

## Dead Church Podcast Notes

### Acts Initiative

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### **Ep. 20 – Why Don't My Prayers Get Answered?**

In the last video, we looked at some of the promises found throughout the New Testament. We talked about how many Christians think those promises are for anyone who calls themselves a Christian, and they assume those promises are for them, when really those promises are only for people who live according to the commands of Jesus.

The New Testament was written to Christians who lived the way we see in the early Church in Acts. They shared everything in common. They gave up their possessions. They prioritized the needs of others rather than themselves.

When the New Testament gives us some of these promises, those promises were written to people who lived like that. They weren't written to the modern Church. Those promises are only for people who live the same way the early Church lived.

In this video, I want to address another one of those conditional promises: Prayer.

How many times have we read or heard the following promises in Scripture?

“I tell you the truth, if your faith is the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. All things will be possible for you.”<sup>1</sup>

“I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will be able to do what I did to this tree and even more. You will be able to say to this mountain, ‘Go, fall into the sea.’ And if you have faith, it will happen. If you have faith, you will get anything you ask for in prayer.”<sup>2</sup>

“I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, fall into the sea.’ And if you have no doubts in your heart and believe that what you say will happen, God will do it for you. So I tell you to believe that you have received everything you ask for in prayer, and God will give them to you.”<sup>3</sup>

These are some of the most incredible promises found in the Bible. Jesus promised that if you have faith, you can move literal mountains through prayer. He promised that nothing will be impossible for you. He promised that you, too, can curse a fig tree and see it wither up. You can receive anything you ask for in prayer. You can live the kind of life that Jesus lived.

This is why his apostles did the same things he did. The apostles did many signs and wonders<sup>4</sup>: Peter and John healed a cripple<sup>5</sup>; Peter is recorded as healing everyone who came to him; even Peter's shadow healed people when it passed over them!<sup>6</sup> Paul's handkerchief was used to heal people!<sup>7</sup> Peter raised the dead<sup>8</sup>; Paul raised the dead<sup>9</sup>; Paul healed every single person who was sick on the island of Malta.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 17:20

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 21:21-22

<sup>3</sup> Mark 11:22-24

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 2:43, 4:33, 5:12

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Acts 3:1-10

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Acts 5:12-16

<sup>7</sup> Ref. Acts 19:11-12

<sup>8</sup> Ref. Acts 9:36-43

<sup>9</sup> Ref. Acts 20:7-12

<sup>10</sup> Ref. Acts 28:7-9

The apostles weren't the only ones living a life marked by this kind of powerful prayer: Stephen was filled with power.<sup>11</sup> Ananias was led by the Spirit and healed Paul.<sup>12</sup> Philip performed many miracles and cast out demons.<sup>13</sup>

The incredible promises of Jesus proved to be true time and time again in the early Church. Those who followed Jesus were heard by God. Those who followed Jesus received anything they asked for. Their prayers were answered in undeniable ways.

Yet today, these same promises make Christians feel uncomfortable. Christians today try to explain these promises away. They come up with excuse after excuse for why these promises aren't true in their own lives or in the lives of any other Christians they know. Today, Christians pray and often feel like they weren't heard. The power of God that defined the early Church is missing from Christianity today.

And Christians don't understand why.

Over the years, I've read many books about prayer. I've heard the advice of countless Christian teachers and preachers and authors as they try to motivate Christians to pray. Depending on their background and denomination, they have a wide array of excuses for why their prayers don't seem to be heard.

Some say that it's because you only receive what you ask for if you're asking for something that's God's will, so you have to just ask, and if it's God's will, he will give it to you, and if it's not, then he won't.

Others say that it's because prayer takes time to be answered, so you just have to be patient.

Others insist that you just have to believe that your prayer *was* answered, even if it's clearly obvious that it wasn't. They claim they healed someone when that person actually remained sick, or even died. They think that if you acknowledge that a prayer wasn't answered, you "curse" yourself and guarantee that the prayer won't be answered because you proved that you don't have faith. So, they just refuse to acknowledge the problem. They refuse to recognize that God doesn't answer their prayers.

And still others insist that their prayers *do* get answered. But they never ask for anything that would require any kind of *miracle*. They comfort themselves in the belief that their prayers are heard, when really they're only ever asking for things that are very likely to happen anyway. They tell others that they see miracles – that their prayers are heard and answered regularly. But none of their so-called "miracles" can even compare to what happened in the early Church.

None of these excuses are biblical.

Yet all these Christians have their Bible verses they use to back up these beliefs. They pick Bible verses, take them out of context, ignore other verses that directly contradict their conclusions, and use these verses to defend their argument. They think they're defending the truth, when really they're just defending their own beliefs and refusing to admit that maybe there's something wrong with their doctrines and theology. They refuse to admit that the promises in Scripture don't seem to be true for them.

The early Church didn't look like this. Their prayers were heard. They received what they asked for. They experienced the literal fulfillment of the promises of Jesus with no strings attached. There was no denying that their prayers were heard, and they weren't only asking for trivial things that were likely to happen anyway. Cripples leaped for joy.<sup>14</sup> Paralyzed people walked home.<sup>15</sup> Dead people woke

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<sup>11</sup> Ref. Acts 6:8

<sup>12</sup> Ref. Acts 9:10-19

<sup>13</sup> Ref. Acts 8:5-13

<sup>14</sup> Ref. Acts 3:1-10

<sup>15</sup> Ref. Acts 9:32-35

up.<sup>16</sup> They experienced a life entirely unlike what Christians experience today.

Why?

Why did Jesus make such grand promises about our prayers being answered? Why do we see the early Church experiencing his promises as true, yet our experience today is the exact opposite? What's wrong?

To understand what's wrong, we need to address the lies that Christians believe. First, we need to understand *faith*. We've already discussed *faith* throughout this series. In the Bible, and in the promises Jesus gave us about prayer, the word translated *faith* is the Greek word *pístis*. And the word translated *believe* is rooted in that same word – *pístis*.

The Greek word *pístis* didn't mean *faith* like we tend to think of it today. And it didn't mean *believe* like we think of it today. It always meant *believing* and *obeying* at the same time. It meant *faith* and *faithfulness*, and included both at the same time – it was never just one or the other. It meant *loyalty*. It meant *fidelity*. It meant *reliability*.

That's the kind of *faith* Jesus was talking about. That's the type of *faith* that the biblical authors intended. We're not supposed to be people who merely believe in Jesus and trust that he is who he said he is. We're not supposed to be people who merely believe that he will answer our prayers. We're supposed to be people he can trust, too. We're supposed to be faithful. We're supposed to be loyal. We're supposed to be reliable.

When Jesus promised that if we have faith, we can move mountains, he was promising that if we are people who live in complete loyalty and fidelity to God, then we are people who will receive whatever we ask from God. His promise wasn't just about believing our prayers are answered. His promise was about what it means to be a Christian in the first place.

The kind of faith that results in answered prayer is the same kind of faith that we need for salvation. It's the kind of faith where we live the kind of life God wants us to live. It's the kind of faith where we prioritize what God said is important, and we obey his commands and forget about anything else or anyone else other than him.

That's the kind of faith the Bible talks about. And we can see in many places that it's the kind of faith we're supposed to have when we are talking about prayer. For example, when thinking about prayer, many Christians think about verses like these:

“In Christ we have access to God with boldness and with confidence. We can do this through faith in Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. He was tempted in every way that we are, but he did not sin. Let us, then, confidently approach God's throne of grace. There we can receive mercy and find grace to help us when we need it.”<sup>18</sup>

“So, brothers and sisters, we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place without fear by means of the blood of Jesus' death. We can enter through a new and living way that Jesus opened for us. It leads through the curtain – Christ's flesh. And since we have a great priest over God's house, let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a confident faith, because we have had our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.”<sup>19</sup>

“My dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God.”<sup>20</sup>

Christians look at verses like these, and they get encouraged. They read these and think, “I can have confidence before God. I can come before God boldly. I have free access to God now because

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<sup>16</sup> Ref. Acts 9:36-43, 20:7-12

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 3:12

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 4:15-16

<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 10:19-22

<sup>20</sup> 1 John 3:21

of Jesus.” And while, yes, that’s true... it’s only true for those who are true followers of Jesus.

People today hear a gospel preached that says you can be saved without doing anything. They believe in a message that says you are a Christian if you believe in Jesus, and it’s entirely based on whether or not you believe the correct information. They accept this gospel, and then they think that all the promises in the New Testament are for them.

But that is not the gospel preached in Scripture.

Scripture says you must obey Jesus, or you aren’t saved; Scripture says you must live your life obeying the commands of Jesus or you aren’t actually a Christian at all.<sup>21</sup> And if you’re not actually a Christian, then these promises aren’t for you – even if you think you are a Christian.

Jesus said, “Not all those who say to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants. On the last day many people will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and did many mighty works in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who practice lawlessness.’ Everyone who hears my words and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house. But it did not collapse, because it was built on rock. Everyone who hears my words and does not obey them is like a stupid man who built his house on sand. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house, and it collapsed with a big crash.”<sup>22</sup>

Jesus was clear: Not all who call him Lord will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but only those who obey his commands – those who do what God wants. If they call him “Lord,” but he tells them, “I never knew you,” and sends them away from him... were they really Christians?

They clearly thought they were. They called him “Lord,” they prophesied, they cast out demons in his name, they did many things in his name. But Jesus never knew them. If Jesus never knew them, then they never really were Christians – and they never actually had the life they thought they had.

Jesus told a parable where he said that on the last day, he will separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.<sup>23</sup> He will tell the sheep to enter into rest *because they obeyed his commands*. And he will tell the goats to depart from him and sends them into eternal punishment *because they did not obey his commands*.

He won’t separate them based on what information they accepted as true. He will separate them based on what they *did*.

True saving faith is about fidelity. It’s about loyalty. It’s about living a radical life of obedience to the commands of Jesus. It’s about being a trustworthy servant – a reliable servant. Jesus was saying anyone who doesn’t live that way isn’t actually a Christian – even if they think they are.

So, here’s the thing: If those people aren’t actually Christians, then those people can’t confidently approach the throne of God. They don’t have free access to God. The access to God that’s available through Jesus is not available to them because they didn’t join themselves to Jesus in fidelity. They didn’t choose to begin obeying his commands.

Christians today read some of the grand promises in Scripture, and they assume those promises are for them – but they don’t accept the lifestyle that Jesus said you have to live to be his follower. They don’t recognize that those verses weren’t written to American Christians who live cushy American lives and pursue the American dream.

Those verses were written to the early Church – to people who gave up everything to follow

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<sup>21</sup> Ref. John 8:51, 14:15, 14:21, 14:23, 15:10, 15:14; Galatians 5:6; James 2:14-26; 1 John 2:3-6, 2:9-11, 3:9-11, 3:16-18, 3:23-24, 4:16, 4:19-21, 5:3

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 7:21-27

<sup>23</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus, people who shared everything in common, who looked out for one another more than they looked out for themselves, who hated the things of this world and lived simple, humble lives so their resources could go toward helping their brothers and sisters. The promise of free access to God is for people like that. It's not for people who call Jesus "Lord" but refuse to obey what he said to do.

John said, "Here is the message we have heard from Christ and now proclaim to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. So if we say we have fellowship with God, but we continue living in darkness, we are liars and do not follow the truth. But if we live in the light, as God is in the light, we can share fellowship with each other. Then the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from every sin."<sup>24</sup>

Look at what John said. God is light. He's in the light. Everything around him is light, and there is no darkness whatsoever. So, if you say you have fellowship with God – if you say you can come before him with confidence, if you say you have free access to God, if you say you can be heard by God – but you're in the darkness, then you're a liar and you don't follow the truth.

Why?

Because God isn't in the darkness. If you're still in the darkness, you can't come before God with confidence because he isn't there with you. You don't have access to God if you live in darkness. But if we live in the light, just like God is in the light, then we can have fellowship with him, then we can come before him with confidence, then we have free access to him, and our prayers are heard.

It's not a promise for those who live in the darkness. It's only a promise for those who live in the light. And living in the light isn't about "believing in Jesus." Living in the light means obeying his commands. Shortly after saying this, John clarified, "Anyone who claims, 'I am in the light,' but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. *Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light* and there is no cause of stumbling in him. But whoever hates a brother or sister is in darkness, lives in darkness, and does not know where to go, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."<sup>25</sup>

Saying, "I am in the light" doesn't mean you're actually in the light! You're only in the light if you love the brothers and sisters – not with the world's love, but with God's love. John clarified what true love is many times throughout his letter, and we've discussed those verses throughout this series.<sup>26</sup>

You are only in the light and have access to God if you live in God's radical love – the kind of love Jesus showed for us, where you drop everything and look out for others before looking out for yourself. That's what it means to live in the light. Anyone who claims to have fellowship with God, but doesn't live this way, is a liar. They don't have the fellowship with God that they think they have. They don't follow the truth. They don't have access to God.

Christians today don't understand why their prayers aren't being answered because they don't understand that these amazing promises aren't for them. These promises are only for those who live in the light – radically loving without concern for themselves, obeying the commands of Jesus.

In other words, these promises are only for those who love Jesus. Jesus said, "Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me, and my Father will love those who love me. I will love them and will reveal myself to them... If people love me, they will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."<sup>27</sup>

Jesus said the only ones who actually love him are the ones who obey his commands. Anyone who refuses to obey his commands doesn't actually love him. If that's what Jesus said it means to love him, then ask yourself: Can someone be a Christian without loving Jesus?

Can someone have fellowship with God and enter into his presence if they don't love him?

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<sup>24</sup> 1 John 1:5-7

<sup>25</sup> 1 John 2:9-11, emphasis added

<sup>26</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:16-18, 4:9-12

<sup>27</sup> John 14:21,23

John said, "Loving God means obeying his commands."<sup>28</sup>

Christians shouldn't expect their prayers to be answered if they're not obeying the radical commands of Jesus – because if they're not obeying him, they prove they don't love him. That means they're not really Christians.

And if they're not really Christians, they can't come before God with confidence. If they're not really Christians, they don't have free access to God. If they're not really Christians, then they're still in the darkness. And God is not in the darkness! That's what John was trying to get us to understand throughout his letter. And this teaching about prayer is something found all throughout the Bible. God doesn't listen to the prayers of people who refuse to obey what he told them to do.

God said, "When you raise your arms to me in prayer, I will refuse to look at you. Even if you say many prayers, I will not listen to you... Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. Stop doing the evil things I see you do. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Help the orphans. Stand up for the rights of widows."<sup>29</sup>

When God said this to Israel, he said that they were still bringing him sacrifices, they were keeping the feasts, they were worshiping him, they were coming to his Temple, they were keeping the Sabbath, and they were having holy meetings. But he wouldn't listen to their prayers.

Why?

Because they were living wrong. Their lives were consumed with themselves. He told them to wash themselves and make themselves clean; that's the same thing John said: If we live in the light, then the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from every sin.<sup>30</sup> But in Isaiah, God said what that means: He told them to change their actions. Cleansing yourself from sin is not just about receiving forgiveness; it's about no longer living in that sin. John was saying the same thing Isaiah said: you are not living in the light if you continue living the wrong way. In Isaiah, God told them he would not listen to their prayers because they had not cleansed themselves – they were still consumed with themselves, living in sin, without repenting. They didn't look out for others. Love didn't define their lives. He told them that if they wanted their prayers to be heard, they needed to stop doing wrong, they needed to do good, seek justice, help the oppressed, help orphans, and help widows.

If we live in the light, then the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from every sin – it washes our consciences,<sup>31</sup> making us "pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds."<sup>32</sup> His blood washes us "so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead."<sup>33</sup> We are washed "so we would die to sin and start living for righteousness."<sup>34</sup>

His blood doesn't just wash away past sins for the sake of forgiveness. His blood washes us so we no longer live how we used to live. His blood transforms us so we stop doing wrong, and learn to do good – so we seek justice, help the oppressed, help orphans, and help widows. If our lives haven't been transformed, then we haven't been washed. And, if we haven't been washed, then, like Israel, God won't listen to our prayers.

Isaiah said again, "You do what pleases yourselves on these fast days, and you are unfair to your workers. Even when you fast, you argue and fight and hit with wicked fists. You cannot do these things as you do now and believe your prayers are heard in heaven. Is this the fast that I want? Do I want a day when people afflict themselves? I don't want people just to bow their heads like a plant,

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<sup>28</sup> 1 John 5:3

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah 1:15-17

<sup>30</sup> Ref. 1 John 1:5-7

<sup>31</sup> Ref. Hebrews 9:14, 10:19-23

<sup>32</sup> Titus 2:14

<sup>33</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>34</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

stretching out on sackcloth and ashes. Is this what you call a fast? Do you really think this pleases the LORD? I will tell you the kind of fast I want: Free the people you have put in prison unfairly and undo their chains. Free the oppressed and stop their hard labor. Share your food with the hungry and bring poor, homeless people into your own homes. When you see someone who has no clothes, give him yours, and don't refuse to help your own relatives. Then your light will shine like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your righteousness will walk before you, and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind. Then you will call out, and the LORD will answer. You will cry out, and he will say, 'Here I am.'"<sup>35</sup>

God was telling his people to change their lives. They fasted, they prayed, they asked God why he wasn't answering their prayers. He told them to stop living for themselves. He told them to share with those in need, to welcome homeless people into their own homes, to clothe the naked, and to help the brothers and sisters. He told them that if they lived that way, they would see their prayers answered, they would know God, he would walk with them and answer them when they cried out to him. Their prayers would be answered if, and only if, they obeyed God's commands.

He said again, "Surely the LORD's hand is not too short to save you. He can hear you when you ask him for help. It is your evil that has separated you from your God. Your sins cause him to hide his face from you, so he does not hear you."<sup>36</sup>

And again, "Whoever ignores the poor when they cry for help will also cry for help and not be answered."<sup>37</sup>

And again, "When I called to them, they would not listen. So when they called to me, I would not listen..."<sup>38</sup>

These are just a few examples. The message of the prophets contained this message time and time again. The Israelites thought they were God's people. They brought him sacrifices. They worshiped him. They fasted. They prayed. But their prayers weren't answered because the way they lived was evil in God's eyes. God is in the light. But the Israelites were in the darkness. They didn't have access to him. They couldn't come before him. They needed to wash themselves and make themselves clean.

The message of the prophets didn't become irrelevant in the New Testament. Peter told us to closely follow what the prophets said as if we were following a light in a dark place.<sup>39</sup> Their message is still true for us. God is still looking for those who obey his commands. He still only promises to answer the prayers of those who live their lives for him – obeying him no matter the cost.

Jesus said, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you can ask anything you want, and it will be done for you."<sup>40</sup>

We're very familiar with the times Jesus said, "If you have faith, you can ask anything you want, and it will be done for you." Here, Jesus said the exact same thing. But he said it in different words. He said, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you can ask anything you want, and it will be done for you." But this is the same promise – because "having faith" means having fidelity! It means loyalty. It means you obey. And as we saw in the last video, *abiding in him* means *obeying him*. It means you have *fidelity*. It means you have *loyalty*. It means you're *reliable*.

John said, "The people who obey God's commands abide in God, and God abides in them."<sup>41</sup>

So, when Jesus said, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you can ask anything you

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<sup>35</sup> Isaiah 58:3-9

<sup>36</sup> Isaiah 59:1-2

<sup>37</sup> Proverbs 21:13

<sup>38</sup> Zechariah 7:13

<sup>39</sup> Ref. 2 Peter 1:19

<sup>40</sup> John 15:7

<sup>41</sup> 1 John 3:24

want, and it will be done for you..." he was saying, "if you obey my commands, and if my commands live in you – they're in your life, they consume your life, they're living in you – *then* you can ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you." Jesus was saying the same thing the prophets had said to Israel. John said it very directly: "My dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God. And *God gives us what we ask for because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.*"<sup>42</sup>

Again: "God gives us what we ask for because we obey his commands and do what pleases him."

John was clear throughout the context of this verse (and the whole letter of 1 John) that God's commands are about loving others – meeting their needs, loving through action, laying down our lives, and helping the brothers and sisters.<sup>43</sup> And here, John said that if we live like that, we will receive what we ask for from God; and we will receive what we ask for from God *because* we live like that.

According to John, our prayers are answered *because* we obey God's commands. We receive what we ask *because* we live in love – we meet the needs of others, we prioritize the lives of others above our own comfort, our own needs, and our own lives. We receive what we ask for *if* we live like Jesus lived – laying down our lives for our brothers and sisters, living in the light.

James said the same thing: "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being just like us. He prayed that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years! Then Elijah prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the land produced crops again."<sup>44</sup>

James was saying that our prayers can have the same power as Elijah's prayers. Elijah stopped the rain for over three years through his prayers. Then he prayed again, and it began to rain. Our prayers can have that same kind of power. But James didn't say, "The prayer of someone who *believes* is powerful and effective." He didn't say, "The prayer of someone who *accepts the correct information* is powerful and effective." He said, "The prayer of *a righteous person* is powerful and effective."

It's the prayer of a righteous person – that's the kind of prayer that has power. A *righteous person* is someone who does what is right. John said, "Dear children, do not let anyone deceive you. *The one who does what is right is righteous*, just as Christ is righteous."<sup>45</sup>

John said that a righteous person is someone who does what is right... which means James was saying that the prayer of someone who does what is right is powerful and effective like Elijah's prayer.

If you want your prayer to be powerful and effective like Elijah's prayer, then you must live right. You must change your actions. You must live a life that is pleasing to God where you obey his commands and live in radical love and stop looking out for yourself.

Peter said the same thing: "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears on their prayers. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."<sup>46</sup>

Again, the Lord listens to the prayers of those who live the way God says is right, but he does not listen to the prayers of those who do what God says is evil. The promise that our prayers will be heard and that we will receive whatever we ask for is contingent on us living the kind of life God commanded us to live. This is, again, the same thing the prophets said, the same thing James said, the same thing John said, and the same thing Jesus said. If you want your prayer to be powerful and effective – like Elijah – then you must live your life doing what God says is right. You must obey his

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<sup>42</sup> 1 John 3:21-22, emphasis added

<sup>43</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:3-6, 3:11-18, 3:23, 4:21

<sup>44</sup> James 5:16-18

<sup>45</sup> 1 John 3:7, emphasis added

<sup>46</sup> 1 Peter 3:12



commands. You must live the kind of life that he approves of. You must abide in him.

The promises from Jesus that our prayers will be answered if we have faith were all saying that our prayers will be answered if we have fidelity, loyalty, reliability, and faithfulness. Jesus was saying our prayers will be answered if we live our lives in complete submission and obedience to him. John said the same thing. James said the same thing. Peter said the same thing.

Why?

Because that's when we're living in the light. We can only have fellowship with God if we're living in the light. If you are not obeying him, then you are not a Christian. And if you're not a Christian, then you don't have free access to God through Jesus. This is the consistent message throughout Scripture – both Old and New Testaments.

So, if this is so consistently the message in Scripture, why is it something that I have never once heard any Christian teacher even mention?

Why do Christian teachers ignore these verses? Why do they focus on the outlying verses, take them out of context, make them say something different, and then tell us that that's what the Bible teaches? Why? Because they care more about their own theology than they do what the Bible actually says. If God only listens to the prayers of those who obey his commands (like John directly said), then Protestant theology has some major holes in it.

The fundamental principles of Protestant theology stand on the foundation that our actions play no role in our relationship with God.

Protestants believe that you can become a Christian and have a full relationship with God and be heard by God simply by believing in the correct information. These verses completely contradict that. So, they completely ignore the verses that prove their theology is wrong. Not only do they ignore them, but they refuse to even draw attention to them.

I recently skimmed through an extremely popular book on prayer. I found the chapter that addressed these extraordinary promises of Jesus that we can receive anything we ask for as long as we have faith. I looked through that chapter to get a feel for what that so-called “teacher” was teaching. He had a whole chapter on why we should receive what we ask for in prayer, and he didn't even mention where John said, “God gives us what we ask for because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.”<sup>47</sup>

*He didn't even mention it!*

It directly addresses the issue he claimed to be addressing, yet he didn't even point it out. And, it's not just him. I spent twenty-five years in the institutional Protestant Church, listening to the teaching of men, learning from them, following them, and trusting them. I read countless books on prayer and listened to dozens or hundreds of sermons on prayer. Yet I hadn't ever once heard anyone mention this verse.

Not once.

They're not teaching the word of God. They're teaching their own theology. And this verse doesn't fit their theology, so they don't mention it.

“My people, your guides lead you astray and turn you away from what is right.”<sup>48</sup>

“You keep saying, ‘We are wise, because we have the teachings of the LORD.’ But actually, those who explain the Scriptures have written lies with their pens. These wise teachers rejected the word of the LORD, so what wisdom is in them? They will be humiliated. They will be shocked and trapped.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:22

<sup>48</sup> Isaiah 3:12

<sup>49</sup> Jeremiah 8:8-9

“Stay away from the Pharisees; they are blind guides. And if a blind person guides a blind person, both will fall into a pit.”<sup>50</sup>

“Woe to you, you experts on the law. You have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves did not enter, and you stopped others from entering, too.”<sup>51</sup>

When these “teachers” talk about prayer and try to address the fact that their prayers aren't being answered like Jesus promised, they very often turn to one single verse as their answer. They turn to this verse:

“And this is the confidence we have before God: that if we ask God for anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know he hears us in whatever we ask, we know we have what we ask from him.”<sup>52</sup>

These teachers use this verse as an excuse to negate all the other extraordinary promises in the Bible. They say that this verse means you can't really know if you will receive what you ask for – because it might not be God's will. They say you should just start making more and more requests because every now and then you'll make one that lines up with God's will, and you'll see that prayer get answered.

Essentially, they say that praying according to God's will is like shooting at a moving target in the dark. You can't know that you're going to get it. You just know that if it's God's will, then you'll get it. And they encourage you to just keep shooting, because occasionally some of those shots will hit the target.

John began this verse by saying, “This is the confidence we have before God...” So, John was trying to tell us how much confidence we can have. But that's the best they think he was saying? ...that this is the confidence we have before God: that sometimes when we ask for something, it will line up with his will and we will receive what we ask for... sometimes...?

What kind of confidence is that?

That's not confidence! And every Christian who has ever accepted their teaching knows there's no confidence in it. That's why most Christians don't expect their prayers to get answered! They think they're shooting blindly at a moving target! They think praying according to God's will is some mystery and they'll never be able to know for sure if they're in his will or not.

This verse is used as an excuse because these teachers don't see their *own* prayers getting answered the way Jesus says they should! They take this one verse, they overwrite all the other verses in the Bible that say we should expect to see our prayers get answered, and they just say, “we have to just submit it to God's will. If it's his will, it'll happen. If it's not his will, then it won't.”

This isn't biblical!

Praying according to God's will isn't supposed to be something where we shoot blindly at a moving target, never sure if it's God's will or not, never sure if our prayers will be answered or not. Jesus said we should receive *everything* we ask! When he said, “everything,” he meant *everything*! And we see that demonstrated in the early Church throughout the book of Acts.

Praying according to God's will is not a mystery. It's not something that's supposed to leave us guessing. “God's will” is a phrase that simply means *what God wants*. And the Bible tells us what God wants!

The entire Bible teaches us what God wants – what he cares about, what he wants us to be doing, what he values. Most Christians don't know God's will simply because they don't read the Bible to *learn*. Most Christians don't know God's will simply because they spend so much time listening to

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<sup>50</sup> Matthew 15:14

<sup>51</sup> Luke 11:52

<sup>52</sup> 1 John 5:14-15

other teachers that they don't even realize those teachers weren't sent by God in the first place. John called them the antichrist.<sup>53</sup> There's nothing to learn from them.

But, they trust those teachers, and they never get around to learning what the Bible itself actually says.

Paul said, "Therefore brothers and sisters, since God has shown us great mercy, I urge you to offer your lives as a living sacrifice to him. Your offering must be holy and pleasing to him, which is the true way for you to worship. Do not be conformed to this world; instead be transformed by a new way of thinking. *Then you will be able to discern what is God's will; you will know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect.*"<sup>54</sup>

Those who obey God's commands – they offer their entire lives as a living sacrifice to God, they stay holy, they live pleasing God, they don't conform to this world, they're transformed by a new way of thinking – their prayers are answered just like Jesus promised, with no strings attached!

Why?

Because those who live that way will be able to discern what is God's will. They will know what God wants. They will know what is good, what is pleasing to him, and what is perfect. They're not shooting blindly at a moving target. They know his thoughts, they know his mind, they know his will. There's no question as to whether or not it's something God wants.

So, this verse where John said that we have to pray according to God's will – it's not a verse that can be used as an excuse for your prayers not being answered. You're supposed to know God's will. If you don't know God's will, something is wrong with the way you're living – because Paul said that if you live correctly, you will become capable of knowing God's will.

John wasn't trying to tell people that they can't be sure if their prayers will be answered because they can't be sure if it's God's will or not! He was saying the opposite. He was trying to give them confidence! He was trying to tell them that they can be confident that their prayers will be answered. Jesus didn't say, "If you have faith, you can say to this mountain, 'be thrown into the sea,' and it will be done for you... if it's God's will."

No.

Jesus said that if you have faith – as in loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness – where you wholeheartedly abandon this world and cling only to Jesus and live only for God and no longer live for yourself – then you can ask for anything and it will be done for you. Period.

Why? Because you will know what God wants. You will know what he cares about. You will want what he wants. You will ask for the things he wants because you want those things, too. You will live in the light, as he is in the light.<sup>55</sup> You will walk by the Spirit, as Jesus walked by the Spirit.<sup>56</sup> You will be one with God in the same way that Jesus was one with God.<sup>57</sup> The promises in the New Testament about prayer are promises about the new life we have when we're born again. Our prayers will be answered because we're in the light: We're walking by the Spirit. We want what God wants. Our very nature has changed.<sup>58</sup>

These promises about prayer stand on the same conditions we saw in the last video about

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<sup>53</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-27

<sup>54</sup> Romans 12:1-2, emphasis added

<sup>55</sup> Ref. John 3:21, 8:12, 11:9, 12:35-36, 12:45; Acts 26:18; Ephesians 5:8-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-9; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 1:5-7, 2:10

<sup>56</sup> Ref. Matthew 12:8; Luke 4:18, 11:13; John 3:5-6, 14:15-17, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7-15; Romans 7:6, 8:1-17; Galatians 5:16, 5:22-25

<sup>57</sup> Ref. John 17:21-23; Ephesians 3:19

<sup>58</sup> Ref. Acts 15:9; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Galatians 2:19-20, 3:27, 5:16, 5:22-25; Ephesians 4:22-24, 5:8-10; Philippians 2:17; Colossians 2:11-15, 3:9-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 8:6, 8:8-12, 9:14, 10:14-23; 1 Peter 1:2, 1:17-23, 2:24-25; 2 Peter 1:2-4; 1 John 2:3-4, 2:9-11, 3:7-11

receiving the Holy Spirit. Why? Because those conditions are what it means to be a Christian in the first place, and all the promises in the New Testament are only for people who are true Christians. They're not promises for all the false brothers and sisters that Jesus and the apostles warned us would fill the Church.<sup>59</sup> They're not promises for apostate believers.

They're only promises for those who take up their cross and follow Jesus to death.<sup>60</sup> They're only promises for people who truly accept the cost of following Jesus and give up everything to be his disciple.<sup>61</sup> They're only for people who no longer live for themselves, but live for him.<sup>62</sup>

It's not about just "believing hard enough." We must walk in the light. We must be one with Christ. We must be joined to him and receive his nature so our old thoughts, our old ways, and our old desires leave us. We must be washed in his blood and cleansed in the same way God told Israel to wash themselves and be cleansed.<sup>63</sup> If we say we have fellowship with God, but we walk in darkness, we're liars.<sup>64</sup> But if we receive his Spirit – not just manifestations or power, but the transformation of a new heart with new desires – then we will begin to walk in the light.<sup>65</sup> Walking in the light means obeying his commands and living the way he wants us to live.<sup>66</sup>

And if we obey his commands then we know we have whatever we ask, because if we're obeying his commands then we can have fellowship with God – because we are also in the light where God is!

This is a crucial teaching that is largely missing in the Church today.

While there are many preachers who teach that Christians should be able to receive whatever they ask for in prayer, they don't understand (or at least preach) that those Christians can only receive what they ask if they're walking in the light and obeying Jesus. They don't teach people what it means to receive a new heart and become one with Jesus. They don't teach that we should be people who, when we do things it's not really us doing them, but Jesus doing it through us. They don't teach that people need to first change. They think that *faith* means *believing something*, so they teach that people just need to start believing that they have fellowship with God. They assume that everyone who calls themselves a Christian is a true Christian... so they try to teach unrepentant sinners how to walk in the power of a Holy Spirit they haven't yet received!

If someone is still living in darkness, they don't have fellowship with God! That person shouldn't expect their prayers to be answered because they don't live in the light, they aren't one with Jesus, and they don't abide in him.

Being one with God and being like Jesus is more than just having power and performing signs and wonders. It means your desires change: You want what he wants. You care about what he cares about. You do what he would do. You love with his love. You live as he lived.

Often we look at the book of Acts, and we just want the power. But the primary job of the Spirit is to give us a new heart – to write the Law on our hearts.<sup>67</sup> If we don't have a new heart, we don't have the Spirit, and if we don't have the Spirit, we can't walk in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is our new nature. He is what causes us to not want the things of this world, but to want what

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<sup>59</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-23, 13:24-30, 13:36-43, 24:11; Acts 20:29-31; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-3, 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2; 1 John 2:3-6, 2:9-11, 2:18-27, 3:7-10, 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Jude

<sup>60</sup> Ref. Matthew 10:38-39, 16:23-25; Mark 8:33-35; Luke 9:23-24, 14:25-27, 17:33; John 12:24-26; Romans 6:1-14; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Galatians 2:19-20, 6:14-15; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 2:11-12, 2:20, 3:1-4, 3:9-10

<sup>61</sup> Ref. Luke 14:33

<sup>62</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>63</sup> Ref. Isaiah 1:16-17

<sup>64</sup> Ref. 1 John 1:5-7

<sup>65</sup> Ref. Galatians 5:16; Romans 6-8

<sup>66</sup> 1 John 2:9-11

<sup>67</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:5-18; Hebrews 8:8-13, 10:15-18

God wants.<sup>68</sup> So, if we still want this world, and if we still want what is evil, we need to stop asking God for the power we see in Acts, and we need to start asking for the new heart. If we have the Spirit living in us, we should stop wanting evil.

That was the primary mission of the Spirit from the beginning. The promise of the New Covenant was that he would write the Law on our hearts.<sup>69</sup> He would make us people who no longer want what God hates, but instead we would want what he wants. Paul said, “Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead.”<sup>70</sup>

This explains a lot of the problems in the Church today. We read in Acts about the unstoppable Church, and many Christians long for those days to return. They want to see the Spirit moving. They want to see the sick healed. They want to see the dead raised. They want to command demons to leave people. They want to see thousands, or millions, converted. They want the power of God moving in their lives.

But they don’t want the cost of following Jesus. They don’t want to give up their American lifestyle. They don’t want to give up the things of this world. They don’t want to give up their comfort. They want to keep prioritizing themselves. They want to meet their own needs, reach their own preferred standard of living, and then they’ll help others when they’re able.

Christians today are trying to gain all the benefits of a life with God, but they don’t want the cost he said comes with it!

The Church today has a problem in that Christians either avoid talking about the power of God entirely and convince themselves that those things don’t happen anymore, or they focus entirely on having the power of God and ignore the cost of following Jesus. They want to have an experience. They want it for themselves. But they don’t want to change their lives and give up their comfort.

As a result, we have a modern church where the sick are rarely healed, the dead are almost never raised, the lost are convinced that God doesn’t even exist (despite living in a so-called “Christian” country), and Christians often seem to only “encounter God” when singing songs with loud music and flashing lights – the same ingredients that create a spiritual experience at any secular rock concert.

This isn’t the kind of Christianity God offered us. He offers so much more than this.

In the Book of Acts, we read about an unstoppable Church. The apostles performed many signs and miracles, there were no needy people in the Church, they faced persecution with boldness, they spread the Gospel into many different countries in just a few short years, and countless people were saved everywhere they went.

Nothing could stop them.

Satan was back-peddling, desperately trying to slow down the advance of God’s Kingdom. God’s Kingdom spread, shining the light into the darkness, kicking down the gates of Hell and rescuing the lost from the grip of God’s enemy.

Today, at least in the West, we have a Church that is mostly stopped dead in their tracks.

This can change!

The stories we read about in Acts don’t have to just be stories – that kind of life is available for every follower of Jesus! It’s available for me. It’s available for you. But you must get up and follow him. You must do what he did. You must do what he told us to do! You must trust him. Jesus promised us, “Don’t fear, little flock, because your Father wants to give you the kingdom.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ref. Romans 8:1-17; Galatians 5:16-25; Titus 2:11-14

<sup>69</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:5-18; Hebrews 8:8-13, 10:15-18

<sup>70</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>71</sup> Luke 12:32

God wants to give us the Kingdom! He wants to use us! He wants to have a relationship with us! He is looking for people to work the harvest! But what was the very next thing Jesus said?

“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Get for yourselves purses that will not wear out, the treasure in heaven that never runs out, where thieves can't steal and moths can't destroy. Your heart will be where your treasure is.”<sup>72</sup>

The Father wants to give you the Kingdom – so get your heart in the right place. Your heart will be wrapped up wherever your treasure is; so, stop treasuring this life and this world, and start treasuring God's Kingdom. How do you store up treasure in heaven? By going to church? By reading your Bible? By praying? No... Jesus told us how: Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Every time Jesus ever talked about treasure in heaven, he always said you get it by selling your possessions and giving to the poor.<sup>73</sup>

You have treasure in heaven when you obey his commands, when you love with his radical love. And when you have treasure in heaven, you will start to value his Kingdom more than this world.

When we begin to obey his commands, we will begin to treasure his Kingdom more because he will come reveal himself to us, make his home with us, and show us how worthwhile he really is! He will come and live in us, talk to us, lead us, provide for us, teach us, answer our prayers, protect us, and so much more!

We will recognize the treasure that is buried in that field and realize how worthwhile it is to sell everything to get it.<sup>74</sup> The more we begin to obey, the more we will know him, and the more we know him, the more we will want to obey.

God offers us so much more than just eternal life. It's not that eternal life isn't an incredible gift – it totally is! But so many Christians think that Jesus died just so we can go to heaven someday, and they ignore the fact that he wanted to have a real relationship with us today – in this life. God offers us a real relationship with the One who created the universe. If we're united in fellowship with Him, nothing can stop us, nothing can stand in our way, nothing can crush us, and nothing can overwhelm us. With him on our side, we're more than conquerors!<sup>75</sup>

If we are joined to Christ, we've died with him and we've been raised with him. Scripture says we're a new creation!<sup>76</sup> Our old life – that life where we used to care about this world and the temporary pleasures of this world – that life is gone. We have something so much better. We get the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. We get the mind of Christ. We get to come into the presence of God with confidence, knowing that he listens to our prayers and answers them!

Our Christian lives don't have to be “dry” – lacking passion, feeling like we're missing something, and full of unanswered prayers. Christians can experience God today like they did in the early Church. But we must accept the cost of following Jesus, and we must begin to obey the commands he gave us in Scripture.

If we do that, then we can have fellowship with God, come before him with confidence, and we will receive anything we ask for in prayer.

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<sup>72</sup> Luke 12:33-34

<sup>73</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:19-24 (compare Deuteronomy 15:7-11 to understand Jesus' phrase “if your eyes are good” and “if your eyes are evil”); Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 12:21-34, 18:22; 1 Timothy 6:17-10

<sup>74</sup> Ref. Matthew 13:44-46

<sup>75</sup> Ref. Romans 8:31-39

<sup>76</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:14-17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10