

Assurance of God's Grace and Our Salvation
Study No. 2: The Grounds of Assurance
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Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

We began last week by indicating the importance of the topic (both in terms of false assurance and the value of a full assurance for faith, love, joy, and fruitfulness). And we discussed the various arguments that we are given in Holy Scripture as reasons to believe that real Christians will finally be saved and cannot be lost ("Perseverance"). But, we also noted that the complications in this doctrine arise from the fact that it is not always easy to know or to be sure that one is, in fact, a "real Christian."

The landscape of Church history is littered with the evidence of this very problem. And it is a problem that has by no means disappeared. You still have highland Scottish congregations that number many more attenders than communicants because there are so many in the congregation who are not yet "sure" of their salvation and, being unsure, fear to come to the Lord's table. On the other hand, here in the United States, we are very familiar with people who have been encouraged to believe that if they ever said they believed in Jesus they are saved and saved forever, no matter how they live, no matter that they do not live in any meaningful way as the followers of Jesus Christ.

You are perhaps aware of the controversy that erupted a few years ago upon the publication of John MacArthur's book *The Gospel of Jesus*. That book was an attack on "easy believism," or what many of us grew up knowing as the idea of the "carnal Christian." In this scheme, assurance is an immediate and inevitable consequence of faith, and faith is simply an agreement that Christ is the Savior and a looking to him to save me from my sins. That is all. If you ever did that you are saved. If you choose never to obey Christ, never to serve him, you are still saved. You may lose rewards in heaven, but you will get to heaven. In this scheme, it is claimed that there are three kinds of people in the world: unbelievers, spiritual Christians -- those who confess Jesus as Savior but also confess him as Lord and follow him -- and carnal Christians, people who confess Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. It is better to be a spiritual Christian, but carnal Christians get to heaven too. [This idea of a "carnal Christian" was made very popular through the notes of the Schofield Reference Bible -- especially at 1 Cor. 3, and through the writings of Bill Bright of Campus Crusade Intl.]

It was this notion of the carnal Christian that MacArthur attacked in *The Gospel According to Jesus*. He argued that there was no assurance of salvation for those who did not follow the Lord. That seems quite sensible to us familiar with Reformed theology, but, as a matter of fact, MacArthur's work was vigorously attacked. There is even now an association, "The Grace Evangelical Society," which publishes a journal, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, which is devoted to maintaining the position on the assurance of salvation that MacArthur attacked. The leader of this group is Zane Hodges of Dallas Theological Seminary. Hodges argues, as others have through the ages before him, that any emphasis whatsoever on works, or obedience, or faithfulness betrays the doctrine of salvation by grace. He wants Christian assurance to be absolutely certain and he makes it certain by tying it to faith and then divorcing faith from any necessary connection with a transformed life. Eternal life turns on faith in Christ -- only -- discipleship turns on obedience. Christian assurance is tied not to discipleship but to salvation. A person may be saved who is not a

disciple. Hodges would not doubt reject the charge of "easy believism" or "cheap grace" because he would argue that the Christian who does not follow the Lord loses a great deal, but he or she does not lose salvation. That is the point. The purity of the gospel is at stake in their view. Trusting Jesus for salvation brings full and complete assurance. Repentance, in this view, is simply a change in mind about Jesus. It does not necessarily entail real sorrow for sin or a turning away from it.

Perhaps, in this scheme, most people who are saved fall into the carnal Christian category, people who are Christians but live like the world.

As a minister I have dealt often with both kinds of people. Some struggle to know that they are Christians in fact. They look at their sins and failures and wonder if they can possibly be among those whom Jesus said will enter heaven because they not only called Jesus "Lord," but did the will of his Father in heaven. And I have dealt with people who are quite sure they are going to heaven though they are not living a godly life, even, in some cases, a life that conforms even outwardly to Christian standards of conduct. Assurance is a very practical issue.

Now, let me say at this point that I reject out of hand the carnal Christian view of Christian assurance, the view that living faith, saving faith may exist in the heart of one who is not transformed in life. That position seems to me to be such an outrage against so many texts and such emphatic teaching that I do not need to spend our time disproving it. Jesus said that not those who called him Lord but those who did his will would be saved and he said that his sheep hear his voice and follow him and that you would recognize them by their fruit; he said that only five of the ten virgins would be saved, the ones who followed him faithfully, he said that in the last judgment he would divide between the sheep and the goats by reason of the service they had rendered him, and he said that on the day of resurrection, those who did good will rise to live and those who did evil will rise to be condemned; James said that faith without works is dead; Paul said that if anyone be in Christ he is a new creation, the old things have passed away; John said that those who have Christian hope in them purify themselves and that no one who is born of God will continue to sin; and on and on and on. There are scores of texts like these everywhere one looks in the Bible.

Everywhere one looks in the Bible there are warnings against false faith, spurious faith, and when someone who was taken to be a Christian returns to the world, it is never said, it is not remotely implied, that they continue to be saved, but, on the contrary, that they were never Christians in the first place (1 John 2:19). To take all of these statements as somehow only distinguishing between two types of Christians is a gigantic travesty of interpretation, a hundred violations of the plain meaning of words. (This is a warning to us not to let our systematic theology run roughshod over the Bible's actual statements, to silence something the Bible actually and plainly says because we do not think it is consistent with something else we find in the Bible.)

But if we reject carnal Christianity, then we are finally left with some form of the problem of determining how one can be sure that he or she is a real Christian. Actually, we are left with a number of forms of that problem, for there are all kinds of doubts that can plague the soul.

There are intellectual doubts -- is this or that teaching of the Christian faith true? Can I know it to be true? Must I know it to be true? There are spiritual doubts? Do I really believe? Have I committed the sin against the Holy Spirit? If I believe in some fashion, have I the obedience, the

fruit that demonstrates my faith to be the genuine article? Am I a Christian right now, given my dullness of heart and relatively unconsecrated life, so much less than I once gave to God? If I am a true Christian, how come I don't experience the things that these other Christians I know say they have experienced and are experiencing? And so on. And, beyond all of these doubts, there are the attacks of the Evil One himself, who is described in his malevolent work (Rev. 12:10) as the "accuser of the brethren." As has often been observed, the Devil has two great strategies and many tactics. The two strategies are to seek to persuade men that nothing of great moment is suspended on submission to God ("You surely shall not die"). He will continue with that so long as someone remains an unbeliever, a nominal believer, or a backslidden believer. But, let a man or woman believe and seek to follow Christ and the strategy changes. Now it is accusation. No one as sinful as you are could possibly be of any use to God. No one like you could be a genuine Christian. No wonder assurance is no simple thing to obtain and protect.

So, perhaps, it is not at all surprising that assurance is based on different things in the Bible, not just on one thing. Those who ground assurance on one thing -- having "gone forward"; a "conversion experience"; or faith as intellectual assent -- have a much less complex doctrine of assurance than the Bible teaches. One of the reasons for all the disagreement is that the Bible speaks about assurance in very different ways.

In our Reformed theology those ways are summarized in three broad categories.

1. First assurance comes from the promises of salvation that God has made to those who believe. In a hundred different ways we are told in the gospel that if we believe in Jesus Christ we shall be saved; that if we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead, we will be saved; that if we come to Christ he will never drive us away; that if we receive him he will grant us authority to become the children of God; etc.

And God makes a great point of assuring us of the certainty of his Word.

"Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf." [Heb. 6:16-20]

The Reformers laid their greatest stress on this basis of assurance. The most important thing to know is that you have really, in your mind and with your heart, believed God and trusted yourself to Christ. They were countering a view of assurance that was by their day completely corrupted and had lost touch with the gospel altogether. Now one was sure, to the extent that one could be sure, by indulgences, confessions and acts of penance, the mass, the avoidance of mortal sins, etc. Actually, Roman Catholicism, with its doctrine of a continuing and imperfect justification really has no doctrine of assurance, one can only know that one is in good standing at this moment. The Council of Trent actually anathematized all who taught that assurance of salvation was possible without

special revelation. And, given the Roman system of salvation, that is entirely consistent. However, it is utterly alien to the thinking of the Bible. As Dr. Packer has written [*Knowing God*, 205], "Whereas assurance is a sin in Romanism, and a duty in much of Protestantism, in the New Testament it is simply a fact."

It is easy to see, by the way, how different theological schemes bear on assurance. Arminianism denies it as well. If, in fact, it is possible to lose one's salvation, then there can be no assurance of eternal life. You might have reason to know yourself a Christian today, but no one can say what might be the case next Friday!

The Reformers rejected that skepticism about assurance root and branch as unbiblical and as a denial of the promise God makes to believers in his Word. They tied assurance to justification and to the reality that "there is therefore now no condemnation to the one who is in Christ Jesus."

II. Second, assurance comes from the evidence that God's grace is at work in one's life.

"By their fruits you shall know them," Jesus said. "Faith without works is dead." John gives us "tests" to know how we may "know that we are in the faith" and those tests include such things as our love of the brethren and our walking in the commandments of God. They also include such things as the acknowledgement and confession of our sins in the assurance of forgiveness available in Christ -- so we are not talking about perfection or an obedience that is not profoundly marred by sins of every kind. But we are talking about a real change, a new creation, the bearing of fruit, the walking in the Spirit, and so on.

The basis for assurance is what, in the generations after the Reformation, came to be known as "the syllogismus practicus" or the "practical syllogism." You know what a syllogism is. It is a form of argument in which a conclusion is deduced from the logical relationship between two premises.

All residents of Tacoma are residents of Pierce Co.
I am a resident of Tacoma.
Therefore, I am a resident of Pierce Co.

Or,

No people of good taste like coffee.
Some residents of Tacoma like coffee.
Therefore, some residents of Tacoma do not have good taste.

Well the practical syllogism deduces faith from practice. It goes something like this.

The Scripture says that real Christians will think, and speak, and behave in a certain unique way.
I think, speak, and behave in that way.
Therefore, I am a real Christian.

Or,

True faith reveals itself in Christian deeds.
My faith reveals itself in Christian deeds.
Therefore, my faith is true.

Now, it is hard to argue with this as a line or argument. It is exactly the way the Bible argues all the time. It is the argument of 1 John precisely. But it is also not at all difficult to see how rather easily such an argument could produce more concentration on one's own works than on Christ's righteousness, a trust in one's living rather than in God's grace, a self-confidence rather than a gospel faith in Christ. For this reason the practical syllogism has been very controversial.

In our day there have been lots of arguments over whether or not it was taught by Calvin, with his strong emphasis on the promises of God received by faith. He does teach it, of course. He is too biblical not to teach it, but he doesn't emphasize it as the ground of assurance in his *Institutes*. I once interviewed a Dutch professor who had written a book on the development of the doctrine of the assurance of faith in Reformed theology (C. Graafland, *De Zekerheid van het Geloof*) skeptical of Calvin's support for the practical syllogism. At one point in the conversation I said, "But Prof. Graafland, doesn't the Bible itself teach the practical syllogism unmistakably?" "Ah," he said, "that is a good question." Like too many other Dutch theologians of his school, he was more interested in what the Reformed authorities said than what the Bible **says!**

Of course, the opponents of John MacArthur absolutely deny the validity of the practical syllogism for the deny the major premise (viz. that real Christians can be identified by the way they live). They believe that to say such a thing betrays salvation by grace and justification by faith. And we should not dismiss their argument, which must be dismissed, without at least seeing the danger in the practical syllogism, important and biblical as it is. All true doctrines are dangerous. All are liable to misunderstanding and misuse by hearts as sinfully subtle as ours. And we are always inclined to take our salvation back into our own hands. We will talk next time about the importance of keeping the practical syllogism in its place.

III. Third, assurance comes from the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Paul says that the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God. Now that is understood in different ways. Some in our Reformed tradition are so wary of mysticism and of any form of the doctrine of inner light that they insist that Paul means nothing more than the witness the Holy Spirit brings through the Bible which we compare with our lives to deduce our salvation. In the case the witness of the Holy Spirit is simply another name for the first two foundations for assurance.

Thomas Goodwin writes, "The Spirit writes first all graces in us, and then teaches our consciences to read his handwriting." [In Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 183-184]

But there is reason to believe that Paul means more than that. For the Bible is full of the evidence of the Spirit's work within the heart to communicate the sense of God's love and divine things. And this, after all, seems to be what Paul is after in Rom. 8, because he speaks there (v. 15) of this witness of the Spirit leading us to **cry out** "Abba, Father."

William Guthrie defines this witness or, at least, one manifestation of it in this way. "It is a glorious manifestation of God unto the soul...It is a thing better felt than spoke of. It is no audible voice, but it is a ray of glory filling the soul with God, as He is life, light, love and liberty, corresponding to that audible voice, 'O man, greatly loved' (Dan. 9:23)." [Cited in I. Murray, *Lloyd Jones*, ii, 209]

In other words, this witness of the Holy Spirit is a mystical sense, in the best and proper sense of the word. God himself, the Holy Spirit, communicating his love, his presence, his truth to the soul.

It is what we have, for example, in Ps. 73, where we find a discouraged and doubting man suddenly having his faith and love completely restored, and then running at full flood, because he encountered the Lord "in the sanctuary." And he who wasn't sure he believed in God any more -- and we are speaking of a real believer -- is now found singing "Whom have I in heaven but thee..." That is, at least, part of what is meant by the witness of the Holy Spirit.

Put these three things together: the sure promises of the gospel grasped by faith; the evidence of the grace of God at work transforming our lives; and the witness of the Holy Spirit, and you have the way of assurance as it is taught in the Bible. But, putting those three together in an actual life, is another most interesting and important subject. We turn to that next Lord's Day evening.