

ASK IN MY NAME

John 14:13-14

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“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” (Jn. 14:13-14).

Andy Benes was not having a good season. His 2001 campaign as a pitcher with the St. Louis Cardinals ended with a sore knee and a poor performance. After a bad start to the 2002 season, the team began hinting to Andy that it was perhaps time to start thinking of retirement. Instead, Benes accepted a demotion to the minor leagues where he could seek to regain his form. A Christian, Andy and his wife began praying that the Lord would enable him to pitch well enough to remain in St. Louis and retire with his reputation intact.

One day in the minor leagues, Benis began toying with throwing a split-fingered fastball. This is an effective but difficult pitch that few can master, yet Andy seemed to pick it up immediately. Instead of spending the months and even years normally required to master a new pitch, Benes threw the split-fingered fastball that night and began retiring batters. Within a few weeks, he was back up in the major leagues and with his new pitch he contributed to a division championship and then retired at the top of his game. Believing that God had answered his and his wife’s prayer, Benes commented just six months later: “That pitch was like a gift God dropped from heaven. If I had to throw a split-fingered fastball today, I’m not sure I would know how to do it.”¹

¹ Cited from Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew*, 2 vols., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 1:218-219.

Hearing this story, Christians may wonder, “Is this the kind of request we are to make of the Lord?” Are prayers like this what Jesus had in mind when he promised, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do” (John 14:13)?

ON-GOING COMMUNION WITH CHRIST

In his last meeting with the disciples, Jesus made a number of revolutionary promises designed to uphold the disciples’ faith, and revealing his plans to provide for their needs after his departure. First, Jesus promised to prepare a place for us in heaven and return to take us there with him (Jn. 14:3). The second promise assured believers that they will carry on Christ’s work, saying that even “greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (Jn. 14:12). Immediately following was a third great promise: “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do” (Jn. 14:13). Here, our Lord assured the disciples of on-going communion with him after his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

The importance of Christ’s promise can be understood by asking what it means to be a Christian. What is a Christian? One answer is that a Christian is someone who believes the Bible’s teaching about Jesus Christ. This definition was emphasized in Peter’s Great Confession, declaring his belief in Jesus: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). Another definition of a Christian is one who has become, through faith in Jesus, a forgiven and beloved child of God. John emphasized this definition, writing, “to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12).

Another essential definition is that a Christian is a man or woman in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The “I Am” statements of John’s Gospel make this point: Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12); “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (Jn. 10:14); and “I am the true vine... Abide in me, and I in you” (Jn. 15:1, 4). These and many other statements in John’s Gospel define the Christian life as a personal and saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Yet the question is raised as to how we have a personal relationship with someone who is not physically present. This was the question gnawing at the disciples. Jesus was departing and they could not follow: how could they remain in communion with him? Jesus' answer was that he was entering into heaven to take up his kingdom and power. This being the case, just as believers are able to speak to the Father through prayer, so may we also commune with Christ his Son in prayer. Prayer is talking to God, and we may through faith talk with Jesus just as the disciples spoke with him during his days on earth. A. W. Pink writes, "True, He would be in Heaven, and they on earth, but *prayer* could remove all sense of distance, prayer could bring them into His very presence at any time," and prayer was thus essential to the "greater works" of which Jesus spoke in John 14:12.²

For this reason, just as a personal relationship with Jesus is essential to Christian salvation, prayer is essential to our discipleship and life of faith. Martin Luther thus insisted, "A Christian without prayer is just as impossible as a living person without a pulse."³ Without prayer there is no communion with Christ, without a personal relationship with Christ there is no Christianity.

Present, personal, on-going discipleship with the risen Lord Jesus is not only the believer's obligation but his or her great privilege as well. Peter Lewis tells of a Chinese pastor who was placed in a labor camp for his faith. His captors denied him a Bible and punished him when he prayed or sang. Out of malice they made him clean the contents of the camp latrine. Every day the pastor would take the excrement out and scatter it as fertilizer over the fields. The smell was so foul that the guards would withdraw and give him plenty of space, enabling him to sing and pray to the Lord. For this reason, he came to love his malodorous occupation because of the communion he could openly enjoy with the Lord Jesus. The dunghill became his "garden", and he sang:

I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses...
For he walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own;

² Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 773.

³ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 14-16*, Luther's Works, v. 24 (St. Louis: CPH, 1957), 89.

And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.⁴

Many Christians today are just as tyrannized by our schedules and lifestyles, and would do well to spend our own time in the “garden” with the Lord. Moreover, each of us can and should live in constant communion with our Lord, as Paul instructed us: “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17).

THE SCOPE OF OUR PRAYERS

The promise of John 14:13 goes farther, however, than merely assuring us of on-going communion with Christ in prayer. Jesus states not only that we may pray to him, but that “whatever you ask in my name, this I will do.” It is the scope of this promise that takes our breath away: “whatever you ask,” Jesus says, “this I will do.”

It is commonly and correctly stated that prayer does not mean that we get everything that we asked for exactly as we asked for it.

Sometimes we pray foolishly, and we can be grateful that God’s wisdom is not overruled by our folly. Furthermore, since the Lord’s priorities are spiritual, he usually places our spiritual well-being ahead of our material well-being. The apostle Paul, for instance, prayed three times for God to remove a thorn from his flesh – whatever that was – and three times the Lord answered not by removing the thorn but by giving Paul grace to bear the affliction. God was teaching him a vital lesson, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

Unanswered prayers may also be a matter of timing, as for various reasons the Lord desires that we wait for what we have requested.

Having pointed out these standard explanations for why our prayers do not always seem to be answered, we need to realize that this is not the emphasis given by Jesus in this promise. Jesus emphasized that he *will* give *whatever* we ask of him in prayer.

An illustration from the reign of Alexander the Great may help show Jesus’ emphasis. The Macedonian conqueror was once approached

⁴ Peter Lewis, *God’s Hall of Fame* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1999), 32.

by a man who pleaded his need of a large sum of money. Alexander immediately sent the man to his treasury, telling him to request whatever he needed. Some time afterward, the treasurer appeared with the horrified report that the man had taken a vast sum from the royal hoard. Alexander confirmed that he had authorized this, explaining, “He has asked me as a king, and I have given to him as a king.”⁵ How much more is this true of our Lord Jesus, who “is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or imagine, according to his power” (Eph. 3:20). There is literally no limit placed on the scope of our requests to Christ in prayer: “Whatever you ask,” he says, “this will I do” (Jn. 14:13). John Newton thus urges us:

Thou art coming to a king, large petitions with thee bring;
For his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much.⁶

THE CONDITION FOR OUR PRAYERS

There is, however, a condition placed on our prayers. Jesus says that he will do whatever we ask “in my name” (Jn. 14:13). “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (Jn. 14:14).

For some believers, praying “in Jesus’ name” means nothing more than appending the words, “in Jesus’ name” to the end of their prayers. This is a good practice, so long as we are serious about what it means. When we pray “in Christ’s name,” we are coming to God the Father through the mediation of his Son, relying on his shed blood for our acceptance and his intercession for our admittance to God’s throne. To pray in any other name, or simply to pray in no name at all, is to have no legitimate reason to expect God to answer your prayers.

R. A. Torrey tells of receiving a note at a conference from man who was embittered by God’s failure to answer his prayers. The note read: “I have been a member of the Presbyterian Church for thirty years, and have tried to be a consistent one all the time. I have been superintendent of the Sunday school for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years; and yet God does not answer my

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⁶ John Newton, “Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare,” 1779.

prayer and I cannot understand it.” Torrey read the note from the pulpit and stated that an explanation was simple. “This man thinks that because he has been a consistent church member for thirty years, a faithful Sunday school superintendent for twenty-five years, and an elder in the church for twenty years, that God is under obligation to answer his prayer. He is really praying in his own name, and God will not hear our prayers when we approach Him in that way. We must, if we would have God answer our prayers, give up any thought that we have claims upon God. There is not one of us who deserves anything from God. If we got what we deserved, every one of us would spend eternity in hell. But Jesus Christ has great claims on God, and we should go to God in our prayers not on the ground of any goodness in ourselves, but on the ground of Jesus Christ’s claims.”⁷

Praying in Christ’s name therefore means praying on the basis of his claims with God. The name of Christ, however, also refers to the whole of his self-revelation, including his character and known will. Leon Morris points out that this “means that prayer is to be in accordance with all that that name stands for. It is prayer proceeding from faith in Christ, prayer that give expression to oneness with Christ, prayer that seeks to glorify Christ.”⁸ Donald Grey Barnhouse adds, “To pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is to seek an endorsement of our request, and to bring into consideration that what we ask is consistent with the nature and purposes of our Saviour.”⁹

This means that we should never expect selfish, petty, worldly, foolish, self-glorifying, self-pitying, or, especially, sinful prayers to be fulfilled by our Lord. But on the other hand, when our prayer coincides with the known will of Christ – with his character, purposes, and attitude – that is, when we are praying in a way that Jesus would pray for us – then we should be confident to offer all kinds of prayers to our risen Lord. Such prayers would include Christ’s blessing on his Word as it is preached and witnessed. Christ’s will also extends to prayers like that of Andy Benes, who

⁷ Cited from James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:1101.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 574.

⁹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Exposition of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:96

desired to finish his career with a positive reputation so as to foster his long-term witness to his city. Praying in Christ's will extends to our seeking good health to continue serving the Lord and financial provision to take care of our families and support our church. Christ's will does not, however, endorse prayers for self-glorifying success, or for the kind of self-serving riches the Bible tells us not to seek (1 Tim. 6:17), or prayers of pride or vindictiveness towards enemies.

Ralph Keiper tells an illustration about praying in Christ's name, based on the work of the Colony of Mercy, a Christian rehabilitation center for alcoholics. The founder of this colony was William Raws, and it was directed by successive generations of Raws' sons. Suppose, Keiper suggests, that one of the men in the colony departs from the grounds and enters a bar at the nearby town. He steps up to the bar and calls out, "Give me a shot of whiskey in Raw's name." At this, the bartender turns around and asks, "Do you mean William Raws, founder of the Colony of Mercy, or his sons who have continued the work of freeing men from bondage to alcohol?" "That's right," the drunk demands, "give me a shot of whiskey in Raw's name!" Such a bartender would refuse, saying, "How dare you charge this drink to Raws? If you were really acting in Raws name, you would have passed by this tavern or come in only to lead someone else back with you to the Colony of Mercy to learn about Jesus Christ. Dr. Raws is not a drinking man, and those who name his name are not customers of ours."

Keiper commented: "To pray in the name of Christ is a serious matter, not to be taken lightly. We ask for many things without regard for our Lord, because we would please ourselves instead of Him." When we do, we find our prayers unanswered, because they were not truly "in Christ's name".¹⁰

The best way we can be confident of praying in Christ's name is to pray for the things the Bible tells us to seek. We should pray for love, joy, peace, patience, and other fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). We should pray for power to withstand temptation, since God has promised to respond with the help that we need (1 Cor. 10:13).

¹⁰ Cited in Boice, *John*, 5:1102.

Parents should pray for their children to come to faith. All Christians should pray for opportunities to witness the gospel, and many more Christ-honoring matters. When we pray for things like these – matters that know are “in Christ’s name” because they are taught in Scripture – we should pray with expectations of our Lord’s mighty answer, in his wise manner and timing, since he has promised, “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (Jn. 14:14).

Moreover, we will find, as we consider Christ’s name in our prayers, that the subject matter of our prayers begins to change from a worldly to a godly and Christ-centered perspective. Newton models a Christ-centered prayer:

With my burden I begin, “Lord remove this load of sin.”
Let thy blood, for sinners spilt, set my conscience free from guilt.
Lord, I come to thee for rest, take possession of my breast;
There thy blood-bought right maintain, and without a rival reign.¹¹

As we pray with an increasing focus on the gospel and its work in our lives we will know in increasing measure the power of Christ in answering our prayers.

THE GOAL OF OUR PRAYERS

There is one more matter to be considered in Christ’s promise, however. Whatever we pray in Christ’s name, we must seek above all else to bring glory to God the Father through his Son. Jesus said, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may glorified in the Son” (Jn. 14:13).

This is exactly what we should expect if we are to pray in accord with Christ’s will. For what is the great desire of God the Son but the glory of God the Father? It was for this reason that the cross was to Jesus not a horror to be avoided but a sacrifice to be embraced to the glory of God. Thus, when Jesus prayed on the night of his arrest, the glory of God was his chief preoccupation. “Father,” Jesus began, “the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (Jn. 17:1). James Boice comments: “This is a new thought for many people, for we are so filled with the idea that prayer is getting something from God, that we rarely consider that prayer is actually a

¹¹ Newton, 1779.

means by which God gets something from us. What he wants from us is glory, a glory that will lead others to trust him.”¹²

We see Christ’s commitment to the glory of God in its most holy intensity when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane about the torments he would endure to atone for our sins. His example shows that when we are afraid, anticipate suffering, or are sifted by trials, we may pray for God to take them away, since Jesus did the very same thing in anticipation of the cross. “Father, if you are willing,” Jesus pleaded, “remove this cup from me.” But Jesus did not stop there, for his prayer was guided by faith in the Father’s will and zeal for the Father’s glory. He therefore concluded, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Lk. 22:42). Therefore, writes, A. W. Pink, “To ask in the name of Christ is, therefore, to set aside our own will, and bow to the perfect will of God.”¹³

To believe in Christ’s name, and to pray in Christ’s name, is to walk in Christ’s way. His is a path that leads to glory and to unending pleasures at God’s right hand. But his also is a path that enters into glory by way of the cross. Jesus taught, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23). We therefore cannot pray in Christ’s name and seek an exemption from the cross, but instead are called to “share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God” (2 Tim. 1:8).

We will therefore suffer many things that are common to life in this world, as well as some trials that resolute directly from our faith in Christ. We and others close to us will suffer and sometimes die. Our lives will include many disappointments, some of which will produce keen sorrow. Before much time has passed we ourselves will die. How will we respond to these circumstances? Will we complain to God and blame him for the reality of life in a world he made good but mankind ruined by sin? Or will we receive the circumstances that God decrees as his good and gracious will for our lives, through which our souls are saved through faith in Christ? Boice writes: “If we choose the latter, we will be able to demonstrate the reality of

¹² Ibid., 4:1103.

¹³ Pink, *Gospel of John*, 775.

God's great grace and peace, produced by God's sovereign choice in suffering Christians."¹⁴

Understanding our calling as believers in Christ, we should therefore not only conclude our prayers saying, "in Christ's name," but we should append to all our requests, "Father, not my will, but yours be done." Then, if we pray in Christ's name, for God's glory above all else, we may confidently know the reality of Jesus' promise: "Whatever you ask..., this I will do" (Jn. 14:13).

¹⁴ Boice, *Gospel of John*, 4:1104.