

Assurance of God's Grace and Our Salvation
Study No. 3: The Practice or the Seeking of Assurance
June 21, 1998
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We began two weeks ago by indicating the importance of assurance, both because of the eternal destinies at stake and because of the spiritual strength, joy, and fruitfulness which the Bible says flows from a living sense of God's love in a Christian's heart. We considered the Scripture's various arguments demonstrating that real Christians will never fall away and cannot be lost but, at the same time, the complications in knowing for sure who is and is not a real Christian.

Last Sunday evening we considered the three paths to assurance or the three pillars upon which assurance is based in the Bible: 1) the promises of the gospel embraced by faith; 2) the evidence of the new creation in a holy life; and 3) the witness of the Holy Spirit to our spirits that we are the children of God.

Tonight, I want to conclude this brief reflection on the assurance of salvation, the confidence that we are loved by God, by considering those three pillars once more, but this time in terms of the way in which we ought to rest our hopes upon them, how we ought to make use of them. In other words, if that is how assurance comes, in those three ways, then how are we to seek it, to practice the assurance of salvation **in those very ways**.

We begin then, with the **embrace of gospel promises and the trust we place in Jesus Christ himself as our Savior**.

There are always temptations for Christians to minimize these promises and the place of Christ in their hearts, especially as the years pass and it becomes easier and easier to take these titanic things for granted. Even the godliest have admitted this.

Here is Robert Murray McCheyne:

"Often the doctrine of Christ for me appears common, well known, having nothing new in it; and I am tempted to pass it by and go to some scripture more taking. This is the devil again -- a red-hot lie. Christ for us is ever new, ever glorious. 'Unsearchable riches of Christ' -- an infinite object, and the only one for a guilty soul. I ought to have a number of scriptures ready, which lead my blind soul directly to Christ, such as Isaiah xlv, and Romans iii." [Bonar, 176-177]

Now why those texts in particular? Precisely because they keep fresh in the soul the great need we have for Christ and the way in which he so precisely answers that need. Sin and our sense of sin and guilt, the holiness of God and our sense of that holiness, -- which are the subjects of those chapters - - is what brought us to Christ in the first place. It is what keeps us looking to him through the entire course of our lives. It was so with Paul (end of Rom. 7) and it will be so with us.

I read again this last week Rabbi Duncan's reflection on his long life three years before his death.

"There are heaps of things in the past, mercies, sins, forgivenesses; in seventy years

and better there is a great deal to look back to. Alas! I have never done a sinless action during it all; I have never done a sinless action during the seventy years. I don't say but by God's grace there may have been some holy action done, but never a sinless action during the seventy years. What an awful thing is human life! and what a solemn consideration it should be to us, that we have never done a sinless action all our life, that we have never done one act that did not need to be pardoned."
[Moody Stuart, 150]

It is no surprise that people who think that way about their lives, who are given to ponder such truth and face with some emotion the implications of them are people who, like Duncan himself, make a great deal of Jesus Christ and live with an active sense of his love and of the gospel and of how indescribably great a thing it is to be a Christian. What else is assurance besides that?

And it is people who live with the active recognition of the mighty implications of the gospel and, therefore, of the holy love that lies beneath it, who come to the very end of their days still convinced, with a powerful conviction, that there is forgiveness with God that he may be feared.

Before their deaths, I sent to my brother-in-law, and my father, and my sister, copies of Alexander Whyte's chapter on Samuel Rutherford's correspondence with George Gillespie. Gillespie was the very young, but brilliant Scottish commissioner to the Westminster Assembly. But shortly after returning to Scotland from London Gillespie found himself on his deathbed, still barely thirty years of age. Rutherford wrote to him:

"My reverend and dear brother, look to the east. Die well. Your life of faith is just finishing. Finish it well. Let your last act of faith be your best act. Stand not upon sanctification, but upon justification. Hand all your accounts over to free grace. [There is nothing you have done that can stand the touchstone of God's justice. Christ is your all...] [160]

We should never be in our thoughts and our hearts more than a step away from that thought and from that conviction. We should live every day remembering our sin and Christ becoming sin for us. We should speak so as to cause some unknowing and hard-hearted people around us to think that we are fanatical for all our talking about "Christ for us." Robert Murray McCheyne had a minister friend, a John Muir, of whom McCheyne said, "he is imputed righteousness to the backbone." What a great thing to be, and what assurance a man or woman must enjoy who is imputed righteousness to the backbone!

Rabbi Duncan, whom I am quoting a good bit in this series, because he struggled with assurance himself and thought about it deeply, said a similar thing.

Let us seek to have well-grounded marks of saintship, but when the push comes, nothing but imputed righteousness will stand the day. It was there we began, and it is there we must end, with God as a sin-forgiving God through the obedience unto the death of His only-begotten Son. And being shut up and driven back to that, will not hinder holiness but promote it, for "the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world".

And among all the things that can help you become that, there is this. Every Lord's Day morning, in this house, we make a pilgrimage through the gospel all over again. The glory and holiness of God, the confession of our sin and sins before that holy God, the acceptance of pardon from the hand of our gracious God, a pardon, which we then hear and then say ourselves comes to us and can come to us in no other way but through the Lord Jesus Christ and his obedience and death. There is no better way to keep our hearts fresh in the convictions of the gospel of free grace and to keep ourselves boasting in nothing save the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, than pouring ourselves into those few minutes of gospel reality every Lord's Day morning, in the company of the saints.

Why do you suppose that David wished, among all the things that that good man might have wished for, why do you suppose the one thing he wanted was to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of his life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple. I will tell you. It was because it was in the temple that David had the gospel most mightily pressed home to his heart-- his sins, God's grace, the righteous substitute, forgiveness through his blood. It was because the worship of the temple renewed his experience of the gospel, his conviction of his own salvation through Christ that he loved that place and that worship as he did. And it should be the same for us. Assurance is born as much and as often, if not much more and much more often, in the house of God and the worship of God, in the confession of sins and the absolution of that worship, as anywhere else in a Christian's life.

Second, of the witness of the Holy Spirit I will say less.

We are to seek it and pray for it. We are to come to God's house in particular seeking it and praying for it. The man in Psalm 73 heard the Spirit's voice in his own soul when he was in the sanctuary and vast multitudes of God's people have received that witness in the same place. Indeed, I will venture to say that this is one of the reasons why the Bible places such an emphasis on public worship in the Christian life. We need that witness of the Holy Spirit, and characteristically, he gives it to us when we are gathered with the saints in the worship of our God.

It can be given at any time in any place however. I was reading this week of such a moment in the life of Martin Lloyd Jones [Murray, ii, 207-209]. He had been passing through a period of despondency and spiritual doubt that was quite devastating. He was alone in a room, after days of this, unable to find peace with God, and suddenly a word on a page of a book that was lying open on his bed -- it was a sermon of A.W. Pink -- caught his eye. The word was "glory" and instantly, "like a blaze of light" he said, he felt the glory of God surround him. Every doubt and fear was utterly and immediately silenced and the love of God was shed abroad in his heart.

I love to read accounts like that because I have had an experience like that and know exactly what the man is talking about. Many of you have as well, I know. I don't mean to suggest that the witness of the Holy Spirit is always in such a dramatic form. He bears witness much more often in gentler ways. Still, it is something to be longed for and prayed for, such visitations of God as those. It would be a good thing for us all to pray, every Lord's Day morning, "Lord, draw near to me today, I beg you, and shed abroad your love in my heart. Holy Spirit, on this day, I beg you, bear witness with my spirit that I am a child of God."

Third, and finally, we are to argue the practical syllogism with ourselves.

We said last week that the practical syllogism is that argument, that comes in many forms in the Bible, that one can judge the genuineness of faith by the fruit it produces in a Christian's life. This point is made in a thousand ways in the Bible. In the parable of the soils, it is the fact that the seed which springs up does not, for one reason or another, finally bear fruit that proves it not the genuine life of the kingdom of God.

We admitted, last time, that there needs to be great care taken, lest the consideration of our works and our character and our beliefs and our actions subtly leads us to place more emphasis on what we are and do than upon Christ and his work for us. There have been many who have argued against this procedure as a ground of assurance for that very reason. They fear that it introduces, by the back door, a self-righteousness and a self-confidence that is destructive of that gospel confidence in Christ alone. And there can be no doubt that there is a danger here.

But, as John Macleod, the mid-century Scottish theologian put it, in commenting on how the old Reformed writers responded to this argument against basing assurance on the evidence of a changed life,

"...our sturdy fathers would not be put off the scent by the suggestion that in examining themselves they were pulling up the roots of their faith to see if it was growing." [*Some Favorite Books*, 9]

The fact is, there is simply too much emphasis on this very argument for assurance in the Bible. When Paul admonishes the Corinthians to "examine themselves" he is referring to their behavior.

When Peter, in 2 Peter 1:10 urges his readers to "make their calling and election sure" he means that they should do that by living a life of consecration to God, which is what he has just been speaking about.

But we have a better argument from Paul himself. In my judgment, two of the most extraordinary verses in the NT are Phil. 3:11 and 1 Cor. 9:27.

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

"No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

I am quite sure that if you were to have been asked to write something that the Apostle Paul might have written concerning his future salvation, you would never have thought to write something that seemed in any way to express uncertainty on his part. But here, on two occasions, he speaks as if he must continue to pay close attention to his life and work **else he might miss the prize!** Astonishing! Here is the great Apostle to the Gentiles saying, in effect, that unless he continues to live a faithful, committed Christian life, he cannot be sure of going to heaven when he dies!

Now, we have to balance that measure of uncertainty with so much other confidence in the grace of

God that we find in Paul, but we need to respect these extraordinary statements. Even Paul, even with Paul's knowledge of Christ and embrace of the gospel, even with his experience of the witness of the Holy Spirit, he did not imagine that he could be sure of his salvation unless he was walking in obedience to the Lord and serving him; unless he was putting his sins to death and following hard after that holiness that Christ died to see formed in him.

To put it simply, no one is ever more sure of his salvation or of God's love for her than that believer who is following on in the footsteps of the Lord Christ and putting on holiness in the fear of God, working out his salvation in fear and trembling, lest, at the last, he be disqualified for the prize. (Think again of the foolish virgins; so much like the wise, in so many ways like the wise, indistinguishable from them, except for that extra oil they did not have -- which Moises Silva tells us stands for good works.)

And so we end here -- the best, the only way to true assurance and the blessing it brings, is to practice the grounds of assurance. If the grounds are the embrace of the gospel promises in Christ, the witness of the Holy Spirit, and the evidence of the new creation, then we are to seek hard to embrace those gospel promises in Christ Jesus over and over again, to be embracing them every day; to seek and especially to seek where it is most likely to be found the witness of the Holy Spirit to our spirits that we are God's children; and, finally, to be always striving to put on that holiness which when it appears is the demonstration of God's presence in a human life.

Assurance, like so much else in the Christian life, is more of a problem to some than to others. By dint of background, personality, make-up, spiritual experience, etc. some struggle all their lives to come to some permanent, happy state of confidence in their own salvation. Rabbi Duncan himself was such a man. One of his biographers writes of him

"An extreme searching into the roots of things, and an excessive self-scrutiny, often threw him into dejection, and into seeming, though not always into real, despondency. Out of this state a word in season would sometimes help him, but for the most part it seemed to take its course before he was relieved. After reasoning long with him, and trying many arguments to answer his objections against himself, and remove his fears, he would reply at last -- 'You don't know how I have sinned; there's no good in polluting my lips by confessing it to man.'

Much as he doubted his salvation, he did not conclude positively that he was unconverted, far less that he was incapable of salvation. In his low states he did not like to speak of his conversion; but when he did speak of it at other times, it was usually as a grand work of God and of redemption. It was sin after conversion that troubled and burdened him; rather it was recent sin, or present sinfulness and distance from God. His belief in the perseverance of the saints might have enabled him to argue his saintship from his conversion; yet that helped him little, because he held strongly that the saintship must be proved by the perseverance. [Moody Stuart, 135-136]

Some of you are like that. Others are more easily kept in a sunny state of mind and heart about your salvation and God's love. The Lord makes these distinctions between his children and has made all of them different in many ways.

We can do nothing about that. Nor can we, finally, resolve the problem of Christian assurance. It has, it does, it will forever remain the case that some true Christians struggle to obtain and preserve an assurance of God's love and many others in the church suffer eternal loss for not struggling nearly enough to be sure of their place in the city of God.

For us, it is left to seek always to be sitting on a stool with three legs: the promises of salvation in Christ that are so freely made in the gospel and which we are to embrace and to continue to embrace by faith; the evidence of a life transformed by the power of God; and, the witness of the Holy Spirit. A man or a woman who continues to practice these "ways" to assurance, is the safest and the happiest man or woman of all.