

Assurance of Salvation

When we use the word "salvation" we are referring to being delivered (i.e. rescued, saved) from the judgment of God (hell). If we don't believe that we are sinful or that we will be judged by God, there isn't any need to seek salvation for there is nothing to be saved from.

The Bible says that we are saved "by grace through faith" (Eph. 2:8-9; II Tim. 1:9).

Salvation "by grace" means that salvation is undeserved and unmerited. In other words, we are not saved because we did something that won God's favor or gained His approval. We are not saved by being born into a Christian family (i.e. because our parents are Christians), attending church, or because someone else desires that we become Christians (Jn. 1:12-13). Neither can we earn our way to heaven by doing good things (Titus 3:5-7) or by simply refraining from evil. Salvation is a gift that originates from God.

Salvation "through faith" means that though salvation is free (Ro. 6:23) it must be individually and personally appropriated. To offer a gift is one thing, to receive it is another. The gift of salvation is received when we personally put our faith in (believe in, trust in, have confidence in) the person and work of Christ (Jn. 1:12; 3:16; Ro. 10:8-11; I Cor. 15:1-4; Heb. 11:6). This means that we must have an understanding of who Jesus is and what He has done before we can really believe in Him.

The problem of assurance: I don't feel saved.

There are many reasons why people doubt their salvation: (1) we might not "feel" saved, (2) we might question our commitment to Christ, (3) we might wonder if we believed enough or believed the right things, (4) we be under spiritual attack, (5) we might be living in sin, (6) or we might have doubts because we really aren't saved.

When people question their salvation I have found that the help offered to them is often oversimplified and misguided. Generally Christians focus solely on the person's past profession of faith, assume that they are saved if they say "I have accepted Christ," and then quote verses that give

assurance (such as Jn. 10:28-29; II Tim. 2:13; I Jn. 5:11-13). However, the real issue is not what God has promised believers, but the genuineness of the person's profession. We tend to forget that unbelievers do make false or half-hearted professions of faith and can be deceived into thinking that they are saved. We could actually be performing a disservice if we convince someone that they are saved when in reality they aren't. What could be worse than thinking that I am guaranteed heaven only to find myself cast into hell at death?

Some believe that faith is an issue of the heart which is only visible to God. But the Bible says that there are ways to examine the heart. In fact, Paul exhorts us in II Corinthians 13:5: "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-- unless indeed you fail the test?" Peter says, "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you . . ." (II Pet. 1:10)

But what are we to be looking for? What are the tests of true faith?

The tests of genuine faith: How can I tell if I am really saved?

1. Doctrine

"Faith in Christ" is not enough if the Christ in whom we put our faith in is not the Jesus of the Bible (II Cor. 11:3-4). When the Bible says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. . ." (Acts 16:31) it's speaking of Jesus as He is revealed in scripture. To believe in anything less is to deny Him.

Jesus said, "Whoever denies Me before men I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven (Matt. 10:33). John said, "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also" (I Jn. 2:23).

One cannot be saved if they deny the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to

the Father but through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him" (Jn. 14:6-7).

Thus proper belief in the person and work of Christ becomes a test of true faith.

2. Good Works

Though salvation cannot be achieved by doing good works, true faith produces good works. That is, no good work can earn salvation, but good works result from genuine salvation. Titus 2:14 says that Christ ". . . gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." According to this verse the purpose of Jesus' death was twofold; both to redeem us and to purify us for good works. If we claim that good works are not an evidence of true faith we must also conclude that Christ's death was ineffective.

Ephesians 2:10 says we were ". . . created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." Again, if God created us in Christ for good works, but it is possible for good works to be non-existent in the believer's life, then God's creative work would have to be considered a failure.

James asks, ". . . if someone says he has faith but he has no works can that faith save him?" (Ja. 2:14) His answer comes three verses later when he concludes that faith that does not produce good works cannot save him because it is not genuine; ". . . faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (Ja. 2:17 and 2:26). Faith can be seen through good works (Ja. 2:18). Jesus said, "by their fruits you will know them" (Matt. 7:20, also see Matt. 12:35; 15:18-20; Tit 1:16).

Since good works are produced by the grace of God working in our lives (II Cor. 9:8), the lack of good works calls into question the reality of our salvation.

3. Obedience

The apostle John says in I John 2:3-6; "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." Jesus said that evidence of our love for Him is found in whether we obey Him or not (Jn. 14:15, 21). To those who do not obey He says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (Matt. 7:21-23). Notice that according to Jesus salvation is not just professing Him as Lord, but includes a real change of life that does God's will and does not practice lawlessness.

One cannot be assured that they know God and love Christ if they are not obedient. Anyone can claim to know God, but John says if we are disobedient we are liars. Some people who believe they are saved will be shocked to hear Jesus say, "I never knew you."

4. Love

In I John 3:10 and 15 a fourth test of faith is given; "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother." "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."

John clearly says that if you hate your brother you do not have eternal life. Lack of love is evidence of lack of faith.

5. Perseverance

Perseverance, or continuing in the faith, is a fifth sign of true faith. God promises that He will bring our salvation to completion (Eph. 4:30; Ro. 8:29-30). Continuing in the faith is another manifestation of the grace of God working in our lives. Mark 13:13 says, "he who endures to the end will be saved," not because salvation is a reward of endurance, but endurance is a hallmark of the saved (Heb. 3:14). On the other hand, departure from the faith is evidence that someone is not really saved to begin with (I Jn. 2:19).

All too often when we are worried about someone we love who turns from Christ, we remind ourselves of their original profession of faith as a means of assuring ourselves of the reality of their salvation. It's true that they may really be saved and come back in the end, but how much better it would be to pray that they repent and turn to God rather than to assume that their faith is genuine.

Denial of the faith demonstrates that our professed faith is not genuine.

6. The witness of the Spirit

Romans 8:16 says, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." The Holy Spirit produces the assurance in our own hearts that we are children of God, that we love Him and that He loves us.

Although the Holy Spirit confirms our salvation to each of us differently, His testimony in our hearts is real. Whether He gives us peace or assurance that God's promises are true, He is the One who assures us that our salvation is real.

When we recognize our utter sinfulness and how even our best deeds are tainted, we turn to the cross and cling to the promises that God who saved us will never desert or forsake us (Heb. 13:5) and that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from *all* sin (I Jn. 1:7). The assurance that God will keep His promises is a testimony of the Spirit's work within us.

Applying the Tests of Faith to Ourselves

Genuine assurance comes from seeing the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, not from clinging to the memory of a prayer of salvation prayed in the past. When we question our salvation the above tests should be applied.

1. Do I see fruit in my life? (Ask others who know you well) Do I look like a Christian?

2. Do I desire to obey Christ? Do I see areas of my life that have been conformed to His will? Do I confess and repent of my sins when I become aware of them? (Of course, Christians still sin. They disobey. They fail. But an unrepentant, habitual pattern of sin should always be a cause of concern.)

3. Do I believe what the Bible teaches about Christ and in His work on the cross? Do I believe that Jesus died for my sins?

4. Am I continuing on in the faith when I face difficulties?

5. Do I sense the comforting presence of the Spirit?

6. Do I recognize that I cannot save myself and that I must depend upon the salvation found in the cross? Have I gone to Him to find forgiveness of sins instead of trying to generate good works myself? Do I believe that His death is sufficient to cover every sin I could ever commit?

Applying the Tests of Faith to Others

When we try to help others have assurance of their salvation we need to ask the same questions we ask ourselves of them. If their doubts seem unfounded and you know the person well, perhaps you can show them in tangible ways how you can see God working in their lives. However, if the person is living in an unrepentant pattern of sin, shows little or no interest in spiritual things, denies Christ, or in any other way fails the tests, the reality of their faith should be called into question. Assuring people that they are

saved when they are not is a grave disservice to them. Their doubt could be a result of God leading them to genuine faith.

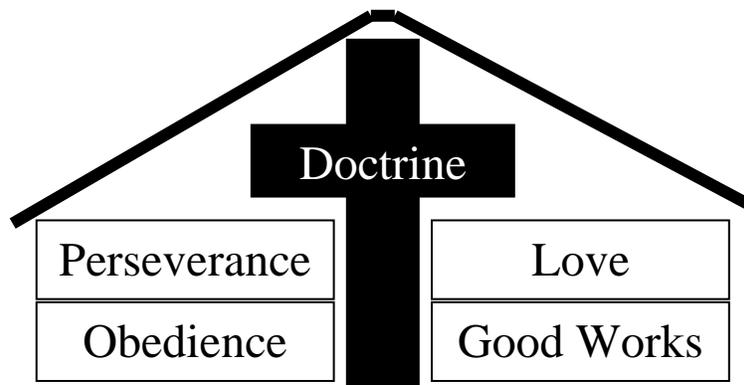
Conclusion:

The Bible does not evaluate salvation based on a profession of faith alone. In fact, it warns us against doing just that. Paul didn't hesitate to challenge the genuineness of someone's faith or refer to a professing believer living in sin as a "so-called brother" (I Cor. 5:11). God expects us to do the same (I Cor. 5:11-13; II Thess. 3:6).

God never intended for us to think that it really doesn't matter what we think or do as Christians. Assurance comes as we begin to realize that the Spirit of God is changing our heart, thinking, and action. If we do not feel that we pass the above tests we (1) may not be saved, (2) may feel convicted and repent (a sign of a saved individual), (3) may have unrealistic expectations of how much growth we think that we should have in our lives, or (4) may be under spiritual attack. However, once we realize that our faith is genuine we can be assured that our salvation is secure for God promises that all who believe in Christ are saved (Jn. 10:28-29; II Tim. 2:13; I Jn. 5:11-13).

Our Christian life can be likened to a building made of many blocks. When all the blocks are in place no one doubts that it is a building. In the same way, the more we display the qualities of faith the more obvious the reality of our salvation becomes, and the greater assurance we will have. As the evidence dwindles so does our assurance. Of course, it's possible that a true believer may not demonstrate faith do to rebellion, but anyone truly concerned about their salvation should be zealous to pass the test.

THE EXPRESSION OF BIBLICAL FAITH



True faith has its foundation in the person and work of Christ. This faith expresses itself by generating love, demonstrating perseverance, creating obedience, and producing good works. These expressions in turn make faith "tangible," giving us assurance of its reality.

Applying the Tests of Faith to those who have passed away: How can I be assured that someone is saved when they die?

Our assurance of someone else's salvation will be stronger or weaker depending on the amount of observable Christian character in that person's life when they were alive. But when assurance is lacking remember:

1. We can entrust the individual into God's care. God is all wise, merciful, and loving. Cling to what you know about God.

2. We need to remember that because salvation is by grace through faith it is possible for anyone to believe in Christ at any time, even at the moment of death. The thief who died on the cross next to Jesus had no time to demonstrate a change of character. Nor did he know all that there was to know about Christ. But he realized that he needed Christ. He believed that Jesus was sufficient to bring him into the kingdom. As a result he went with Christ to paradise (Lk. 23:39-43). The same could be true of anyone. We never know what takes place in someone's heart and mind as they approach death. I am sure that we will see many people in heaven who we never expected to be there.

3. We must be careful not to distort the Word of *God* and dishonor *God* for the sake of our own comfort. When someone we love dies we want them to be in heaven. But instead of saying things like, "Well *God* is love and we know that many roads lead to heaven," or, "She was a good woman, I think *God* will let her in," assure yourself in what is true about *God*. If we trust in *God* He will extend the comfort that we need.

4. In some cases sickness or death itself could be evidence of the person's salvation for *God* uses both as a means of chastening the believer who is not living in a worthy manner (I Cor. 11:29-34).

5. The tests of faith are a tool to evaluate our lives and the lives of others who claim to know *Christ*. They help us from being self-deceived or deceived by others. They motivate us to holy living and give us assurance. But our ability to apply the tests is limited. Only *God* can put all the pieces together perfectly. He alone makes the final call.