

Assurance - Part 1 - The Possibility of True Assurance of Salvation

WCF 18.1: (Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation) Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation a (which hope of theirs shall perish b): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, c and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.d

Introduction: In the first 3 centuries of Christian history after the death of the apostles, it was usually fairly easy to spot a Christian. Because the fires of persecution burned bright and people often paid with their property, freedom, and lives for confessing openly the Lord Jesus as the only Savior of sinners and the only Lord of all creation, there were very few hypocrites in the ranks of local Christian churches. While this scenario is very much a reality for many of our fellow believers who live in nations hostile to the truth, for the majority of American history such has not been the case. We have been able to live our lives professing Christ relatively free from harassment and distress caused by persecution. For the majority of us, it has cost us *very little* to be open disciples of Christ.

While the persecuted church, in whatever century or location you consider it, has always been the most pure in terms of the holiness, commitment, zeal, and strength of its membership, the **unpersecuted** church has always been the least pure in terms of its holiness and strength, etc. We live in a nation where, for most of its history, Christianity has not only thrived, *but it is en vogue and popular to profess*. As I stated earlier, about 4/5ths of Americans claim the title, "Christian." During the first 3 centuries of the NT church, *nominal* Christianity was almost nonexistent. It was considered shameful and despised by most in the Roman Empire to be called a "Christian." The result of this was:

Most people during that time period who called themselves Christians were real Christians. They had very little to gain and everything to lose by doing so. The charges made against Christians by Romans in those first 3 centuries were:

⇒ *They despise all mankind (b/c of their doctrine of sin), they are atheists (because of their imageless worship),*

⇒ *they are cannibals (because they "eat" and "drink" the "body and blood" of Christ),*

⇒ *they are traitors (because they refused to swear allegiance to the divinity of the Caesar,*

⇒ *and they are perverts because they "greet one another with a holy kiss" and have these "love feasts," etc.*

++** ⇒ One charge that was not made against them was that they were *hypocrites*. One had to be certain of what they believed and where their highest loyalty was because of the fires of persecution.

My point in this introductory illustration is to point out a fact which ought to give us pause.

⇒ Hypocrisy and false professors of the faith will always thrive during periods of time when Christianity is popular, Christianity is professed by the majority, and it costs those who profess to be Christ's disciples *very little for doing so*.

Our first point in this sermon is words spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount which He wanted all future generations to consider carefully:

1. The Prevalence of Hypocrites - Matthew 7:21-23

[21] "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. [22] Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' [23] And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

Point: What is remarkable about this text first and foremost is that it teaches us clearly that *among those*

who profess allegiance to the Lord Jesus, are **many** who will, in point of fact, be denied entrance to the kingdom of heaven on the last Day - the Great Day of Judgment.

Point: Because this passage goes on to describe the actions of men who are specifically pastors, (i.e. "have we not prophesied in your name... cast out demons in your name.... and done many wonders in your name...") it is primarily directed at them, *but it also functions as a general warning to all professing Christians.*

Point 2: Jesus is quite clear that *not everyone* who professes allegiance to Jesus **shall enter the kingdom of heaven.** There are, as the text says, "many" who claim to be Christ's followers who are, in fact, **not** His followers. Elsewhere we read this narrative from:

Luke 13:23-27 Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them, [24] "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. [25] When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' [26] then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' [27] But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.'

Illustration: *The very last paragraph of Pilgrim's Progress* - after Christian and Faithful pass through the river of death, another fellow - Ignorance, by name - whom they had met and spoken with a couple of times on their way to the Celestial City - shows up.... listen:

Now, while I was gazing upon all these things, I turned my head to look back, and saw Ignorance come up to the river-side: but he soon got over, and that without half the difficulty which the other two men met with. For it happened that there was then in that place one Vain-hope, a ferryman, that with his boat helped him over: so he, as the others, I saw, did ascend the hill to come up to the Gate; only he came alone, neither did any meet him with the least encouragement. When he was come up to the Gate, he looked up to the writing that was above, and then began to knock, supposing that entrance should have been quickly administered to him: but he was asked by the men that looked over the top of the Gate, Whence come you? and what would you have? He answered, I have eat and drank in the presence of the King, and he has taught in our streets. Then they asked him for his certificate, that they might go in and show it to the King. So he fumbled in his bosom for one, and found none. Then said they, Have you none? But the man answered never a word. So they told the King; but he would not come down to see him, but commanded the two Shining Ones that conducted Christian and Hopeful to the City, to go out and take Ignorance, and bind him hand and foot, and have him away. Then they took him up, and carried him through the air, to the door that I saw in the side of the hill, and put him in there. Then I saw that there was a way to hell, even from the gates of heaven, as well as from the city of Destruction. So I awoke, and behold it was a dream.

Application: Remember Jesus' words: "*Many* shall come on that day...."

Application 2: Every communicant member of BHPC has made a profession of belief in the Lord Jesus and has claimed that they are in fact born again and are Jesus' disciples.

Here is the Critical Question I hope to answer biblically from a number of passages of Scripture:

Is it possible to *know* for sure that we ourselves will not be among those who hear those terrible words from Jesus on the day of final judgment? Scripture answers this question in the affirmative - ***It is not only possible to be, as our Confession of Faith says: "certainly assured that they are in the state of grace..."*** we are also going to see that the pursuit of such *certainty* is every *professing* Christian's ***duty*** in the following passage - 2 Peter 1:1-11.

Before we turn to 2 Peter, I want to read you just a handful of passages that answer definitively that we *can* in point of fact *know* we have eternal life and will go to heaven:

1 John 5:13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may

know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

1 John 2:3 Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.

1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

1 John 3:18-19, 21, 24 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. [19] And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. ... [21] Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. ... [24] Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

And then another marvelous key passage on this topic of the assurance of grace and salvation:

Romans 8:15-17 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." [16] The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, [17] and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

⇒ **Critical question:** How does the Spirit "bear witness with our spirit that we are children of God?"

Answer: *through the Word of God.*

Application: The deeper and more regularly we are in the Word of God, the more our assurance of God's grace will grow and deepen. Because if we have been born again by God's Spirit, then we will have a God-given affection for the Lord Jesus Christ and an affection and desire to *Hear His voice* speaking to us, assuring us, and promising us eternal life, salvation, and forgiveness.

Application 2: Assurance is not just possible for the professing Christian, it is also his divinely commanded *duty* to be "diligent" in pursuing it! **Now let us look at 2 Peter 1:1-11**

2. Exceedingly Great and Precious Promises - 2 Peter 1:1-4

[1] Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: [2] Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, [3] as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, [4] by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

Point: This letter is addressed directly to *believers* - notice v1's phrase: "To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ."

Point 2: In v3 we are told that it is from *God's divine power* that we are given all things that pertain to life and godliness. Everything we need to know and the power to be godly is *ours through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.*

Point 3: Notice v4 - we have been given "exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature..."

Question: What are these exceedingly great and precious promises? They are the promises of the Lord Jesus and His apostles who had preached the gospel to the recipients of this letter.

Our Confession of faith continues in point 2: "This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation [We will look at these others in subsequent sermons], the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption."

Hebrews 6:17-20 "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the

immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, [18] that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have **strong consolation**, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. [19] **This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast**, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, [20] where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Point 4: Notice again v4: “... exceedingly great and precious promises, that **through these** you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

“**Through these**” we are “**partakers of the divine nature**” = This is a round-about way of referring to our gaining eternal life - the image of God in holiness and righteousness *begins* again when we are born-again by God’s Spirit - we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our redemption.

Application: It is when we *embrace by faith* the promises of Scripture regarding the forgiveness of our sins, God’s willingness and ability to pardon us, and God’s love for His people that *we are* “*partakers of the divine nature.*”

What are some of these “promises?” Before I walk through 4 of them here, remember Jesus’ wonderful words about those who truly are His sheep: **John 10:27** “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”

A. When Paul preached at the synagogue at Antioch in Acts 13, he concluded his message with this promise:

Acts 13:38-39 Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; [39] and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.

B. Jesus said at the synagogue at Capernaum:

John 6:47 Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.

C. Jesus promised at the tomb of Lazarus:

John 11:25-26 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. [26] And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

D. Paul wrote to the Romans:

Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we **(I)** have peace with God through our **(my)** Lord Jesus Christ, [2] through whom also we **(I)** have access by faith into this grace in which we **(I)** stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

⇒ **Question:** Do you see yourself among the “we” Paul refers to in this passage? Can you read this passage substituting all the 3rd person plural pronouns with a first person singular pronoun?

E. Paul wrote to the Colossians - Question: When this passage uses the word “you” it was originally meant just for the Colossian Christians - but do you hear it, as one of Christ’s sheep, addressed directly to you?:

Col. 2:13-14 “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, [14] having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”

These promises that come to us directly from God’s mouth to our ears is the first and foremost ground of a true assurance. When Scripture speaks of the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God - always remember that it is through His *Word* that the Holy Spirit does this.

Application: Do you struggle with assurance? Do you fear that perhaps you are self-deceived? Then I would encourage you to enter into an in-depth study of the person and work of Jesus Christ in behalf of His people - deeply rooted in the Word of God.

Illustration: When married people are having problems and their relationship is strained, they often will go to retreats or marriage-encounter weekends, etc. Why? *To spend focused time on each other to strengthen their relationship.* We will make the time needed to do that which truly matters to us. Our

actions will always speak louder than words.

Application: If in your life spending daily time with the Lord Jesus - meditating upon His promises, His statutes, and His law - is not a priority - or is constantly being neglected for work, people, or anything else in your life - you may expect to suffer from a lack of assurance.

3. Fruitful Knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ - 2 Peter 1:5-9

[5] But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, [6] to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, [7] to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.

Point: The very end of v4 says, "... having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence..." add what follows to your faith in Christ:

BDAG: Spoudes: "earnest commitment in discharge of an obligation or experience of a relationship, eagerness, earnestness, diligence, willingness, zeal..." BDAG adds in this specific reference, 2 Peter 1:5: "make every effort to add..."

Question: What are you diligent about? What in your life do you "make every effort" to accomplish? What is your consuming passion in life? For some it is their physical appearance, for others its position, still others it is wealth and security, for some it is athletic accomplishments. **But what holds the center of your heart? Where, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount is "your treasure?" On earth or in heaven?**

Notice this remarkable list of things we are to "give all diligence to add to our faith:"

⇒ **Virtue** (praiseworthy character), **knowledge** (of Christ and His Word), **self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.**

[8] For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. [9] For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

Point: If we give "all diligence" to pursue all those things, we will be neither "barren nor unfruitful" in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Illustration: Consider carefully that when the Lord Jesus told the parable of the Sower, the difference between the fruit yielded by the unbelievers and the true believers was a 30, 60, or 100 fold-increase.

Application: And yet the clear indication from this text in 2 Peter 1 is that it is possible for a time for a true believer to be "barren and unfruitful in their knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Incredible Application from v9: When we who name the name of Christ lack these things, we are said to have "forgotten" that we were cleaned from our old sins.

Question: How could we ever forget such a thing?

Illustration: When humans first began to explore space and to subject their bodies to extended periods of weightlessness, the effects were seen to be rather dramatic when those astronauts first returned to earth. Many were not even able to walk at all and had to be confined to wheelchairs while their muscles rebuilt themselves having now been exposed to gravity once again.

Application: Paul exhorted young Timothy:

1 Tim. 4:7-8 "But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness. [8] For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come."

Application 2: The spiritual disciplines of prayer, fellowship, sacraments, Bible reading, and self-examination are critical to prevent our spiritual muscles from *spiritual atrophy* from lack of use. The problem is, we tend not to see just how much our spiritual muscles have atrophied until we return to gravity from weightlessness - IOW, a trial hits us by surprise. The rains come, the waters rise, and *beat on that house* - then its foundation is made known.

Critical Application 3: And in the day and age in which we live, it is far too easy for us to get used to

weightlessness because it costs us so little in America to follow Christ. **But what will happen** to us if, because of our commitment to Christ and to Biblical law and righteousness, we are no longer able to put food on the table, pay our mortgage, or put gas in our cars?

An Appeal: Now more than ever, we need to be like astronauts in space - doing the daily regiment of the spiritual treadmill of fervent prayer, the spiritual weight training of in-depth Bible study, and the spiritual aerobics of fellowship with God's people and attendance upon the preaching of God's Word and corporate worship.

Who here would ever want to be described by the One who hung on a cross and died *in behalf of your sins* as one who is "barren and unfruitful... and has forgotten that they were cleansed from their former sins."

4. Making Your Call and Election Sure - 2 Peter 1:10-11

[10] Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; [11] for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Final Point: This diligence that we express in the spiritual disciplines is how we make our call and election sure. If we do that "we will never stumble." And we will receive and abundant entry into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Application: We are commanded to be diligent to make our call and election sure - and surely we are *able* with the help of God's grace to accomplish this.

Final Application: For the soft-hearted here, I want to encourage you: *Jesus was condemned and crucified because He loves us in spite of how cold our diligence has been in making our call and election sure.* Any person here who is a true Christian - born again by the supernatural work of the Spirit of God - will only recoil at much of what has been preached here this morning because they know *they have not been diligent* in adding all of those things to their faith, they have not been diligent in making their call and election sure, they have at times, or are perhaps right now, in a time of feeling barren and unfruitful. Remember the words of our Confession of Faith - with many, many passages behind each thing said here:

"yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, c and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed."d"

Notice, it does not say: such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus and love him *perfectly*, and walk with him *perfectly*.... may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace."

God has graciously given us what we need to overcome sin, but God is also well aware that sin is still a part of who we are even as believers. And so, I leave you with this final *promise* from Scripture that I hope you will meditate on and rejoice in the rest of this Lord's Day:

1 John 2:1-2 My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. [2] And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

R. C. Sproul has a 6 message teaching series on assurance in which he said he would ask the Christian struggling with assurance the following questions, in this order:

1. Do you love Jesus perfectly? *No.*
2. Do you love Jesus as much as you should? *No.*
3. Do you love Jesus - i.e. the Biblical Christ, in His doing and dying for sinners at all? If you can say "yes," you must know this: *No unregenerate person can have any true affection for the Lord Jesus*

Christ.

1 John 4:19 We love Him because He first loved us.

⇒ If you have *any* true affection for the Biblical Jesus, it is because God has made you born again - it is because He *first loved you*. And that is an assuring truth to, as our Confession faith says, “such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity... may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace.”