

How to Have Assurance of Salvation

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Chapter One

What is Assurance?

This short study is for any person who has a desire to be certain of his or her eternal destiny. You may not even believe at this point that it is possible to know such a thing, much less to have certainty about it. Let me assure you, the Bible teaches that a person can know with certainty where you will go after death. Would you like to know and be sure about it? Then read on with prayer that the God of the universe will help you in this pursuit.

In this study of the “assurance of salvation” we will mainly draw from the teaching of Scripture and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

When we speak of the “assurance of salvation” we are talking about something that is somewhat subjective, although many objective elements are involved. Assurance of salvation is a gift of God. Only God can grant assurance but He does so through several means.

Let me give you a definition of assurance by Donald Whitney from his book *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian*.

Assurance of salvation is a God-given awareness that He has accepted the death of Christ on your behalf and forgiven you of your sins. It involves confidence that God loves you, that He has chosen you, and that you will go to heaven. Assurance includes a sense of freedom from the guilt of sin, relief from the fear of judgment, and joy in your relationship with God as your Father.

Do *you* know *for certain* that you are saved and in a state of grace? Are you sure that if you died today, you would enter heaven? My prayer is that after reading this book you will be able to answer these questions in the affirmative, and for the right reasons.

Why ought believers to study this doctrine? For three reasons:

1. The Scriptures teach that it is something we may have.

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:13)

The purpose of the book of 1John is to give believers joy and assurance of their salvation. Therefore, it is a privilege that God's word says we may enjoy.

2. It is very beneficial to have this assurance.

“And now these three remain: faith, *hope* and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Assurance and hope are very much related. Hope, in Scripture, has to do with an assured confidence before God. If we do not have an assured hope, we will be fearful and hesitant in the battle against sin and darkness.

“But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the *hope* of salvation.” (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

This verse indicates that the hope of salvation will be a helmet to protect us from evil. The context of this verse indicates that this is one way in which we can be prepared for the second coming of Christ.

3. We are commanded to seek this assurance.

“Therefore, brothers, rather be diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things, you shall never fall.” (2 Peter 1:10) We will look more at this verse later.

Of course there have been many objections to this doctrine of assurance. Here are three:

1. Some believe that it would be presumptuous, or prideful to claim that you know for sure you are going to heaven.

However, if the Bible says we may attain such assurance, it would actually be presumptuous not to seek it! Assurance would be presumptuous if we based salvation partly upon our works, as Roman Catholics do. They say

that full assurance is not possible and therefore would be presumptuous to claim it.

2. Some say that the Bible teaches that a person can fall away from grace.

Those passages are a warning to unbelievers in the church who have a false assurance and a disobedient lifestyle. There are many more passages in Scripture which show that a true believer in Christ will never perish.

3. Others say that this teaching leads to slackness in obedient living.

This is far from the truth. 2 Peter 1:10 says that in order to attain assurance, there must be diligence in the Christian life. God has tied our assurance partly to our obedience. Though our justification is by grace alone through faith alone, our assurance of that grace and faith is enjoyed fully only when we are walking close to Christ and in ways that please Him.

Let's look briefly at that verse in 2 Peter 1:10:

“Therefore, brothers, rather be diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things, you shall never fall.”

To say that you are certain of salvation is to say that you are sure you are going to heaven when you die. It is the same as saying that you are sure you have been called by God's Spirit to believe in Christ and be saved. It is the same thing as saying you are sure that you are one of the elect.

Election is the foundation upon which all else rests. In order to be assured of our election, we must reason backwards from our faith, obedience and calling. If you have been called, and if you possess faith and obedience, then you can be certain that you are one of the elect.

Peter is not saying that God's election depends upon us in any way. God's decree of election is certain and unchanging. What Peter is urging is that each individual who professes faith in Christ must seek to become assured of his own election and salvation. I am not to try and assure others of *my* salvation. The verb in this verse “to make” is in the middle voice. The middle voice indicates the subject performing an action upon himself (reflexive action) or for his own benefit.

Peter is saying that each person who professes faith ought to make certain of his *own* calling and election. In order to gain such a firm assurance, where does one begin? The starting place in the pursuit of full assurance is self-examination.

2 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you-- unless, of course, you fail the test?"

So then, are you in the faith? Are you sure? Is Jesus Christ in you? Are you one of the elect? I had someone in my church years ago tell me that they didn't think it was right to ever question anyone's salvation. Of course we are not to judge others' hearts. We can't possibly know the heart of another human being. However, the Bible clearly calls upon us to question *ourselves* -- to examine ourselves and see whether we are saved and have Scriptural reasons for this assurance. The Bible tells us to examine ourselves, *not* so that we who are saved would begin to doubt; but for the following two reasons:

- 1) That on the one hand those who are not saved would not be deceived by a false assurance.
- 2) That those who are truly saved would come to have a solid assurance of it.

Those who are truly saved ought not be shaken by self-examination. Those who are unsaved ought to be shaken -- out of their self-deception.

Over the next few chapters we will look at *how* we can obtain this assurance and *what* it is that we must do to make sure of salvation.

Chapter Two

True and False Assurance

The starting point in the pursuit of full assurance is self-examination.

2 Corinthians 13:5 says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test?"

The Bible clearly calls upon us to question ourselves -- to examine ourselves and determine whether we are saved and have Scriptural reasons for this assurance. The Bible tells us to examine ourselves, not so that we who are saved would begin to doubt; but for the following two reasons:

- 1) That on the one hand those who are not saved would not be deceived by a false assurance.
- 2) That those who are truly saved would come to have a firm and biblical assurance of it.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 18 is titled, "Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation." There are four paragraphs or sections in this chapter. Dr. Joel Beeke, in his excellent book *The Quest for Full Assurance*, says "Its four brief paragraphs include the following themes: 1) The possibility of assurance, 2) The foundation of assurance, 3) The cultivation of assurance, and 4) The renewal of assurance."

Let's look now at chapter 18 section one of the Confession, which has to do with the possibility of assurance:

Hypocrites and other unregenerate men may deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of their being in God's favor and about their being saved. Their presumptions will die with them. However, those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus, who honestly love him, and try to walk in good conscience before him, may in this life be assured with certainty that they are in the state of grace. They

may also rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, and they will never be ashamed of that hope.

There is a false assurance and on the other hand, a true assurance of salvation. There are those who think they are saved who are not. They are deceived about the state of their soul.

Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?"

Ultimately, only God knows those who are saved. 2 Timothy 2:19 says, "The Lord knows those who are his." We can be deceived about our own salvation and about the salvation of others, but the Lord is not deceived. Hebrews 4:13 declares that, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

The confession says that such persons have "false hopes and carnal presumptions of their being in God's favor and about their being saved. Their presumptions will die with them."

The natural man is a religious man. He wants to go to heaven, but has no right or claim to heaven. He flatters himself that he is good enough to be accepted by God. Man naturally has a spirit of self-righteousness and self-confidence.

There are those who say they have faith in Christ, and yet there is no fruit and evidence of that faith. This is what the Bible calls "dead faith." James 1:22 says, "But become doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." James 2:20 says, "But will you know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?"

Then there are some who have outward works that appear to be good, but their trust is in the works and not in Christ for justification.

Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and

perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

Outward works, even done in the name of Christ, may be part of a false profession of faith. Such persons need to repent of their self-righteousness and trust in Christ alone and come to know Him as their Savior and Lord.

How can we distinguish true from false assurance? A.A. Hodge gives four tests that enable us to distinguish true from false assurance:

- 1) True assurance produces real humility; false assurance begets spiritual pride. (1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 6:14.)
- 2) The true leads to increased diligence in the practice of holiness; the false leads to sloth and self-indulgence. (Ps. 51:12,13,19.)
- 3) The true leads to candid self-examination and to a desire to be searched and corrected by God; the false leads to a disposition to be satisfied with appearance and to avoid accurate investigation. (Ps. 139:23,24.)
- 4) The true leads to constant aspirations after more intimate fellowship with God. (1 John 3:2,3.)¹

I like what G.I. Williamson says: "It is not the strength of one's conviction which proves the validity of his assurance but the character of one's conviction."²

Professor Sinclair Ferguson summarizes the confession's concern about false assurance well. He said:

It is... terribly possible for someone to have a kind of faith and assurance that is little more than self-confidence, born out of an intellectual conviction rather than out of a helpless casting of one's sinful self upon a willing Savior. But so long as there is a vestige of reliance on *my* righteousness, *my* service, *my* knowledge of Scripture, -- so long as I rely on *my* faith rather than on Christ's work alone -- so long am I the possessor of a false and temporal

¹ A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 239.

² G.I. Williamson, *Westminster Confession of Faith: for Study Classes*.

assurance. The sands of time are littered with the strewn wreckage of men and women who have made shipwreck of their souls because they went forward with a false assurance, not having really laid the foundation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That is a tremendous danger.³

It is interesting that Ferguson said that they “went forward” with a false assurance. I am convinced that countless thousands of people in the Bible Belt think they are saved because they “went forward” at some meeting! Un-biblical methods of evangelism inevitably lead to much false assurance of salvation.

Look now again at what the last half of section one of the Confession said:

“...those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus, who honestly love him, and try to walk in good conscience before him, may in this life be assured with certainty that they are in the state of grace.”

There is such a thing as true assurance of salvation. Genuine faith in the Lord Jesus is the foundation of such assurance. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:13)

Sincere love for Christ is also part of that equation. Notice that the confession did not say *perfect* love for Christ, but *sincere* love -- i.e. not hypocritical.

Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who *loves Me*. He who *loves Me* will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself (assure him?) to him.” (John 14:21)

Walking in good conscience before God is part of our assurance. A person who goes to God daily, confessing and forsaking sin, will build up his or her assurance.

³ Quoted in *The Quest for Full Assurance*, Dr. Joel Beeke p. 121.

Lastly, the confession says, "They may also rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, and they will never be ashamed of that hope." Assurance is a subset of hope, joy and peace. Romans 14:17 reminds us that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

While it is possible to be deceived about one's salvation, the Bible encourages us to seek and find a full assurance of faith.

Chapter Three

The Foundation of Assurance

The Bible presents the assurance of salvation as something not only that is possible to attain, but that is highly desirable as well.

The apostle John states, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13)

God wants believers in Christ to have a certainty concerning their eternal salvation. But not everyone who is certain of assurance has the right to such assurance. Therefore, tonight we will look at this matter of a proper *foundation of assurance*. As we will see, a true Biblical assurance is based upon God's Word and the work of God's Spirit.

The doctrine of *Justification by Faith Alone* was the major concern of the Protestant Reformation. But the Reformers also rediscovered the related doctrine of the *Assurance of Salvation*. The Reformers came out of a medieval background of superstition and fear. In Luther's day there were street plays put on to scare people and bring fear to their souls about hell.

Now, there is nothing wrong with scaring people about hell, as long as you also present the gospel of justification by free grace through faith alone. However, In Martin Luther's day the Roman Catholic Church preached a message of fear in order to sell more indulgences. The Catholic Church taught that one could never be certain of salvation. In contrast, the Reformers preached a message of hope. The Roman Catholic Church had to combat this teaching of course, or else they would be out of business! So, in the year 1560, they officially declared the following in the Council of Trent:

It is not to be said that sins are forgiven or have been forgiven to anyone who boasts his confidence and certainty of the remission of his sins and rests on that alone; seeing that it may exist, yea, does in our day exist among heretics and schismatics.

Thus the Catholic Church has declared the doctrine of assurance to be heresy. Read on and you be the judge concerning this charge of heresy.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 18, section 2 reads:

This certainty is not based on the fallible hope of guesswork or probabilities. Rather, it is the infallible assurance of faith established on the divine truth of the promises of salvation.⁴

If assurance of salvation were based solely upon subjective experience or speculation, then it would be mere guesswork. False assurance can be based upon what a person feels or experiences, or upon false teaching. True biblical assurance is solidly based upon the promises of God in Scripture. Some promises of assurance are found in Hebrews chapter six:

“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope to the end.” (Hebrews 6:11)

“This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.” (Hebrews 6:19)

But how is it that we can be so confident of God's promises in the Bible? These are great promises, but is there any guarantee that they are true and trustworthy? Hebrews 6:17, 18 states, “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.”

The two unchangeable things here are “His purpose to save those who believe His promise” and “His oath” to do so. God cannot lie! And He does not change His mind! If He purposed to save you and has sworn to do so, then count on it being done! Believe His word for it is truth. You can have an infallible assurance of salvation because God's promises in His word are infallible.

⁴ *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Modern Study Edition*, p. 27.

It has been said that assurance is attained by the use of a “sacred syllogism.” A syllogism is simply a basic formula of logic. The syllogism of assurance goes like this:

- A) Whosoever believes in Jesus Christ is in a state of grace and has eternal life.
- B) I believe in Jesus Christ.
- C) Therefore, I am in a state of grace and have eternal life.

There is only one difficulty with this syllogism. The syllogism is true, but the truth of its premises must be true for it to work. We know that A is true because God's promise is infallible. But what about “B”? Do I truly believe in Christ? Do I have true saving faith? How can I be certain that my faith is genuine?

That is where the rest of section two of the Confession of Faith comes in. It says:

There is also the inner evidence of spiritual insight, given to us by God, to which these promises are directed. And there is the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God. This Spirit is the pledge of our inheritance. By Him we are sealed until the day of redemption.⁵

The original version of the Confession speaks of, “...the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made.” What does this refer to? It refers to the graces such as love to God, obedience to His commands, love to others, bearing of the fruit of the Spirit, performance of good deeds and an inner hunger for righteousness and purity. Only those who have these graces in them are entitled to assurance of salvation. But we can be deceived about our faith and about the evidence for our faith. Our obedience may be only outward. Our love might be insincere. How can I know that these outward graces are authentic and not hypocritical? Robert Shaw stated, “How we can attain to this, without the assistance of the Holy Spirit, is inconceivable. He who gave us faith and repentance, must also make us know the things which are freely given us of God. ‘As the sun cannot be seen but by its

⁵ Ibid.

own light, neither can we know, but by the Spirit, that we have the Spirit."⁶

Romans 8:16 says, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." The Holy Spirit does not impart assurance of salvation by some private revelation alone. He always works with the Word of God. G.I. Williamson states that "to claim assurance on the basis of a witness of the Spirit apart from, or additional to, the Bible is to claim a false assurance."⁷ Jonathan Edwards also spoke strongly against the idea that the Spirit witnesses by way of immediate suggestion or revelation.

How does the Holy Spirit testify? He testifies "With our spirit," not "to our spirit." Scripture says that "by the testimony of two witnesses a matter is confirmed."⁸ The word *witness*, as used in Romans 8:16 has to do with evidence in a court of law. The Spirit's witness is contained in the objective Word of God, which gives the promises we must believe, and tells us the life a believer must live. In other words, the Spirit in the Word tells us the true way of salvation and gives us the true evidences of salvation. Then our own spirit must bear witness that we have believed and that we are endeavoring to live a life that pleases God.

"The Spirit of God is one witness to the fact. Our spirit is a corroborative witness. How do each bear witness? God's Spirit bears witness in His Word. Does our own spirit testify that we 'mind the things of the Spirit'? (Rom 8:5) Does our consciousness recognize its fruits, inward as well as outward? If the testimony of our spirit is that what God's Spirit witnesses of the sons of God (in Scripture) is true of us, then they concur in the testimony that we are the children of God."⁹

⁶ Robert Shaw, *And Exposition of the Confession of Faith*, p.185.

⁷ G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes*, p. 133.

⁸ See Jay Adams *Christian Counselor's Commentary* on Romans.

⁹ *The People's New Testament Notes*, Romans 8:16. (Source: *The Online Bible*)

Chapter Four

The Cultivation of Assurance

We have already seen that the assurance of salvation is something that is desirable and is possible to attain. Yet our assurance can and will be assaulted. While a Christian cannot lose his salvation, he can lose his assurance. Once a believer gains assurance of eternal life, that assurance must be properly maintained or cultivated.

Chapter 18, section three of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* addresses the ongoing struggle to maintain assurance in the life of the Christian. It says:

This infallible assurance is not so essential to the essence of faith that a true believer may not have doubts and conflicts about it, possibly wait some time for it and grow into it. But since the Spirit enables believers to know the things which are freely given them by God, every believer may come to a full assurance of salvation by the ordinary working of the Spirit without unusual revelation. Therefore it is every believer's duty to establish the certainty of his calling and election so that his heart may be filled with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, with love and thankfulness to God, and with strength and cheerfulness of obedience. These are the true products of assurance, which is never conducive to an undisciplined life.¹⁰

The Relation of Faith to Assurance

The first statement made in this section is that: "This infallible assurance is not essential to the essence of faith..."

I once had a Christian say to me, "I don't see how a person can be saved and not know it." Let's think about this statement.

The Confession says that, "*Infallible* assurance is not essential to the essence of faith." Full, infallible assurance is not necessary for there to

¹⁰ *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Modern Study Edition*, p. 27.

be true saving faith. However, there is a seed or germ of assurance in all true faith. This issue of the relation of faith to assurance was debated amongst the Puritans. Thomas Boston said, "How faith can grow in any to a full assurance, if there be no assurance in the nature of it, I cannot comprehend."

John Calvin taught that assurance is part of all true faith. He said that faith is, "A firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us." Calvin said that he added those words "firm and certain" because "faith is not content with a doubtful and changeable opinion." This does not mean that a believer won't ever struggle with having doubts – we will. He said, "For unbelief is so deeply rooted in our hearts, and we are so inclined to it, that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth: namely, that God is faithful."¹¹

Weak faith is indeed true faith, for it is not the strength of our faith, but the object of our faith -- Jesus Christ, that saves. All a person needs to be saved is to have faith the size of a mustard seed. But that faith ought to eventually grow into a tall tree. "Though weak faith is true faith, a believer should never be content with weak faith."¹² Hebrews 6:11 says, "And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the *full assurance* of hope until the end."

The Time Element

"This infallible assurance is not so essential to the essence of faith that a true believer may not have doubts and conflicts about it, possibly wait some time for it and grow into it." (WCF)

Is it sinful for a saved person to have doubts about his salvation? Yes and no. James says that when we pray, we "must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind... he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does." This is not

¹¹ Calvin's Institutes

¹² Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, pp.148-149. (quoting Puritan pastor Robert Bolton)

a direct reference to salvation, but it shows that doubting is not pleasing to God and makes us unstable in the Christian life.

Jude 1:22-23 says, "Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them." Those who have doubts about their salvation have a weak faith, or no faith. Either way, we ought to be merciful and gentle with them. The Bible said of Jesus that "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."

True believers sometimes suffer doubts and have inner conflict about the assurance of salvation. Of course those who have doubts should seek to resolve them. But full certainty of salvation may take time to grow into. As a person grows in sanctification, so they will grow in assurance. Ordinarily, this will not take a long, long time to occur, unless the individual is not diligently using the means of grace. Even those who have a strong assurance still have room for their assurance to grow. Ultimately, God is sovereign over how long it may take to arrive at a full or mature assurance.

The Means of Attaining Assurance

The Confession says, "But since the Spirit enables believers to know the things which are freely given them by God, every believer may come to a full assurance of salvation by the ordinary working of the Spirit without unusual revelation."

The original version of the Westminster Confession says that the believer, "may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto." Assurance is the sovereign gift of God, but we are not to look for some unusual experience in order to gain it. The ordinary use of the means of grace -- the Word, the sacraments and prayer, will bring about assurance in God's time.

The Puritan Obadiah Sedgwick said that "Experiences are good encouragements to the future acts of faith, but the Word of God is still the ground of faith."

As we pray through the Scriptures and claim the promises of God, our assurance will grow. While nothing can add to the promises of the Word, God has also given us the sacraments to seal and confirm His

promises to us. How does this work? The Sacraments are visual promises, as it were; tangible signs of His love. They show forth the gospel of God's grace. The sacraments show what God has done for our salvation. We are reminded that we contribute nothing to salvation, and are merely recipients. Each time we witness a baptism, our faith is confirmed in the fact that God has washed away our sins. And each time we partake of the Lord's Supper our faith is strengthened by the remembrance of Christ's substitutionary death for us on the cross. By giving us this covenant meal, God works in us by His Spirit to confirm that we are saved by His body and blood. "Just as physical food nourishes and strengthens our bodies, the spiritual food of the Lord's Supper nourishes and strengthens our faith, so that we ever depend upon God through Christ for everything."¹³

If you are a believer in Christ and have not been baptized or have not joined a local church, then I encourage you to take that step of faith and obedience. Then the way will be open for you to partake of the Lord's Supper on a regular basis. Find out when your church will be observing the Lord's Table next and prepare your heart through prayer and repentance to partake of this covenant meal.

The Duty of Seeking Assurance

The Confession says:

Therefore it is every believer's duty to establish the certainty of his calling and election so that his heart may be filled with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, with love and thankfulness to God, and with strength and cheerfulness of obedience. These are the true products of assurance, which is never conducive to an undisciplined life.

Our duty to seek assurance is stated in 2 Peter 1:10 "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure." It is our duty to pursue assurance of faith and salvation. It is not meant only for a few spiritual elite, but for the lowliest of believers. Some would say that gaining assurance of salvation will lead to carelessness, neglect and pride. But this is not so. The confession states that

¹³ Terry Miller, (email correspondence)

assurance produces a life marked by peace, joy, love, thankfulness, strength and cheerfulness in obedience. When you cease to be humble and diligent, your certainty will diminish. Assurance is only kept up by humility and diligence in the Christian life. True biblical assurance will not lead to pride and slackness, but to the very opposite. As the confession says, "the true products of assurance are never conducive to an undisciplined life."

Are you diligently seeking to make sure of your salvation and election? Then in due time you will come to have this blessed assurance.

The Renewal of Assurance

True or False:

1. True believers can lose their assurance.
2. Assurance is of the essence of faith.
3. Assurance of salvation is guaranteed to every Christian.
4. There is no harm in having a false assurance.
5. No true believer will have doubts about his salvation.
6. Assurance is a privilege, but not a duty.
7. Salvation is through faith alone, but assurance is not.
8. Having assurance is good but not necessary to be mature in the faith.
9. Assurance may be obtained by the ordinary work of the Spirit.
10. Assurance sometimes leads to an undisciplined life.

(See answers on p. 22)

The final section of chapter 18 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* has to do with the weakening and loss of assurance, as well as how it may be recovered. The Confession states that:

The assurance true believers have of their salvation may be shaken, lessened, or interrupted for various reasons: from neglecting to preserve it; from committing some particular sin, which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit; from some sudden or strong temptation; or from God's withdrawing the sense of His presence and allowing them to walk in darkness. Nevertheless, they are never completely without God's seed, the life of faith, the love of Christ and of other believers, and the sincere heart and obedient conscience, out of which the Spirit revive this assurance in due time and by which they are in the meantime kept from complete despair.

Assurance may grow and become stronger in a believer, but it also may be weakened. Gordon Clark stated that: "Indeed while it is impossible to lose one's faith or salvation, assurance may be shaken, diminished and intermitted. There is such a thing as backsliding, both sudden and gradual. The Christian may fall into sin and lose his assurance. This is

graphically portrayed in Bunyan's great work, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian and Hopeful disobey their instructions, leave the path to the Celestial City, and climb over the fence, where, after the storm, they are caught by Giant Despair and thrust into the dungeon of doubting castle."¹⁴

Assurance May be Shaken, Lessened, or Interrupted

The *Westminster Confession* states that the reasons for a lack of assurance are found primarily in the believer. First of all, lack of assurance may be due to neglect. If a Christian neglects to attend worship faithfully, or read the Scriptures or does not pray, it is no surprise that his assurance grows weaker. Those who are spiritually lazy will not be spiritually confident. Peter neglected to pray with Christ in the Garden and he then denied the Lord and when Christ confronted him with a look, he wept bitterly. Dr. Joel Beeke states that "The Christian cannot enjoy high levels of assurance while he persists in low levels of obedience."¹⁵

Another reason the confession gives for a lack of assurance is "from committing some particular sin, which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit, or some sudden or strong temptation." King David was tempted and committed grievous sins. In Psalm 51:12 David prayed, "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit." Many times I have found that a professing Christian who is involved in serious sin also has a lack of assurance. (E.g. when a couple is living together without being married.)

The last reason the confession gives for a lack of assurance is not the fault of the believer, but is part of God's mysterious providence. A Christian may lose assurance "from God's withdrawing the sense of His presence (the light of His countenance) and allowing them to walk in darkness."

A.A. Hodge said that, assurance may be weakened "by God's withdrawing the light of His countenance, in the way of fatherly

¹⁴ Gordon Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* p.179.

¹⁵ Joel Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, p.157.

discipline, for the purpose of trying our faith, of convincing us of our entire dependence, and of the all-sufficiency of His gracious help."¹⁶

In other words, God may allow us to experience a time in the desert, and our assurance may grow weak, but it is always for good and holy purposes. Read the Psalms and you will find occasions where the writer is in despair due to God's heavy hand upon him. For example, the Psalmist cries out to God, saying, "You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily upon me; You have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Why, O LORD, do You reject me and hide your face from me?" (Psalm 88)

Though true believers can suffer a loss of assurance, the confession goes on to say that genuine faith can never die and true salvation can never be lost. Therefore, assurance can be revived, just as a smoldering wick can be fanned into flame.

How is assurance revived? The same way it was obtained in the first place. If you are a Christian whose assurance has been shaken you ought to review your life, confess your backsliding and cast yourself upon the mercy of God in Christ once again. If you are struggling with this, go to Psalm 51 and pray through this Psalm. Repent and confess your sins to God and then begin to diligently use the means of grace again. Pursue holiness with a fervent heart. Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. Don't grieve the Spirit. Seek to live a godly and holy life. Put Christ first and serve Him in all areas of life. Be a bold witness for Christ wherever you go. Be in church whenever you have an opportunity. Be in the Word as much as possible. Pray with other Christians. Get Biblical counsel. Don't cut any corners with God. And above all else, rest in Christ alone for your salvation and acceptance with God. Your assurance will be revived and your joy in the Lord will return.

¹⁶ A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 246.

Answers to T/F questions:

1. T – True believers can lose assurance for a time.
2. F – Assurance is part of faith, but not the essence of it.
3. F – Assurance is conditionally promised, but not guaranteed. We must seek it to have it.
4. F – There is great harm in having false assurance, for there is danger in perishing for eternity.
5. F – Most Christians will face doubts at times.
6. F – “Make your calling and election sure.” ~ 2Peter 1:10
7. T – Assurance comes by faith in God's promises and the evidences of obedience, aided by the Spirit's help.
8. F – Assurance helps us be confident and bold in living for the Lord.
9. T – No special revelation is needed.
10. F – False assurance might lead a person to be undisciplined; however, true assurance is only attained by those who are disciplined in their walk with God.

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