

1 John 3:21-4v1

For the second time in chapter 3 of his epistle, John refers to these Christians who were living on the cutting edge as 'dear friends.' The first instance was further up the chapter in verse 2 and we have the same phrase repeated here in verse 21. He also addresses them as 'dear children' on a couple of occasions, those references are in verses 7 and 18. This is John at his paternal best, he's a doting father figure to these first century believers, and they respect him and appreciate him for that. In verses 21 and 22 the apostle highlights one of the spin-offs of a clear conscience before the Lord, he says we reap massive benefits from that no-holds barred relationship, and at the same time, we enjoy the added bonus of answered prayer! In this particular context, Robert Candlish is quite correct when he says: 'I cannot look my God in the face if I cannot look myself in the face.' It's the 'no earth born cloud arising' syndrome which can often intrude into our hearts and minds, when that happens it only serves to eclipse the shining beauty of his lovely face. I think these are immensely encouraging words, for John shares with us: 'If our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.' Before we get into the nitty-gritty of obedience to his will for our lives, let's examine a little closer the matter of believing prayer, and the net result of that, when we receive answers to our prayers. John opens up the topic in these two verses of the blessing of answered prayer and also the basis of answered prayer. Confidence before God is fundamental in our prayer life, it is absolutely essential to have that if we are going to see anything achieved through our combined ministry of intercession and supplication. The Lord accepts us the way we are, he never gives us the cold shoulder, there's always a welcome for his people at the throne of grace. We have nothing to fear when we approach him, we have nothing to dread as we anticipate an audience with the king. We can touch the throne by

simple childlike faith and trust. We can come boldly into his courts and meet our God face to face. We draw near to him as children to a loving heavenly father, he is one to whom we can turn in every time of need, he is one to whom we can pour out our hearts, we can be open and honest with him regarding all our anxieties and burdens. It seems to me that such confidence and assurance is vital if we are to pray effectively. It is so easy for us to become so tight and tense about our failures, to be so hard on ourselves for not being better, and so miserable about our state, that we lose the sunshine of God's love. The challenge is, when the channels of communication are clear there is nothing to hinder us from coming before him and making our requests known to him. He longs that we might ask great things from him for he can hardly wait to surprise us with the answers! In such sacred moments in the trusting place, we need to think big thoughts about God. Here is a God who can do anything, but fail! Here is a God who will never disappoint us! Here is a God who never short-changes us! Here is a God who is able to do more than all we ask or imagine, a God whose resources are unfathomable, a God whose reservoir is never in danger of drying up! Here is a God who desperately wants to help us, a God who passionately longs to intervene on our behalf, a God who loves to come alongside his people and show them the way forward. Here is a wonderful God who is oozing with kindness and one who is incredibly generous that we just can't comprehend it. Here is a God who finds endless delight and pleasure and satisfaction in answering the prayers of his children! We need to let that truth sink in to our hearts and minds, and when it does, we need to revel in that superbly joyous relationship. Our prayers are hugely effective because God is more than keen and enthusiastic to play his part in seeing our dreams turn to reality. I was impressed when I read the insights of one Bible expositor when he said: 'God is not a mechanical blessing dispenser who coughs out the goodies every time we insert the appropriate prayer coin. He is a Father, and he answers our requests in a way analogous to that in which

any parent listens to and responds to his children.’ The baseline in all of John’s ideas on prayer is that prayer is not a technique, nor is it some kind of magic formula, prayer is not a divine and human concoction where ideas and resources are pooled. Prayer is a vibrant and pulsating relationship, and in any meaningful relationship, mutual confidence is terribly important. It’s an essential ingredient. When we have it, we know it; when it’s missing, our lives are sadly impoverished. Elijah’s prayer in 1 Kings 18 is a breathtaking example of a man whose confidence in God was at an all-time high; his relationship with God was utterly secure, he knew the mind of God, he knew himself to be an instrument of God’s purposes, and all that mattered to him was the outworking of God’s agenda. We find echoes of that inner assurance in verse 36. Jesus emphasised the same point in his teaching on prayer in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 6. He told us how not to do it in verses 7 and 8, then he proceeds to show us how to do it in verses 9 and 10. It is not a matter of knowing how to get my will done, it is a matter of knowing God well enough to get his will done! You see, it makes a lot of sense, doesn’t it, it follows that confidence in prayer lies very much in the intimacy with which we know God and the degree to which our human wills are aligned to his. That’s the secret, it’s not what I want for my life, it’s what he wants for my life; when our desires and aspirations are in sync with his, then our prayers will be answered and God will receive all the praise and glory. According to John in verse 22, there is yet another connecting link regarding answers to prayer, that’s why he uses the word ‘because’ to introduce this new concept. It is related to our obedience to his commands and our willingness to do what pleases him. It’s important for us to realise that these great promises about prayer do not give us carte blanche to get anything we want from God. This would make God indulgent, but hardly loving. At the end of the day, God knows what is best for each of us, and the last thing he wants is for us to turn into a brat pack of spoiled children! On a similar note, prayer is not a sort of quid pro quo, by which God

rewards or compensates us, answering our fervent prayers according to the time we have put in and how pleased he is with us. I think if we grasp these two basic principles then we are well on the way to understanding John's implicit encouragement of verse 22b. As we seek to live in a way that pleases the Lord, practising his truth and love, our aspirations and dreams become moulded to his. They take on a God shape. The more we enjoy and work at deepening that relationship, the more we shall find ourselves on the receiving end of God's blessing through answered prayer. In verse 23 John clears the air, he leaves us in no doubt as to what is on his heart for he tells it like it is. The overall package of commands enshrined in Scripture is narrowed down to two basic essentials; if you like, this is John's irreducible minimum for Christian faith and experience. John says, 'And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.'

Number one opens up the area of heart belief in Christ as our personal Lord and Saviour, number two touches on the prime need to love one another with total commitment and heart compassion. David Jackman is right when he says, 'This verse provides both a summary of all John's teaching and a fulcrum for the whole letter.'

These are cardinal truths, these are the central tenets of John's timely instruction. The Greek verb for 'to believe' is in an aorist tense indicating a definite action at a specific point in time. It is something which has happened already. It is a one-off experience; when it's done, it's done! It can't be repeated. The verb for 'to love' is different for it appears in the present continuous tense and therefore carries the idea of something which is ongoing. It will have had a starting point and that was the moment we believed in Christ, but it has no cut-off point, it just keeps on flowing from us to others around us. We become channels of God's love to those in life's wider community and we become a conduit for blessing others. You see, from John's perspective, faith and love walk hand-in-hand together! Real faith will always manifest a love which ministers to others; and, a genuine spiritual love can always be

traced back to a healthy and vibrant faith. It's all about belief and behaviour. That's the final thought John brings before us in chapter 3 when he says in verse 24: 'Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.' The prominent idea here is that of abiding in Christ. John harks back to the message couched in chapter 15 of his gospel and repeated endless times in his epistle. It's a two way relationship for not only do we live in him, he lives in us! That's a wonderful scenario, isn't it; but it's more than just fantasy or an imagination run riot, thank God, it's the ultimate reality! This is our experience in the here and now, and we know it because of the presence of the Holy Spirit who resides within us, he indwells us. It is his unique ministry to make Jesus real to us and to also testify to our hearts as to the reality of our trust in God. You find that hinted at in Romans 8:16. He is all we need, he gives us all we need, he meets our every need; that's why our confidence is rooted in God, for in him, we have someone whose power is able to keep us and whose grace will lead us home!

Spiritual radar, that's what we need today! We need a God given capacity to tell truth from error. God's people need discernment every bit as much in the third millennium as they did in the early years of the first. They had big problems then, we have huge problems today. There have always been those who have plied their wares on unsuspecting saints, there's nothing new about pseudo pilgrims who try to sideline the people of God. The sad fact is that so many Christian people are gullible, they will believe anything that sounds remotely credible. The truth of God's revelation has always been counterfeited by false prophets and peddlers of error. From day one, the world has never been without a plethora of cults and ism's, you name it, we've had it; in some areas they have been so rampant and apparently successful that rent a sect has risen to the fore. The pernicious influence of such masqueraders of truth has caused enormous problems to the worshipping community of God's

people; more often than not, we have been caught on the back foot and we have been a little unsure as to how to handle a worsening situation. It seems we have forgotten to read and take on board John's incisive comments in the opening verses of chapter 4 of his epistle. If we had listened to John, we could have saved ourselves a lot of heartache, and in the process we could have spared others from major headaches! People make all sorts of wild claims today, they can do this, they can do that, they can do the other; in the light of such, the challenge facing the thinking Christian is a simple one, are they real, are they authentic, are they from the Lord? We need to carefully assess all their claims and subject them to the litmus test of Scripture. We need to examine their teaching with meticulous care so as to determine whether they are genuine or bogus. Naivety is not a spiritual virtue when it comes to such matters. Too many have slipped through the net, too many have fallen by the way, that's why extreme caution is a prudent option in such potentially dangerous situations. The man is a wise man who follows John's suggestion in verse 1 when he says: 'Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.' The implication is that we should not swallow hook, line and sinker everything that is thrown at us within the four walls of a church. Just because it happens in the sanctuary doesn't mean to say that it is right! By the same token, John isn't saying that we have to be cynical about all that is happening in the name of Christ. He is plainly urging us to exercise spiritual restraint, there are times when we need to stop in our tracks and ask the question, is this of the Lord or is it not; the old apostle is imploring us not to throw caution to the wind. Human nature being what it is, we have an inbuilt tendency to enjoy and appreciate those things which are novel and new, we have a soft spot in our hearts for that which is unusual and out of the ordinary; the temptation is to ascribe all such phenomena to the power of God. That's where John exhorts us to apply the brakes and get our brains in gear. He specifically warns us not to

believe all that we are told, we need to discover and discern its origin. We need to pay attention to the signals coming to us from our spiritual antenna. There are two key criteria laid down in this extensive paragraph. Number one, we are to examine what they say, you find that in verses 1-3; number two, we are to look at how they live, you find that in verses 4-6. John's concern is real for he has seen the terrible devastation they have caused, he has seen the untold damage they have done, he has seen the lives they have wrecked and the fellowships they have split down the middle. The old apostle faces reality head on, he doesn't bury his head in the sand and opt out by adopting the ostrich mentality. John is quick off the mark to acknowledge that this is a perennial problem and we have to be on red alert to guard against the spurious. It comes in all shapes and sizes. Some of it sounds extremely plausible, some of it is hyperbole and the product of an overactive imagination which has been well oiled by the great deceiver himself. It doesn't matter who says it, it doesn't matter who does it, such signs and wonders have to be tested in the light of biblical truth. This is especially true of spoken prophecy which purports to be a word from the Lord. This is the burden weighing heavily on John's heart. It was no new problem for God's people. Back in Deuteronomy 18:21,22 through Moses, God addresses precisely the same issue. Five chapters earlier in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 it is the content of the message that is the all-important factor. In other words, it's not so much who says it, it's what they say! When you read between the lines it is clear that what the prophet says matters far more than how he says it, or whatever apparently supernatural signs he can produce to support it. It's a question of content! The test is not whether it feels right or whether it sounds right, but whether it is true. And here the plumb-line of God's revealed truth in the Bible must be rigorously applied. You see, God's Word is truth, it is eternal truth, it is timeless truth, it is truth unchanged and truth unchanging; from Genesis to Revelation it is all truth and God will not contradict himself by saying something today which is contrary to what he said

yesterday in Scripture. God's revelation in the biblical canon is complete, nothing more needs to be added to it, nothing can be removed from it; there is no second edition of the Bible, there are no amendments required from the original. From beginning to end, it is the living word of the living God. Every Christian, not just those in positions of assembly leadership, has that solemn responsibility delegated to them. In the final analysis, we have to determine whether the message is from God. It doesn't mean we see reds under every bed, it does mean we keep our wits about us when listening to others! For a mechanic to know what is wrong with your car, he needs to know something about engines; for a doctor to diagnose your illness, he needs to know something about how the human body functions; for a Christian to distinguish truth from error, he needs to know his Bible from cover to cover. We may not understand it all, we may not be able to unravel its mysteries, but we must be able to test the spirits by the Word of God.