So I’m trying something new here. I get questions from time to time from friends who may have some problems understanding a particular Bible passage or verse and would like to get my input on it. So I figured that perhaps this might be useful to share to others who may have similar questions. The point is to provide short and concise responses which aid understanding—not lengthy in-depth explanations (though I may reference some additional resources in my footnotes should the reader want more info). Not that I’m an infallible interpreter of Scripture, but maybe I may bring up an angle or insight into a text which had not been seen—just as others have done for me and helped me along in my understanding of God’s word. I’ll put the questions in bold and then my response underneath. I pray this helps you also. God bless!

Question 1:

Hey man. I always found it unclear when it speaks about sins that lead to death and sins which do not lead to death. I think I understand it but I feel I’m missing something regarding it. I did an interlinear word study and have not found anything different in the words that are being used so I don’t know, what are your comments about 1 John 5:16-17?

Hey bro! So at first glance the verse can seem pretty weird (and I think it may be hard to translate some of the Greek smoothly into English, so some translations don’t do as good a job at connecting the thoughts) ... but I think if you read the context, it makes sense of it and you don’t need Greek. Here’s my exegesis on it (but since I paid all that money for my seminary Greek classes, I’ll throw some in there for good measure also... lol).

Let’s take a look first at the passage:
13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

16 If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

18 We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

(1 John 5:13-18 ESV)

Firstly, if we backup just a few verses to v. 13 – John said that he wrote all these things (referring to the whole letter) so that we may know that we have (present tense) eternal life. And, that if we ask according to his will, he hears us (v14) and we know he hears us. That sets the context for verse 16 where he tells us to ask God in regards to a brother who we see committing a sin not leading to death (I’ll get back to that). Notice though that “we see” that they are committing this ‘sin not leading to death’—so it has to be something we can perceive, not some attitude of their heart or something we can’t see. So if we follow the thought from the previous verses; we have confidence that God hears us and answers our prayers when it is in line with His will. So, when we ask for another brother, we also know that God hears us and gives it to us when it is in line with His will. This is the necessary precondition John has established in verses 13-15. So there is a condition to this asking and the guarantee that he will give life – mainly that it is according to His will – for it is God who saves.

Secondly, notice that it is only to those “committing a sin not leading to death” that God will give life. The necessary precondition therefore for God NOT to give life to that person is that their sin “leads to death.” That is, their sin is so serious that either they lose their life because of it, or God takes their life. For example – Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11. Also, Paul writes about this in the instructions for the Lord’s Supper – “for this reason many are weak and sick, and a number sleep [or die]” (1 Cor. 11:30). So there seems to be cases where sin is so serious that God brings punishment as serious as physical death. This is probably what Paul meant in 1 Cor. 5:5 about delivering certain persons to “the destruction of the flesh.” Also, some commentators think that John might be referring to Jesus’ words in Matt. 12:31-32 about the ‘unpardonably sin’ of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. So I think this is a possibility, however, after looking at the Greek text I think it actually does bring some clarity (and this is where an interlinear can’t help
you, because you need to know how the language functions and not just looking at individual word definitions from an interlinear). 1 Collin G. Kruse comments:

“A better approach is to examine who it is in 1 John that the author sees committing sins which do and do not lead to death. It is the ‘brother’ whose sin is not unto death for whom the readers are urged to pray. This suggests that the sin that does not lead to death is the sin of the believer. If this is the case, then the sin that does lead to death is most likely that of the unbeliever.”

In Greek, the phrase ἁμαρτάνοντα ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον is literally “sinning [a] sin not toward/unto death.” Which doesn’t make for great English – but it’s good Greek. The verb ἁμαρτάνοντα is a present active participle – which is basically just a fancy way of saying it’s a tense of the verb which implies some sort of continuity to the action. So, this person is sinning and continuing to sin the “sin unto death” – or as some translations have rendered it – “leading to death.” Therefore, it is clear I think from the Greek that John is talking about a person who sins, and lives a lifestyle of sin all the way up until their death without any visible sign of repentance. D.A. Carson comments that, “We should regard sin that leads to death as a state rather than an act; in Scripture there is no one specific act people do which results in death, but there is a state of sin, of being in rebellion against God, which John elsewhere calls remaining in death (3:14).”

Furthermore, this is how John talks about it throughout his letter, referring to active and continuous sinful living. Even Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) seemed to understand it this way, writing “I, however, say, that sin is to forsake even unto death the faith which worketh by love.” Elsewhere Augustine expands on this using the example of Christian fellowship and brotherly love, saying,

“Hence I am of opinion that the sin of a brother is unto death, when any one, after coming to the knowledge of God through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, makes an assault on the brotherhood, and is impelled by the fires of envy to oppose that grace itself by which he is reconciled to God. But the sin is not unto death, if anyone has not withdrawn his love from a brother, but through some infirmity of disposition has failed to perform the incumbent duties of brotherhood.”

1 As a side note – I’m not opposed to use of an interlinear. However, without a knowledge of how the Greek language itself works, with its grammar and syntax, an interlinear may actually not be as helpful and could lead to one drawing false conclusions.
What is the sin that leads to death in 1 John 5:16?

So there’s also an important element of maintaining the unity of the fellowship of the Body in view too—and love for the brothers (fellow-believers) is another major sign that John points to for true believers in his letter. So, I think that John is talking about ultimate apostasy (which is basically what blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is about anyways—so really both interpretations could be valid here, though I think the connection to Matthew 12:31-32 is probably forced here). This is the person for which he implies we should not pray.

BUT!!! Hold on, before we’re too soon to dismiss people and use this as an excuse not pray for them... the ONLY way we know for sure that someone is in this state of sinning unto death is if they HAVE ALREADY DIED IN THEIR SINS! Also, if we are to say that someone’s lack of love for believers makes us feel that they are actually not a true believer, then this verse does not apply—since they are not a brother and we are to pray for the unsaved. So, far from telling us not to pray for people who we “think” may be committing a sin leading to death, at least until they actually do die, John is actually telling us that we should be praying for them. If anything, this is a prescription for us not to pray for those who have already died in their sins and thus have no hope of repentance or salvation. For it is appointed unto man once to live, but after this the judgment (Heb 9:27).

John even makes it doubly clear in the Greek text of verse 16(and some English translations try to emphasize this) – when it says καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ ζωήν τοῖς ἁμαρτάνοντι μὴ πρὸς θάνατον – literally, “and he will give [future indicative] life to him—to those sinning [present participle] not unto death.” John here emphasizes that the ones that will be given life are those who are sinning (because we all are sinners) but NOT those sinning unto death—meaning they repent of their sin before they die. And this is exactly what the rest of scripture bears witness to; that if a person dies in their sins, there is no hope of salvation. But if we truly repent before we die, God will grant life to us.

I think my exegesis of the text is right because if we just read on to verse 18, John says that “everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning.” That is, everyone born of God—saved and regenerated—does not keep on living an active lifestyle of sin, they repent. So the context fits with this understanding of the text. Also it fits with how John talks about continuing in sin and how to know if you’re saved throughout this letter of First John. It’s important that our understanding of a verse should fit within the context of the whole of Scripture, and not just isolated texts. So sometimes it’s helpful to ask how the writer talks about the issue in other parts of the book or other of his writings to make sure that we understand what he means by it. We see that in 1 John 2:19 that he views those who fall away (those who went out from us) as never having truly been saved in the first place. So this isn’t talking about losing salvation—and also the term brother can just simply refer to someone in the church, but not necessarily truly saved. John uses similar expressions of the present tense of “sinning” to describe habitual sins which characterize unbelievers (eg. 1 Jn 3:4, 6, 8, and 5:18). I think this passage really shows us the weight of seriousness that God puts on living in
unrepentant sin. However, it also shows us the hope that as long as we are still living, we should pray for each other as in James 5:16 and hold each other accountable—exhorting one another to forsake sin and turn to righteous living.

Question 2:

So, if a brother or sister is in sin and I pray for that person, does God answer that prayer ASAP? Just because they have already been sealed and because I am praying according to God’s will?

I think that’s the assumption that John makes: that for the true brother (ie. one who’s truly saved, and not just professes faith with their mouth), God does give them life ultimately. Because the one who is truly saved evidences that they are truly saved by not continuing indefinitely in sin—they will eventually be brought to a place of repentance.

I think this is clear in 1 John 3:4-10...

“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”

It is not that we’re saved by our works but that true faith will manifest itself in our works. Like Martin Luther said, "We are saved by faith alone... but faith that saves is never alone." This is the same argument that James makes, and why we are instructed to pray for one another. Somehow, in the mystery of how God uses our prayers in His sovereignty, He uses our prayers for each other to also affect our sanctification and continued walk of faith and endurance. That’s why James 5:16 tells us to confess our sins one to another that we may be healed and that the prayers of a righteous man avails much. Exactly how that all works is a mystery, but we know that God is faithful to His word.

Great question bro! I hope this helped. And I hope that sharing this also helped some other people. May we continue to seek the Lord for wisdom and understanding through His word that we may be a His people, united and sanctified, glorifying our King. God bless.