

An Exegetical Study of 1 John 5:13-21: Confidence in God and the Efficacy of Prayer

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Abstract

First John 5:13–21, where the anonymous author concludes a series of messages to his audience, can be seen as the conclusion of 1 John. Instructions on loving others and believing in the Son of God can be summarized as the themes of the earlier messages in 1 John. The author of 1 John 5:13 declares that he is writing to believers in Jesus Christ. The entirety of 1 John 5:13–21 can be distilled to suggest that, if they ask in accordance with God's will, followers of Jesus Christ can be confident and assured that God hears and responds to their prayers. Three approaches will be used to approach this exegesis and interpretation of 1 John 5:13–21. This study will provide a historical-cultural and literary context, the content, and a possible application of the 1 John 5:13-21 passage of Scripture.

KEYWORDS: 1 John 5:13-21, Prayer, Historical-Cultural Context, Literary Context, Application

Introduction

First John 5:13-21 can be considered the conclusion to 1 John, where the anonymous author makes his final points in a series of messages to his audience. The themes of the preceding messages in 1 John can be summarized as instruction to love others and to have faith in the Son of God. In 1 John 5:13, the writer states that he is writing to those who believe in Jesus Christ. The entirety of 1 John 5:13-21 can be summarized as

saying that believers in Jesus Christ can have confidence and assurance that God hears and answers their prayers when they ask according to His will. The procedure of this study of the interpretation of 1 John 5:13-21 will be approached in three steps. First, there will be an evaluation of the historical-cultural and literary context. Next, there will be an examination of relevant commentaries' interpretations of the passage and a keyword study. Finally, a useful and practical application of the passage will be provided for a contemporary reader.

Historical-Cultural and Literary Context of 1 John 5:13-21

The author of 1 John is anonymous, meaning his name is not mentioned in the text. However, it is widely accepted that John the Apostle, who wrote the Gospel of John, also wrote 1 John. Church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, and Eusebius also support the view that Apostle John was the author of 1 John. "Irenaeus (writing ca. a.d. 180) says that after the writing of the other Gospels, John, the disciple of the Lord who reclined on his bosom (an allusion to John 13:23, 21:20), published his Gospel at Ephesus."¹ From Scripture, it can be concluded that the writer's general audience is Christians, or in other words, "believers." In Augustine's commentary on 1 John, he says, "Some have suggested that 1 John may originally have been written to Jewish Christians living in Babylon sometime toward the end of the first century."² In 1 John 2:12-14, the writer specifically addresses the children, young men, and fathers, and in these cases, they are Christians to whom he appeals, as already knowing the Father. This scriptural evidence for the writer addressing specific Christians can be extended to general Christians, as in 1 John 5:13-21. Despite the addressing of specific age groups of Christians, i.e., children, young men, and fathers, 1 John is written mostly to

¹ 1, 2, 3 John Comfort and Counsel for a Church in Crisis, *Bible.org.*, s.v. "1 John 5," accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.bible.org/seriespage/background-and-setting-1-john>.

² *Ibid.*

the whole church in general, not a specific group or congregation. Another note about the author and his intended audience, inferred from what is included and missing from the text, is that there may have been a very good relationship between the writer and his audience. The fact that the name of the writer is not mentioned in the text indicates there was no formal introduction because it may not have been necessary due to the well-known relationship between the writer and the audience. It can also be inferred that the author is part of and deeply associated with the Christian community he is addressing. This can be attributed to the writer's authority and familiarity with his audience.

It is likely that this comes from personal contact the author has had with the recipients, and it cannot be ruled out that he himself is in fact a member of the Christian community to which he is writing. The first person plural pronouns which characterize the prologue (1 John 1:1-4) have been understood by some scholars as nothing more than a literary device to identify the author with the original apostles. If taken at face value, however, they make a significant contribution to the authority with which the author speaks.³

The familiarity and authority with which the writer speaks to his audience prompt one to ask what message he is trying to convey through his relationship and authority. This leads one to need an understanding of the literary context of the Scriptures before and after the selected passage.

The literary context of 1 John 5:13-21 can encompass the entire book. Firstly, because it is considered the conclusion to chapter 5 or the entire book. The use of the phrase “these things I have written” in verse 13 links the conclusion to the rest of the book.

³ Ibid.

“Since the verse (13) unquestionably refers to the entire gospel of John, the parallel expression in verse 13 most likely refers back to the entire epistle.”⁴

The literary context can be viewed from two perspectives. One, the writer is trying to reassure and encourage the Christian community. A second view is based on the schism that has taken place in the Christian community, where some have left the Christian community to follow false teachers. Most of 1 John is written to reassure believers and to emphasize loving one another, as reflected in its major themes in 1 John 1-5. Essentially, throughout all chapters of 1 John, the writer encourages devout Christians to walk in the light, love one another, and have faith in God. The messages about antichrists and false prophets are slight deviations or caveats to the main theme of love found throughout 1 John. In 1 John 2, John warns about antichrists and those who have left their churches. Likewise, in 1 John 4, he instructs how to discern false prophets or teachers. Metaphorically speaking, the writer of 1 John set the course for Christian communities and warned and instructed about the things that can knock them off course. In a broader context, the writer’s concern about false teachers is carried on into 2 John. “2 John 10-11 appears to indicate that the opponents have sent out traveling ‘missionaries,’ or teachers, who are attempting to ‘convert’ members of the recipients’ community. This the author wishes to prevent, so he warns the recipients against welcoming such false teachers into their homes or giving public greetings.”⁵ MacArthur refers to these two perspectives as a test to see who the true Christians are. MacArthur writes that,

⁴ John MacArthur, *1-3 John*, The New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 202.

⁵ 1, 2, 3 John Comfort and Counsel for a Church in Crisis, *Bible.org.*, s.v. “1 John 5,” accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.bible.org/seriespage/background-and-setting-1-john>.

throughout the letter, John has recycled tests to identify who is a true Christian. Those tests serve a polemic purpose; they expose the phony believers and the false teachers- the deceiving antichrists. But they also serve a pastoral purpose, giving increasingly stronger confidence and assurance to the genuine believers.⁶

1 John 5: 13-21 Content

First John 5:13-17 can be subtitled "Believers having confidence in prayer." These verses capture the essential message of all the closing exhortations in 1 John 5:13-21. First John 5:14 assures the believer that God hears their prayers. There is great comfort in knowing that God hears the believer's prayer. With the preunderstanding that God is good and loving, the believer can rest assured that God hears their prayers and that He has their best interests in mind. "It also seems, however, to promise that *whatever we ask*, we are granted. The boldness spoken of here is not brashness to challenge the will of God, but the confidence that God's will is done, and that in part it is affected through the prayers of faithful Christians."⁷ Matthew Henry provides an interpretation of verses 13-17, "The Lord Christ emboldens us to come to God in all circumstances, with all our supplications and requests. Through him, our petitions are admitted and accepted by God. The matter of our prayer must be agreeable to the declared will of God."⁸ These interpretations rely on the word "confidence" in verse 14. The usage of *confidence* is "*parrhesia* ('out- spokenness,' 'boldness') is invariably translated in the Revised Version (British and

⁶ MacArthur, *1-3 John*, 202.

⁷ InterVarsity Press Commentary Series, s.v. "1 John 5," accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/Closing-Exhortations>.

⁸ Matthew Henry Commentary on Whole Bible. s.v. "1 John 5." accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/1-john/5.html>.

American) 'boldness' (Acts 28:31; Hebrews 3:6; 4:16; 10:35; 1 John 2:28; 3:21; 5:14)."⁹

Despite 1 John 5:13-17 being the central theme of the selected passage, complementary messages are also conveyed. First John 5:16-17 addresses sin that is unto death and sin that is not unto death. First John 5:18-19 can be subtitled based on its theme as confidence in God's keeping power. The final verses, 20-21, focus on the coming of Jesus Christ. The following discussion explains the meaning of these themes in relation to the central theme and context.

First John 5:16-19 deals with the sin that is unto death and the sin that is not unto death. This slight deviation from what was discussed in the previous verses and the book's central theme results from the second perspective discussed in the literary context. This perspective was that the writer was warning about the antichrist and false prophets who had caused a schism in the Christian community. The writers' discussion appears to stem from these concerns and warnings. Merwe explains,

Therefore, those who caused the schism in the community are described by the Elder in the harshest of terms. Hence, the way the deceivers and their evil deeds are depicted in the Johannine epistles have to be understood from the perspective of the dualism of group cohesiveness (familialism) in relation to the schism they caused. For this reason the Elder describes sin and salvation (in terms of this dualism) from the perspective of familialism.¹⁰

⁹ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. s.v. "confidence." accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/confidence.html>.

¹⁰ D. J. Van der Merwe, "Understanding "Sin" in the Johannine Epistles," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26, no. 2 (2005): 546.

In these verses, the writer is suggesting that there is a sin unto death that believers should not pray for. This may be due to the fact that the person who commits that sin is not following God and is under the control of Satan. The IVP provides,

Sin unto death is sin that carries a person into death's clutches, into the grip of the evil one (v. 19). And a child of God does not sin in that way, because one who is truly born of God will rather manifest that in confession of sin and dependence for forgiveness upon the atoning work of Christ. But "sin unto death" is already evidence that one lives in the realm of death, in the world, under the control of the evil one, and not in the sphere of life and righteousness granted by God to those who trust in Christ's work on their behalf.¹¹

The sin that is not unto death is the sin a fellow believer commits; this type of sin is one that believers should pray for and help that person with. IVP Commentary says the distinction is not necessarily based on different degrees of sin severity but on the sinner's disposition. "The distinction between kinds of sin is not, therefore, a ranking of the seriousness of sins that believers commit. Instead, we have an implicit distinction between kinds of sinners and kinds of *sinning*. 'Sinning not unto death' is, paradoxically, sin in the realm of life, committed by one who has eternal life."¹²

The final verses, 20-21, state that Jesus Christ has come, and that because believers know Jesus Christ, they know and understand the truth. "Jesus has given to us *understanding*, which includes the ability to discern the spirits (4:1-6) and to understand what the Spirit teaches us (2:20-21, 26-27). We are

¹¹ InterVarsity Press Commentary Series, s.v. "1 John 5," accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/Closing-Exhortations>.

¹² Ibid.

given understanding of truth, which is not so much the power to understand things as it is the power to know a person, *him who is true*.¹³ Also, these concluding verses of chapter 5 seem to confirm or reiterate the initial verses. Wesley Explanatory notes provide,

And we know - By all these infallible proofs. That the Son of God is come- Into the world. And he hath given us a spiritual understanding, that we may know him, the true one - "The faithful and true witness." And we are in the true one - As branches in the vine, even in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. This Jesus is the only living and true God, together with the father and the Spirit, and the original fountain of eternal life. So, the beginning and the end of the epistle agree.¹⁴

Application of 1 John 5:13-21

When looking for proper application of Scripture, there is no better way than to utilize something that Jesus said or exemplified as the, for lack of better terms, “ace” or “trump” card when appropriately applying Scripture. Jesus is our perfect example of how to live out Scripture. First John 5:14-15 says, “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.”¹⁵ Initially, taken at face value, the “whatever we ask” seems problematic because many people would agree that they have not always received what they expected, the things they pray for and ask God for.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Wesley’s Explanatory Notes, s.v. “1 John 5,” accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/wesleys-explanatory-notes/>.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the King James Version (Cleveland, TN: Assurance, 2000).

However, skipping or not emphasizing the clause “that if we ask anything according to His will” can lead to disappointment and ultimately misinterpretation and misapplication of this Scripture. The “whatever we ask” must be qualified based on the fact that whatever we ask must be *according to His will*. Jesus exemplified this qualification during His prayer at Gethsemane in Matthew 26:39, which says, “And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou *wilt*.” The IVP provides, “few questions vex faithful believers as much as that of petitionary prayer, especially in view of the extravagant promises in the New Testament that those who ask, receive—whatever they may ask. These promises are always understood to be qualified—one must ask with faith, or one must ask with the qualifier ‘nevertheless, thy will be done.’”¹⁶

Conclusion

The meaning of 1 John 5:13-21 can be captured as a response to the schism in the Christian community, in which John the Apostle, the alleged author of the epistle, offered certainty to true Christians. The central theme of the passage is that believers can have confidence that God hears and answers their prayers. Given the schism as described in the historical-cultural context, John warns true Christians to discern false prophets and be aware of antichrists. He distinguishes between the sin that is unto death and the sin that is not unto death, and gives instruction on how to deal with sinners who commit those sins. Finally, he provides reassurance that Jesus Christ, the truth, has come, and for that reason, believers understand that truth. The principles from the passage that can be applied

¹⁶ InterVarsity Press Commentary Series, s.v. “1 John 5,” accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/ivp-nt/Closing-Exhortations>.

to a contemporary audience are: believe in Jesus Christ, you have eternal life, and believers can be confident that God answers their prayers. Pray for fellow believers who sin. Believers have fellowship with God through their faith in Jesus Christ. Contemporary Christians can be certain and confident that God hears their prayers, and that when they pray according to God's will, their requests will be granted.

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