

Sermon 17, Assurance and the Wrath of God, Hebrews 3:15-19

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?’” (Num 14:11 NIV)

Proposition: You can and should have full assurance of participation in Christ, but recognize that assurance is not cockiness and does not negate apostasy and God’s wrath against apostates.

- I. Our Status: Partakers of Christ, v. 14a
- II. Our Assurance, vv. 14-19
 - A. What It Is: Reality, Confidence, Conviction, Trusting Firmly, v. 14b
 - B. How It Is: Through Soft-Hearted Listening to God’s Voice, v. 15
 - C. When It Is: Today, vv. 14b-15
 - 1. Its Beginning
 - 2. Its End
 - D. What It Isn’t, vv. 16-19
 - 1. “Once Saved, Always Saved”, vv. 16-19
 - 2. A License to Provoke God, v. 16
 - 3. A Denial of Apostasy, vv. 17-18
 - 4. A Denial of God’s Wrath, v. 17
 - 5. A License to Disobey, v. 18
 - 6. A Denial of Faith’s Necessity, v. 19

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, today we will encounter two ideas that we would not choose to place together — assurance and the wrath of God. By the way, these ideas don’t appear together only here, but repeatedly throughout the book of Hebrews. Assurance and apostasy are not mutually exclusive. The Christian faith teaches both. The book of Hebrews teaches both. The half-dozen verses we’re looking at together this morning teach both. You cannot use one to cancel out the other. The idea that you cannot know for sure that you’re saved is a Roman Catholic error. In the name of apostasy, they deny assurance. Its mirror image is the hyper-Calvinist error. They deny that you can apostatize. In the name of assurance, they deny apostasy.

Brothers and sisters, both assurance and apostasy are real things. You should enjoy assurance that you are really saved. You can be a Christian without assurance that you are one, but ordinarily, you will know whom you have believed, and you will have good confidence that He will bring you safely through. That said, do not imagine that apostasy presents no danger to you. Assurance is not presumption. Assurance is not a license to provoke God. Assurance is God’s gift to His people, but He is angry with those who abuse it.

I. Our Status: Partakers of Christ, v. 14a

We begin, then, where we ended a few weeks ago when we last looked at v. 14. At that time, I dared to speak of a conditional partaking of Christ, for the text says that we have become partakers of Christ *if* we hold our assurance firm from beginning to end.

What does it mean to partake in Christ? It means to share in Him. To partake in Christ is not merely to enjoy His benefits, to welcome His gifts, to walk in His graces; it is to share personally in Him. To partake in Christ means that the whole Christ belongs to you.

I've told you many times that my father had a capacious lap, but at most he could only hold four of us at one time. My siblings would do battle to get a spot on Dad's lap, shouting "He's my daddy!" "No, he's my daddy!" at one another with great vigor.

"He's the daddy of all of you!" I would add my bit of noise to the melee, trying unsuccessfully to get them to see reason.

Well, brothers and sisters, He is the Christ of all of you. He is my Christ, and your Christ. We each partake in Him. It's not that there are (say) 2 billion Christians in the world, and so each one of us gets one two-billionth of Christ. No. To partake in Him does not mean that you have to share Him, that He is like Solomon with 999 other women to satisfy. To partake in Him means that you get all of Him. My siblings didn't each get a tenth of dad. We got all of him. I know my brothers and sisters would agree with me that dad never makes us feel like he is rushed or needs to get on to the next child and the next crisis. And he is only one man, a mere mortal with 24 hours in a day like everyone else. But Jesus can and does share all of Himself with all of His saints. "Take all myself," sighs Juliet to Romeo in the balcony scene. We should say the same to our glorious bridegroom — but recognize that He said it first. Not only does He have us, but we have Him. We are partakers in Christ. All things are yours, for you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

II. Our Assurance, vv. 14-19

How would you rate your certainty that Christ is yours — all yours? Fifty-fifty? Seventy-five percent? Ninety percent? The text does not give us an exact number. Instead, it uses the word "assurance."

A. What It Is: Reality, Confidence, Conviction, Trusting Firmly, v. 14b

What is assurance? You will see that the word only appears in a minority of English translations. Most EVV render the Greek with the word "confidence," while HCSB has "reality" and NLT has "trusting God . . . firmly." Perhaps surprisingly, the word so rendered is the word *hypostasis*, famous in later Trinitarian debates for its starring role as the Greek word for each divine Person. The *hypostasis* of the Father is not the *hypostasis* of the Son, though they share the one divine *ousia*.

So wait — a word whose most common technical rendering in later Greek is "person" — how does that word figure as the Biblical term for assurance of faith, for confidence in the promises of God? The lexicon (Friberg's) defines *hypostasis* as

the objective aspect and underlying reality behind anything, with the specific meaning derived from the context . . . (3) as the objective reality that gives a firm guarantee and basis for confidence or assurance *substance, ground of hope, foundation* (HE 3:14; 11:1). In other words, the assurance of faith is first and foremost not a psychological factor. Assurance is not primarily a state of mind, a feeling of confidence. Assurance, as used here in Heb. 3:14 (and later in Heb. 11) is a reality. It is a substance. God's gift of Christ to us is not insubstantial and unreal, but substantial and real. Assurance is a matter of holding tightly to the reality of God's gift of His Son to us. In other words, the psychological aspect of assurance is a by-product. To have assurance requires holding fast to Christ. Don't stop believing! Rather, continue to cling to the reality of who Jesus is. And then, secondly, based on that reality of God's saving work in Christ, you can and should feel a feeling of confidence about God's work in you.

In other words, the text is not teaching an ungrounded confidence but a grounded one. Your confidence in Christ is and must be well-founded. You partake of Christ if you hold onto His reality — and when you do, you will have what theologians call assurance.

B. How It Is: Through Soft-Hearted Listening to God's Voice, v. 15

The text itself moves rapidly on to highlight the way in which you can build your feeling of confidence in Christ on the firm foundation of who He really is. That way, of course, is by listening to His voice with a soft heart. Why does the Hebrew writer quote this verse from the psalm again? Because he is talking about assurance, and making clear that assurance is intimately tied to hearing God's voice. Assurance is about standing on a firm foundation, something that will give you a solid source of confidence. You can't be confident without some knowledge of how firm your foundation is. I tell you what, walking around on a metal roof with a hose is a great confidence-buster. My shoes stick to the metal just fine when it's dry. The second it gets wet, my feet begin to slip right out from under me.

Unless you know the word of God, your Christian life is not firmly founded. You can't be on a firm foundation, confident that you know and believe the truth, unless you are familiar with what Jesus said, what the apostles and prophets preached, and what Moses wrote.

Soft-hearted listening to the word of God is the way to assurance. Casual, in-one-ear-and-out-the-other listening to the word of God may make you rather too cocksure. It will not do much for your spiritual life. Ask me how I know.

C. When It Is: Today, vv. 14b-15

Well, when can and should you plant your feet firmly on this foundation, strengthening your knowledge of the reality on which your confidence is founded? The answer is "Today." Listen to His voice today. But the writer not only speaks of the gospel day, the time that is available for repentance and faith right now; he also speaks of holding your assurance firm from beginning to end.

1. Its Beginning

What is the beginning of our assurance? It is coming to learn the reality of Christ. I would date the beginning of assurance to the moment of conscious conversion. When you knew for certain that you had been persuaded, and that you definitely believed in Christ more than you doubted

Him, you began to have confidence. Your faith began to be founded on something solid. You began to enjoy the reality of Christ and His work on your behalf. Let me hasten to add that that assurance was real. You had confidence that Jesus had saved you. You had confidence that you were trusting in someone worth trusting in.

2. Its End

But the writer demands more than that. The beginning of our confidence is good. But we need to keep it until the end. This is conventional Christian teaching. You've heard it many times. Why? Because it's hard to implement. It's hard to keep ourselves grounded on the reality of Christ when the world, the flesh, and the Devil conspire together on a daily basis to tempt us away from Him. The end that's spoken of here is the end of one's life, or the end of the world, whichever comes first. It is, in other words, the end of the gospel "day" spoken of in Psalm 95. As long as it is called "today," Jesus is in the business of saving. But there is an expiration date on His offer. The day you die, the offer is no longer valid for you. The day the world ends, the offer is no longer valid for anybody.

I opened a book on my shelf recently and found inside it some Domino's coupons that expired in August of 1989. I could have gotten two cheese pizzas for \$9.99 — an incredible deal, as anyone who eats Domino's knows. But alas! The deal died over thirty years ago. In the same way, brothers and sisters, God's offer to save those who believe in Jesus Christ is not valid for all eternity. It is good only until the day you die, or the day the world ends, whichever comes first.

That means that you need to hang on to your confidence until the end. Don't give up on Jesus. Don't let yourself be drawn away from His reality. Hold tight to Him until the day you die. Don't become an exvangelical, one who no longer believes. To do that, you either have to believe God can't/won't save you, or that you don't need saving, or that salvation is not a good worth having. All of these views are incredibly insulting to the Almighty who gave His Son to die so that you could be saved.

So hold fast your confidence, firmly to the end. When Jesus returns, be found trusting in Him. When you come to die, be found trusting in Him.

D. What It Isn't, vv. 16-19

That said, the writer also takes care to warn against half-a-dozen heresies or errors that lie around this topic of assurance.

1. "Once Saved, Always Saved", vv. 16-19

The first one at which he takes aim is the teaching known in the American church today as "Once saved, always saved." This doctrine says that if you ever prayed the sinner's prayer or went forward at the evangelist's invitation, you are saved. Even if there is no external fruit, no apparent holding fast your confidence from beginning to end, you are still saved. That's because God respects and honors your choice to be saved.

Let me just point out that these rhetorical questions that wrap up Hebrews 3 neatly skewer "once saved, always saved." Those who were saved from Egypt did not make it to the promised land. They were saved once, in some sense, but not permanently. Their salvation was temporary at best. Those who seem to have been saved, but do not walk with God in the full

assurance of hope to the end, will not be saved in the end. Those who stop believing do not go to Heaven — even if they prayed a prayer and said the right words at an evangelistic meeting.

2. A License to Provoke God, v. 16

Secondly, assurance is not a license to provoke God. You may feel certain that you are saved. That does not give you the right to do things that make God angry. Sin makes God angry. Unbelief provokes Him.

Knowing that you have been saved by Jesus is not a license to do things that make God mad, such as sinning, doubting, and complaining. Quite the reverse, actually: Rightly understood, assurance of the reality of salvation in Christ, of the reality of *your* salvation in Christ, means that you want to please God. It's all the more reason to walk with Him in obedience and love.

3. A Denial of Apostasy, vv. 17-18

Assurance is also not a negation or denial of apostasy. Who made God angry? Who did not enter His rest? The ones who came out of Egypt. Again, they had the beginnings of salvation. They were led by Moses, God's man, God's mediator. And yet they did not enter His rest.

4. A Denial of God's Wrath, v. 17

Assurance also gives you no reason or right to deny God's wrath against sin. He was angry, and that for a long time.

God hates sin. And if you give yourself to sin, God reacts against that very negatively. Assurance does not mean that you are OK no matter what you do. Israel had a real salvation when they walked out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. But they forfeited it when they refused to enter the promised land.

God's wrath is real and it is fierce.

5. A License to Disobey, v. 18

God swore to the disobedient that they would not enter His rest. Those who will not do what Christ says do not enter Heaven.

6. A Denial of Faith's Necessity, v. 19

Finally, in the last analysis, it was not disobedience so much as lack of faith that doomed the wilderness generation. They could not enter the rest because they did not believe it was worth entering. They rejected the opportunity because they let the ten faithless spies terrify them with accounts of the Anakim. If you fear Anakim or other mythical monsters more than you believe God, look out. You will not flourish. Israel did not trust.

Do you? Assurance is a function of faith and obedience. The salvation Jesus offers is real enough, all right. But whether you feel assurance depends on whether you trust and obey Him. Do so, and I'll see you in Heaven. Amen.