



# 2024 Weekly Devotions

**Week of: January 1<sup>st</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup>**

Sermon: December 31<sup>st</sup>



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
building community ◦ equipping believers ◦ serving Jesus



January 1

**1 John 5:13 & John 20:31**

We have made a somewhat unique decision to push through chapter 5 of 1 John in the interest of finishing this wonderful little epistle in time to start a new sermon series on the book of Genesis in the new year. This means that we will leave a few verses at the end of the book somewhat uncovered during the preaching hour on Sundays.

My goal for this week's devotions is to try to fill in the gaps with a devotion for each of the remaining verses including today's text. This passage in 1 John records for us the purpose statement, or goal, that John had guiding his writing. His book is aimed at giving his audience assurance that they are in fact believers in Jesus Christ.

What we see in today's other verse is that John's goal was not unique to his first epistle. In fact, he states that his reason for writing the Gospel of John is assurance as well! In both cases, John demonstrates that the way we know that we are believers is through truth applied.

John's Gospel focuses on the life of Christ. In that precious text, the Apostle begins with a brief summary of the preincarnate Christ and then moves to a somewhat lengthy discussion of His life and ultimately His death and resurrection. In this summary, John says that a true Christian can know that Jesus is in fact the Savior of the world by virtue of His knowledge of and faith in the person and work of Christ.

In 1 John, the Apostle tells us that we can know that we are Christians by virtue of our faith which is demonstrated by our actions. Repeatedly, John has told us things like "by this we know..." and then provided a rubric for us to demonstrate the validity of our confession.

The point is fairly obvious, its possible for a Christian to know His eternal standing before God! One of the aspects of John's writing that has always amazed me is how straightforward and intuitive his tests are. For instance, we know that we are disciples of Christ by our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 3:16) which is demonstrated in our tangible, obvious actions. This kind of teaching is clear and persuasive and easily applied!

Folks, evidence of the Christian life is not as mysterious as some would make it to be. Obviously, there is great mystery and power in our conversion. No one can adequately explain how the Spirit moves and we certainly are not privy to His exploits prior to His saving work, nevertheless, the evidence of His coming and the proof that God has in fact worked in our souls is worked out in ordinary, everyday moments that demonstrate a change of heart that only God can provide.

I write this devotion because it seems to me that we have inverted John's teaching. Most people today think that God's work in becoming a Christian is easily explained but the evidence of our conversion is impossible to discover. Here's what I mean, in our post Bible-belt society, anyone and everyone still passes as "Christian". The way you become a Christian is by being born into a Christian family or just deciding that you desire the title! There is nothing supernatural or life-altering that takes place. Millions of people in our state and region believe they are Christians because their families have some connection to the name of Christ. Conversely, we are told that

being a Christian is totally subjective and that no one can judge the state of our souls. Those who live like the devil are given the benefit of the doubt because "no one can judge me" and this means that our lifestyle is inconsequential to our eternal standing before God. Do you see how this is backwards? Salvation is a miracle that must take place in everyone's life. It does not just happen by physical birth, you must be born again (even if grandma was a Christian)! Conversely, we know a Christian (including ourselves) by his fruits! This means that when the supernatural work of regeneration takes place, it manifests itself in incredibly obvious and demonstrable ways... this is how we can "know" that we indeed have come to know Christ and this is John's goal in writing.

January 2

**1 John 5:14 and Proverbs 10:24**

There is a very powerful descriptor used in our passage for today that sheds some great light on an otherwise sticky issue in biblical interpretation. Today's world is awash with folks who claim that we are somehow in control via our prayer lives. They teach, using verses like 5:14 and 5:15, that we can have whatever we desire, and that God is obligated, by virtue of His teaching, to give it to us! However, our experience teaches us that God does reserve the right to say "no!" and, if you have lived and walked with God for any amount of time, you realize that this is a very good thing!

So, how does God interact with our prayers and how do we reconcile the fact that some of our prayers are incredibly effective, and others don't seem to make it past the ceiling? The answer is grounded in the qualifier found for us in verse 14. What separates an effective, powerful prayer from an ineffective, impotent prayer is its foundation. Those who pray things that are not in accordance with God's desires will not see their desire realized whereas those who as in accordance with God's desires will see their desires come to pass.

This means that God is the ultimate determiner of what will and won't occur and that we are obliged to discover what He wants and then ask Him for it. Now, there are two pushbacks here that deserve a moment of our time. First, some might think that this makes God an egomaniac. Like the angry, biggest kid on the playground who enforces his rules without even listening to the other children who want to play, God can be painted as some cosmic bully, but this misunderstands the nature of God's Sovereignty and the goal of His plan. You see, God's plan is for His glory, and this also terminates in our good! If God were to grant us what we want when our wants are not in line with His wants, the request would result in our pain as well as His shame. God's plan is not ONLY for His glory, it is also for our benefit as well. Sometimes, I don't grant my children's requests not because I hate them but because I love them! Conversely, think of how terrifying it would be for God to give us the reigns. Not only would our worlds be affected by our prayers, but our lives would be adversely impacted by other's prayers that are evil and/or naïve in nature.

Second, the question is obviously raised, "how do we know His will?" The answer is that God has made His character and will apparent for us in Scripture. We know what pleases God and we know the attributes of God which allow us to gather and discern what He wants. We know, for instance, that God desires for His children to be redeemed. We know that God desires His name to be glorified. We know that God desires the holiness of His people and so forth and this means that we are able to pray in such a way as to keep in step with His revealed will.

If we step back from this verse for a moment, we must realize that preparation needs to occur in order for us to be effective in our prayers. First, we need to prepare ourselves by knowing what God has revealed and second, we need to prepare our hearts by actively working to discern what God would want in a circumstance. When those two things occur, true power is unleashed in our prayers. The righteous will indeed see their prayers come to fruition (Proverbs 10:24) and this is a good and marvelous promise from on high.

January 3

**1 John 5:15 & Psalm 135:6**

John is fond of the word “know”. He uses it often in his writing and it appears again in our passage for today. The term has a certain finality to it. When we “know” something, we are assured of it. We don’t know what the weather is going to be like next Tuesday, but we do know that  $2+2=4$ . One of those things is fixed, the other is subject to change (to say the least!).

What is interesting about verse 15 is the certainty that we can have regarding something in the future. Notice how John says that we know we have requests that we have asked but that doesn’t mean that the request has been granted in real time. How can we know that God will come through when the thing asked for has yet to appear? Does it seem a bit presumptive to think that just because we have prayed in accordance with God’s will, we can KNOW that whatever we ask will come to pass? Two things come to mind here.

First, we can know that we have a request based on the revealed will of God. For instance, when we pray that God’s will be done, we can know that we will see that request answered because it is in keeping with God’s will! When we pray for Christ’s Kingdom to come, we can know based on Psalm 110 that His enemies will be defeated and that He will return again in glory to rule and reign as King over His Kingdom. When we pray for God to be glorified or the church to be strengthened, we can know that these things will be answered with a resounding “yes”! Now, this doesn’t mean that God will answer our prayers in the way we deem appropriate. It may be that His will includes suffering for the church (it often does) or that His Kingdom will arrive slower than we’d like! Nevertheless, we can know that these prayers will be answered. These things mean that we can have assurance that what we ask of God will come to pass in God’s timing and we can be so assured of this that we can know we have these things even if they haven’t materialized yet.

This leads to the second point which is grounded in God’s attributes. How can we know something that has yet to occur? The answer is that God is omnipotent (a fancy word that means all powerful). This separates Him from us in many, wonderful, ways. You see, I cannot assure people of future things, even if I have good intentions! A few months ago, I promised my girls ice cream at Dairy Queen on a weekday night. I had every intention of following through with that guarantee but when we arrived at Dairy Queen, they were closed! Obviously, I had no ability to change what the good folks at DQ chose to do in closing their store, so my promise was unfulfilled (we did go to Sonic in case you were wondering because I did not want to deal with the wrath of little people scorned). The point is that I am unable to dictate many things, and this means that even my most hearty and examined “yeses” can turn into “no’s” that are beyond my control.

While this is true of us, we can have assurance that God is not like this. In fact, Psalm 135 reminds us that God does “whatever He pleases”. There is no circumstance nor is there any being or entity that can stand in the way of God’s yes! When He tells us that He will do something, it is as if it has already occurred precisely because no obstacle can stand in His way. This is one way He separates Himself from us and this is why John says that those things which are in accordance with His will have been done and whether they have actually occurred in space or time as of this moment is truly irrelevant!

January 4

**1 John 5:16-17 & 1 John 2:19**

Today's passage from chapter 5 is admittedly the most challenging text to interpret in the entire epistle! Many commentators have wrestled with what this text means, and therefore what it doesn't mean, and the conclusions are varied. Nevertheless, basic interpretive principles guide us here to a conclusion that I think fits with the overall structure of the book and the larger teaching of the Bible on the topic.

John draws a distinction here between "brothers" who are committing sin that "does not lead to death" and a sin that does lead to death. What in the world does he have in mind here? The answer is grounded in the historic context of the book. Remember, John is writing to a church that is beset with heretics. In fact, there has been an exodus of previously faithful church members as a product of gnostic thought (for a brief treatment on Gnosticism, you can consult the introductory sermon on the book, which is available on the app, shameless plug). The result of this heretical teaching was that many had fallen away, denying the true Christ, and following a counterfeit. This explains John's teaching in chapter 2 when he informs the brothers that those who "went out from us were never apart of us" meaning those who had left the fellowship are just demonstrating their true spiritual state, even if they represented something else at the start.

Now, this is the explanation for what John has in mind here as there are two kinds of sin. There are sins that don't lead to death... but how? The answer is that the believer still sins! Remember, John has also told us that those who say they are without sin are liars and the truth is not in them (1 John 1:10). This is not because the wages of sin have changed, sin still deserves and results in death. It is because One has died in our place and redeemed us from the curse. Jesus has seen to it that those who are in Christ are not subject to the penalty of death which is why John can say that God will give the sinner life.

However, there is a second sin that does lead to death... what is it? The answer is the sin of denying the true Christ. If we deny Jesus, there is no Savior and, therefore, the sin of apostasy, or the abandoning of the truth thereby demonstrating that a person was never in the truth, is a sin that leads to death.

Folks, if you are a true believer in Jesus Christ, He will never leave you nor forsake you! There is no risk of a true Christian abandoning Jesus because a true Christians has been saved and transformed and indwelt by a God who promises that nothing will separate us from Him (Romans 8). However, there are those who will claim Christ for awhile and walk away eventually. There is no hope for those folks (see Hebrews 6) precisely because they are walking away from the only One who can atone for their transgression. Their sin, therefore, leads immediately to death and this is the distinction. Those who are "brothers" in Christ are sinners who are saved by grace, others who used to claim Christ but now deny Him are careening towards eternal death and torment.

January 5

**1 John 5:18 & John 17:12**

There is a cosmic war being waged over the souls of men. That might sound like hyperbole, but it is actually a simple reprisal of biblical assertions! We live in the midst of a battle between good and evil and this skirmish is occurring over the state of our souls. The realization that some abandon the faith is sobering and it was certainly personal to the people that John was initially addressing.

Sometimes, it's easy to forget that John is writing to people... with a name and a history. This church had experienced the heartbreak of those they loved and lived alongside, walking away. These people had a name and a history. When John wrote that some "went out from us..." the little church thought about Jenny who used to come but now has been "enlightened" or Bill who seemed to be on fire and now thinks that God had failed him causing him to walk away. Each of those stories are heart wrenching and they are not limited to John's moment. Many, if not all, of you know people who used to claim Christianity and have now turned entirely. There are personal stories and national figures who demonstrate that the issue has not subsided in the 2,000 years between John's writing and our moment in history.

There are many effects of seeing people walk away. Obviously, we hurt for them and long for their return but, if we are not careful, many of us can be spooked by what happened. If Bill, who was such a strong Christian and vibrant member of our faith family, can turn his back on Christ, what makes me think that I can hold strong? Am I going to do the same thing? Like the disciples who immediately question whether they would be the prophesied betrayer of Jesus at the Last Supper, we are all a bit antsy when we consider man's propensity to wander.

What gives assurance? The answer is that it is Christ who guards and guides His sheep. If it was up to you and I to endure, we wouldn't! Perseverance is not in our makeup. We are weak, tired and easily distracted sheep and this means that we are sitting ducks for our enemy on the cosmic battlefield. We desperately need someone to shield us, and this is exactly why John reminds his reader that Jesus protects.

The priestly prayer in John 17 unveils Christ's heart for His sheep in majestic detail. In this text, He prays that God would keep us from falling and He informs us (through interaction with His Father) that "not one" of His sheep had fallen away from the flock. The point is that Jesus is the good, perfect shepherd. He knows you, and He protects you and He will not be denied! Those who have read the book of John and seen evidence of the Lord's provision and grace in your life, those who have assurance that there are true fruits of the faith in your walk with Christ have every reason to rejoice because you are on the winning side! Jesus is undefeated and He is eternally faithful. Take heart dear friend, God will finish what He began in His precious saints (Philippians 1:6).



January 6

### 1 John 5:19 & Ephesians 6

When I became a believer, I was under somewhat of an illusion. For whatever reason, I believed that coming to Christ would make my life easier! Perhaps this was taught, more than likely it was something I assumed, nevertheless you can imagine, and perhaps empathize, with my frustration when I realized that my life was every bit as challenging as before.

What is it about our Christian walk that is so challenging? One answer is that we are still beset with vestiges of sin. So many of my problems are grounded in... me! I am still prone to wander and rebellion and this has its own set of implications and consequences. While many of my problems are my own, there is another factor in play and that is the ever-present challenge of dealing with our cosmic enemy. Satan is real, and he has massive sway in this fallen world.

Today's text tells us something that might be quite shocking to you... "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." The whole world?!?! That seems like quite the statement. How can God be victorious and yet the world lies in the devil's power? The answer is that God's Kingdom is not of this world. While we still live in the world, the world doesn't know Christ and, therefore, it does the bidding of its master. The "god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4) has incredible power and reach and this is why we seem to always be in conflict with so much of what surrounds us.

Why is it that governments so easily wander from truth? Because the world lies in the power of the evil one. Why is it that our entertainment options are so filthy? Because the world lies in the power of the evil one. Why is it that we must be on guard against all kinds of ideologies and worldviews that so clearly violate the truth of God's revelation? Because the great counterfeiter exercises his power over the world!

This means that when we proclaim the name of Christ, we become associated with the enemy who has immense control in this world. This also means that when we work to expand the Kingdom, we are taking enemy ground! Folks, I don't write this devotion to be pessimistic. In fact, my eschatology is far more optimistic than most! I would argue that we have every reason to be hopeful and faith-filled regarding the current events that are unfolding, and this is not because I think things are better than they appear in the world, it is because our God is the One who has proclaimed and demonstrated that He has "overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Christ's Kingdom is coming. We are taking ground for the Lord. His power does prevail, but this prevailing only occurs as we struggle against true evil. May we understand that the world is not our friend, there is no such thing as "neutral ground" (in education, in entertainment, in politics), you are either for Christ or against Him. There are two teams and we have been chosen to be on the squad that is victorious. So, take heart but expect the war to continue!

January 7

**1 John 5:20**

How did we arrive here? I don't mean Dinwiddie (or wherever you may reside), I mean in the Kingdom? Did we discover Christ because we are more intelligent, more moral or wiser than those around us? How do we know that we are believers and where does our assurance come from? The answer is that we came to Christ by God's grace alone.

Today's devotion is the final attempt to help us understand the great little book of 1 John. 1 John is all about assurance. John's stated goal is that we would "know" that we are children of the King, and this inspires and informs the entire book. Obviously, John wants us to examine ourselves and to think diligently about what he has told us, nevertheless he ends the book with a humbling reminder... we know anything at all about our standing before God because Christ has "given us understanding so that we may know him who is true."

My hope for this final devotion is that you take some time to praise God for His gracious work in "giving you understanding". He has chosen to come to this earth, He chose to die for us, He chose to redeem us, and He chose to reveal truth to us in the Bible. Everything that John wrote is Spirit-inspired grace. It is God's choice to freely unveil the things to us that we must know if we are going to persevere. The Bible is a loving and generous resource.

Christmas was a few days ago... most of you were around family and friends, giving and receiving presents. You know the difference between the child (or adult for that matter) who receives a present with glee and thanksgiving and the entitled brat who takes everything given as if it was totally deserved. There is a chasm between the two!

I fear that we sometimes minimize what God has done in providing salvation and revealing it to us. we are not entitled to Jesus, and we are not entitled to the Word that reveals Him to us. I pray that you receive the Word made flesh with a joyful, thankful heart. That you treat His coming, His Gospel and His Word like treasure.

May we be the kid who is so overwhelmed and enraptured by His Christmas present that he is totally consumed with enjoyment of it. May we work to discover all that Christ has done and may we give Him praise and glory as we revel in the Gospel. Far be it from us to be the young man or woman who unwraps a present, shrugs and throws it into the pile, never to be considered again. Our great God has given us an unmatched gift, His intention is for us to walk in what He has offered and to thank Him every step of the way. This is why John wrote this epistle, may we honor God by using His Word to gain more understanding along the way.