

## *Living Confidently – Confident in Need*

What do you do? To whom do you talk when both you and your partner are diagnosed as having cancer or when facing any other great need in life? Sooner or later I suppose it happens to us all that the pressures build up or the problems suddenly arise and we face extraordinary situations only to recognize how ordinary we are as people. Is it possible as Christians to really have that kind of confidence in God even in the seasons of need in life?

According to the Bible it is possible. In Hebrews 4:16 we read, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” I John 5:14 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”

When the Greeks use the word *parresia*, which we translate confidence, they had kind of an interesting history to it. To them it meant freedom of speech or the freedom to say whatever you want to say and I suppose that’s kind of in fitting with our notion of confidence. If we say that a man has confidence to propose to the person whom he wants to marry, then he has the freedom to ask her for her hand in marriage. If someone has the confidence to stand up before a group of people and make a speech, then we say that that person has the freedom to be able to talk to a group of people. If you go in to see your boss and you want to ask for a raise and you have confidence then you have that freedom to ask for more money in the next paycheck.

Confidence, it’s saying what you want to say so that you can have your needs met. Let’s take that idea. Let’s take it back to our needs. When fighting cancer or facing failure or losing a job or having uncertainty in a marriage or struggling with loneliness or family strain or spiritual defeat, whatever may be our need that we then may have the freedom to go to God and know that he will hear our need. That we have the confidence to go right to the top, to talk to the boss, to speak to God himself. To God. And, of course, that makes the difference. It’s not confidence in confidence but confidence in God himself. A God who is described in four different ways in these two

verses from Hebrews 4:16 and I John 5:14. He is described first of all in I John 5:14 as a listening God. And this is the confidence that we have in him that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us! And here at least, hearing means listening. He hears us. It literally means that God listens with favor.

You know there’s a difference between hearing and listening. That’s evident in church. I’m sort of convinced that preachers can stand up in front and say anything and there are some people will hear but not listen. A preacher could stand in the pulpit and say: “The Bible is a very interesting book written in Latin by William Shakespeare and William Buckley. It is the story of a huge concert staged by Pay Boone and the Bee Gees on the Island of Maui in 1834.” Sure enough someone would come up afterwards, shake hands and say, “That was a wonderful sermon, Pastor, a real blessing to my heart!” It’s obvious, they weren’t listening!

When we pray in need, God listens. He gives us his attention. He focuses in upon us and he listens with favor. He’s predisposed in our direction. He has our interest at heart. He wants to help us as well as hear us. He’s ready and waiting. You know what it’s like to be expecting a package or a visitor at the door? You sit by the window and you watch and yes, there

is another door in your house and you hear that knock and almost before the second rap on the door, you up on your feet and you’re reaching for the door knob to let that person in. Or you know what its like when you are expecting a telephone call and you

sit by the phone, your hand almost touching the receiver and when it starts to ring you can get it even before the first thrust of pulses come through to bring that sound. Ready and waiting. That’s what God is, ready and waiting for us to speak to him freely and in confidence in the midst of our need.

Now there are some conditions involved, conditions that are strewn throughout scripture. It is a condition that we be Christian, that we have a personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Does that then mean that if someone in some distant pagan land

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who has never heard of Jesus Christ prays then that prayer is unheard and unanswered? Does it mean that if someone who has heard the way of salvation and does not say yes, faces a crisis, an automobile accident this week and in the midst of the happening of that accident screams out and says, oh God help me, that he won't listen? No, it does not mean those things. God hears. God listens to all prayers of all of his creatures but there is a difference. The difference is that to Christians God has obligated himself, obligated himself in a way that he has not obligated himself to non-believers. He has committed to us who know Jesus Christ in advance that he will hear us with favor, he will respond positively to us and to our prayers. A commitment he has never made to anyone who does not know him through Jesus Christ. That's a condition. It's a condition that we pray in Jesus' name. Sometimes we do it quite perfunctorily and so at the end of our prayers we say in Jesus' name, amen. It's that, yes, but it's more than that. It's the recognition that we as individuals have no right of access to God. We go only through the person of Jesus Christ and so whenever we come to God, whether we are quite formulating the words or not, it is only through Jesus Christ that we have a right to be heard and to claim an answer.

We're told in I John that it must be according to his will. Some people think that that is something of a Christian cop out as far as scripture is concerned and yet that's not the case at all. Of course, God is only going to answer prayers in keeping with his will. If we ask God for power to sin or ask him that we do something that is contrary to his revelation, or that which is bad for us or for someone else, clearly God is not going to affirm us in that kind of a prayer.

So there are conditions but that does not mean that God hangs up on technicalities. Some people fear that. I suppose this fear comes from the suspicion that we have in our society that a criminal who obviously has committed a crime is set free because of some technicality where a police officer didn't correctly gather evidence. Or because of stories we hear of legal documents that seem to be ironclad only to have someone discover that there is a loophole there and so the entire document is invalidated. Technicalities.

Let's understand who our God is. He is a God who listens with favor. He does not get hung up on technicalities. We need never fear that as Christians we go to God in the midst of some great need and we don't quite say it right that God will then refuse to listen to our prayers. We need never be worried that

just because we are unaware of some obscure little verse somewhere tucked away in the Bible and our prayer doesn't quite fit exactly the prescribed formula that God says, oh well on that technicality I throw out your prayer and you as well. He's not that kind of a God. He is a God who is ready and waiting. He is a God who is anxious to listen predisposed in our direction, seeking to bestow upon us his favor so when in need we have confidence. Be assured that we are free to speak to God with the confidence that he is a listening God and an understanding God.

God knows everything so he understands from knowledge. Theologians call that omniscience. He is all knowing. Now I'll admit to you that the very idea of that at times in my life has frightened me, that he knows who I am, that he knows where I am, and when I was a kid I had some great hiding places and he even found me there. That he even knows what I think and what I am going to think. I tried to beat him at that. I have tried at times to think what I'm going to think and then quick at the last minute think something else only to discover that he knew what I would think before I thought what I think, I thinkÉwhatever! He knows every single thing about us. It's true what the Psalmist prayed in Psalm 139:1 "Oh Lord, you have searched me and you know me." Now it's true there's a scary side to this omniscience business. That God knows everything about us. Now we can trick one another. Our own motives can be somewhat covered but God knows everything. That's scary. But there's a comforting side to it as well. That when we are facing our great need and when we go to him he is not short of data for a decision. He is not uninformed about all of the intricacies of our situations. The physician may be aware of a tumor in one place but God knows everything about every cell throughout our bodies. We may wonder what is meant by someone who says something at work or a spouse who has a comment at home but God knows what that person's thoughts are. God knows it all.

So the God to whom we freely go to speak and have confidence in is a God whose understanding is based upon his having all knowledge. If I have some chronic pain and I go to a physician for help, I find a great deal of comfort and a great deal of confidence in that physician knowing that he has a great deal of knowledge. He can explain to me the structure of the skeletal system all the way down to the synapses and the nerves. I know he knows all this stuff and I find confidence in that, that kind of knowledge but then he says to me, I've had that pain too. I know what it's

like to try to walk when it hurts. I know what its like to try to sleep and turn and toss all night long in agony where no medication helps and all of a sudden I hear him describing me and my experience, not just from the base of knowledge. I'm grateful that he has that, of course, that is necessary, essential, but from the perspective of a fellow sufferer. Someone who knows not only from knowledge, understands not only from knowledge, but understands as well from experience.

That's the way it is with God. Hebrews 4:15, the preceding verse says that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are yet without sin." He is the God who has seen where we are. He has walked in our shoes. He has experienced our experiences. He knows what our needs are about. Of course, he knows all as God, omniscience. Of course he understands from that point of view but he also understands from experience. You say, well yeah, yet without sin and for you maybe that tempers it in the wrong direction to the point that it dilutes it. That is not the case either. Understand that when Jesus Christ suffered the same testing, tempting and needs that we face without sin, that does not lessen his experience, it heightens it. That means that he took the testing and the tempting all the way to the limit whereas we more often collapse early on and never know the difficulties of the limit. I suppose it's comparable to two individuals in their endurance of pain. One person has a great tolerance of pain and is able to endure tremendous amounts of agony. The other person passes out with a stubbed toe. Now which one really understands what pain is all about? The one who passes out early on or the one who stays conscious and experiences it all the way? Obviously the one who experiences it all the way. Jesus Christ was tempted all the way. He didn't collapse or give in or succumb. He was tempted and tested in all points as we are yet without sin. All the way.

Let me tell you that this is the kind of God in whom we can have confidence. He listens but he also understands, not just from knowledge but from experience as well. Now add to that the teaching of scrip-

ture that he is a sovereign God. Hebrew 4:16 tells us to then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.

What do you picture when you think of a throne? Do you have images of an elaborate ancient throne room decorated with expensive oriental tapestries, precious stones and polished silver horns? Do you picture powerful, armed guards with sharp swords and spears standing nearby? Is there on the throne an awesome monarch who needs only whisper a command and it will be don; a king with absolute authority of life and death? Is that your picture when you think of a throne? Well I'll tell you what's wrong with it. It is the poverty of our imagination, at least when it comes to comparison to God. For the throne room of God is far greater than anything that we have ever seen or could imagine. The awe of it is far beyond our human comprehension even if we were now able to visit it. God is sovereign upon the throne.

There is the great God who has unlimited authority but there's even more than that. He is also not only the one who sovereignly has authority but he also has power to go with his authority. He is the God of no impossibilities. It is correct what is recorded in Luke 1:37 with God nothing will be impossible. He can do

anything. He wants a new universe, he snaps his fingers and he's got it. He wants to perform some miracle that takes earthly dust and makes it into a man, poof, he blows the breath and he's got it. He wants to speak a word and the Red Sea has a dry path through it, it happens. He wants a virgin to conceive and give birth to a son and so she does. A lame man to walk, a dead man to live, whatever he says happens. With God there are no impossibilities. Oh not that he

always does those things but he always can. I don't know what that does to your level of confidence but it makes mine just soar to the limit. I have the confidence that when I have a problem, I have the privilege to go into the throne room of God. There I can stand before God himself with the assurance that he will listen and listen with favor and that he'll understand knowing everything and from experience that he will be sovereign upon his throne listening to me.

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But not even that is all of it. It is described here in Hebrews as a throne of grace. He is a gracious God, this listening, understanding, sovereign God of ours, never greedy, never stingy, and his grace means generosity. He takes pure delight in giving out of all his resources to us.

God loves to give food to the hungry, money to the poor, hope to the desperate and help to the troubled. That's who he is. We must never think of him otherwise. There are points at which we sometimes become confused by things that we cannot understand and that confusion unfortunately is often translated into hostility and anger. We wonder what God is all about but we may have the absolute confidence that what the scripture says is true. That God is a gracious God who finds a superb divine job in generously blessing us but grace that is just generosity is grace that is dangerous indeed and so with God's generosity and grace also comes God's goodness in grace.

You know I'd be terrified if God were a God only of generosity. I think of the story of the tragic death of the rock singer, Elvis Presley, who died from the culmination of long periods of time of overdosing on prescription drugs. Not illegal drugs, but prescription drugs that were given to him by a close physician friend who did not know how to say no. A man who loved Elvis Presley. A man who was in his employ. A man who was a close friend. A man who was indeed generous but his generosity was not tempered with goodness.

We have a God who is not only a generous God but also a good God so out of his generosity he will never give to us that which will hurt us. He never gives to us that which is wrong for us. He never takes it too far or fails to take it far enough. Now I'll tell you at the time that pretty tough to understand. Often we call on God and beg of him to give to us generously and he says no. We ask him for money or happiness or we ask that our wishes be imposed upon other people. One of the most frequent prayers that many Christians pray and his answer is no. Do not think him less generous but understand that his generosity is always controlled by his goodness? Do not think him less wise because sometimes he gives to us illness when we have asked for health or even gives to us death when we ask for life. He is the God who always does good for his own whether we understand or not.

Now let me tell you, he is a great, great, great, great, great, great God who is listening, understanding, sovereign, and gracious. He is the God to whom we can go in confidence and speak freely whenever

or whatever our need and what's your need? Is it cancer, or employment or marriage? Is it money or decision or spiritual direction? It doesn't make any difference what the need is. You can take every need constantly to him and speak to the God who listens and understands as sovereign and gracious.

But I have a concern. There's an if. It's if you know him, if Jesus Christ is your savior. It makes me shudder to think that there might be some who are now facing the need or soon might who cannot with confidence go to God because we do not really know him through Jesus Christ as Savior. I would seek to see that remedied. If you do not know Jesus Christ as Savior let me invite you to him right now. It's really simple, but it is an eternally important transaction. Where you have faith and you express that faith to God in prayer, acknowledging yourself as a sinner, claiming him as Savior, accepting him as Lord of life and then you too, no matter what your need, can always go to God in confidence. Would you like to know him now that way? I invite you to bow your head and pray to him right now if you have even the slightest of uncertainties or the strongest of desires to be sure you are a Christian. Pray something like this, "Dear God, I am a sinner and I sure have needs and I believe, I believe Jesus died for me on the cross and rose again from the dead on my behalf and so I accept him as my only savior from sin, my only hope. I claim him as the Lord of my life and I want the confidence to bring my every need to you through Jesus Christ."

Let me assure you on the authority of scripture my friend that once that prayer in faith is prayed that you then are counted as a child of God who may confidently come to the throne of grace.

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