded individuals—this is a spiritual entity created by the work of the Spirit of God through the lives of redeemed people. In the Word of God, we who are gathered as a congregation are identified as family [1 PETER 2:17], as God's temple [1 CORINTHIANS 3:16, 17]; however, we are known as the Body of Christ. In the Ephesian Encyclical, the Apostle writes, "(In saying, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" [EPHESIANS 4:9-16].

Again, Paul takes care to emphasise our expected interaction through serving one another as the living Body of the Lord, when he writes, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

Then, in emphasis, he writes to these Corinthian saints, (and also to Christians today), "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" [1 CORINTHIANS 12:21-27]. This is the basis for the saying, "*We don't go to church, we are the church!*"

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We who are twice-born children of the Living God are to invest ourselves in one another. We do not cease to care because one wanders from the truth—we have invested ourselves into the life of that one and we cannot cease caring for the soul of that wandering saint. We know, despite every protestation to the contrary, that a sheep wandering from the fold is vulnerable to destruction by the evil one. Though one may wander away, we love that one, loving earnestly with all our heart. What else can be meant when Peter admonishes Christians, “Above all, continue to love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins” [1 PETER 4:8 ISV]. It is precisely the identical message that John delivered—*care enough to invest in one another*.

NO ONE CARED FOR MY SOUL — “There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death” [1 JOHN 5:17]. Recorded in the Psalms is a Maskil of David, written when he had fled from Saul. Perhaps it was before anyone had come to support him as God’s anointed; whatever the particular situation, David felt deserted, alienated from every network of support. As he wrote this Psalm, a pitiful prayer to the only One to whom he could turn, he made a sorrowful confession. He wrote,

“Look to the right and see:
there is none who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for my soul.”

[PSALM 142:4]

Over the years of my service before the Master, I’ve heard multiple sermons for which this particular Psalm served as the text for the message or the Psalm was referenced. Almost without exception the Psalmist’s plaintive cry was treated as though it came from lost sinners. Almost always the messages were vehicles urging believers to greater evangelistic efforts. Knowing the circumstances surrounding the writing of the Psalm, I’m loath to suggest that the Psalm applies (exclusively or otherwise) to unbelievers; the Psalm surely finds application to believers who have become ensnared by sin, Christians who have wandered from the truth. What I can derive from this Psalm is the suggestion that never does a child of God feel more isolated, more alone, than when she has wandered away from God. She is a lamb in a barren land. No one is near except for wolves and other beasts who will make quick work of destroying a lamb. At such a time, the wayward lamb may say in her heart, “No one cares for my soul.” That plaintive cry should never be one heard from any of those who once walked with us in the presence of the Living God.

The Apostle of Love is urging readers to exercise discernment, but especially to plead for fellow saints who stumble, fellow Christians who stray. He is not saying that we are to be casual about sin, because “All wrongdoing is sin.” He is saying that we are to be discerning when he writes, “There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.” Among the more shocking verses penned by the Major Prophets, is a divine command repeated to Jeremiah. The LORD God was so enraged about the behaviour of His ancient people that He commanded Jeremiah, “As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you” [JEREMIAH 7:16]. I find this command shocking; God is clearly saying that He has lost all compassion for the people. They had rejected Him in order to pursue other gods. He washed His hands of that generation, consigning them to the dustbin of history. He was finished with them; He would no longer entertain prayer on their behalf.

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Again, when judgement could no longer be avoided, the Lord God commanded Jeremiah, “Do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble” [JEREMIAH 11:14]. God said they no longer had a right in His House; their vile deeds had at last caught up to them.

One other time, God commanded Jeremiah, “Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence” [JEREMIAH 14:11, 12]. This command came only after the LORD had lamented, “Thus says the LORD concerning this people:

‘They have loved to wander thus;
they have not restrained their feet;
therefore, the LORD does not accept them;
now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins.’”

[JEREMIAH 14:10]

Sin is serious business, and I don’t want to depreciate the serious nature of tolerating sin. However, John is especially focused on the wandering saint who has been wounded; he is not focused on the saint who is guilty of presumptuous sin. There is a world of difference between someone who is arrogant and someone who is weary in the struggle for righteousness. There is no comparison between someone who is upset because they didn’t get their own way or who is angry because they didn’t get the recognition they craved and a fellow believer who has stumbled into sin. Distinguishing between these situations is where we call for discernment from the members of the assembly.

A church that models what John is teaching is a powerful entity; in part, this is because a church that models godliness will be a healing community that builds up hurting saints rather than trying to destroy them. Remember, John is writing to Christians who live in a hostile environment. Christians were not welcomed in that ancient world, and it was to be expected that some saints would be exhausted in their struggle against sin; they would finally cease struggling, wondering, “Why bother?” Somebody knows what I’m talking about.

Other Christians would perhaps feel beaten down by what felt like constant failure. Inwardly, they longed to honour God and they attempted to fulfil what they believed to be the will of God, only to feel as if they were not accomplishing anything—they were spinning their wheels. They once dreamed of doing some great deed for the cause of Christ; but the dreams had died some time ago—now it felt as if God was ignoring them, as if He had settled them on the backside of the desert. They knew they loved God, and they had never ceased trusting Him; but they needed a fresh dream. Perhaps you can identify with that feeling.

Wounded saints are sometimes stumbling saints. Weary believers may appear as if they are turning away from the truth, when in fact they are crying out for help. John has a vision of the assembly of the righteous that mirrors that of Paul. The Apostle of Love envisions a church where men and women nurture one another, build one another and, when necessary, warn one another. Gary Burge is correct when in his observation, “Depleted Christians are weakened Christians for whom the world and its allure have a stronger gravitational pull.”²

² Gary M. Burge, **Letters of John, The NIV Application Commentary** (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI 1996) 219–220

1 JOHN 5:14-17
WHEN A CHRISTIAN PRAYS

I am not pleading for us to pursue every disgruntled individual who didn't get his way; there is no warrant for such to be found in the Word. Even the Apostle John has taught us that for some, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" [1 JOHN 2:19].

Neither am I arguing that we are responsible to make everyone happy in the assembly. There will always be friction because we are individuals; and some will be controlled by their own rage at times. Some people must be released to their own devices that they may learn not to blaspheme [see 1 TIMOTHY 1:20]. You have heard me echo the words of the Apostle on occasion, "There must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized" [1 CORINTHIANS 11:19]. These are the cases that will demand discernment.

Nevertheless, I confidently join the Apostle of Love to plead that we train ourselves to be considerate, to admonish the undisciplined, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient toward all [1 THESSALONIANS 5:14 NET BIBLE], I urge the people of God to heed the Apostle Paul who has taught us "to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy toward all people" [TITUS 3:1b, 2]; but in light of today's message, I especially urge each Christian sharing in our services to always pray for those who are wandering from the truth. I pray that none who are weary and who may stumble will fall by the wayside because it seems that no one cares for their soul. I pray that God's people will encourage themselves in the words of the Psalmist.

"The steps of a man are established by the LORD,
when he delights in his way;
though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong,
for the LORD upholds his hand."

[PSALM 37:23, 24]

A weary saint should expect to find refreshment within the assembly of the righteous. Though individuals may disappoint us, we must each determine to fix our gaze upon the Saviour. Remember the admonition we have received from that one who gave us the Letter to Hebrew Christians. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" [HEBREWS 12:1, 2]. If the pastor should fail to live up to our expectation, or if some leader appears to be less than we thought they should be, or if a fellow believer is not all that we hoped she would be, let us rest our confidence in Christ. He has never let us down, and He never will.

John began this portion of the Word with a note of confidence, and he concludes with that same confidence. It is not confidence in his own wisdom, nor in others, nor even in the congregation; John's confidence is in Christ who calls us to Himself and appoints us to His service. Now, He is moulding us into His image, and He is accomplishing His will through the church, which is the Body of Christ. Amen.