

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Assurance

“These things I have written 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

Introduction

“Am I truly saved?” The question is one of the most important that a believer can ever ask, and how he answers reveals more about his understanding of the gospel than his responses to many other salvation-related issues.

The Roman Catholic Church has certainly recognized the significance of the issue. Its denial of the possibility of assurance has been a key characteristic of its teaching, and this is vividly illustrated in its answer to the 16th-century Reformation. In response to the Reformers’ rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith alone (and with it, the doctrine of the assurance of salvation), the RCC gathered its theological experts at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) to formulate a response. At its conclusion, the RCC not only pronounced formal damnation on anyone who affirmed justification by faith alone, but on anyone who asserted that assurance in salvation is possible:

No one can know with a certainty of faith . . . that he has obtained the grace of God. . . . If anyone saith, that a man, who is born again is justified, is bound of faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate: let him be anathema. (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Canon 15, “On Justification”)

The RCC believed that any teaching that gave people confidence in their salvation would inevitably foster spiritual laxity and licentious living. Worse, the RCC knew that it needed to withhold any sense of spiritual security from the people in order to maintain its absolute control over them. By keeping assurance from the people, it would keep the people dependent upon the Church as their only hope and refuge. Moreover, keeping people in suspense certainly worked well for the selling of indulgences.

The doctrine of assurance continues to be opposed by people today, even outside the RCC. Some also fear that assurance leads believers to lax and licentious living. Consequently, nothing works better to keep believers living virtuous lives than the teaching that they cannot know if they are truly saved until death. Others are aware of vast numbers of “pretenders” in the church, and fear that preaching the assurance of faith will make them complicit in the deception of these imposters. Still others deny the doctrine of assurance as a result of their woeful ignorance of God’s Word. Unfamiliar with biblical teaching on doctrines like justification, adoption, sealing, and union with Christ, they teach a view of Christian living more in tune with human logic than divine revelation. There are also those who—like the leaders of the RCC—recognize the tremendous power that comes in withholding assurance. It creates deep dependency and lines leaders’ pockets with money as people attempt to buy their way into heaven. But there is an even more basic reason for the rejection of the doctrine of assurance. As Sinclair Ferguson explains, the denial of assurance is “the natural bent of fallen men and women who are at heart legalists and who therefore see the way to salvation in terms of their efforts to fulfill the demands of the law” (“Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine?” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 625).

Indeed, the issue of assurance is a hallmark issue. It has profound theological, pastoral, and personal implications, for it relates not only to the doctrine of salvation as a whole, or to the ministry of the church, but also directly to the believer’s every-day well-being.

A. Key Terms and Definitions

Four terms or concepts are pertinent to a discussion about the doctrine of assurance.

1. **“Assurance.”** MacArthur and Mayhue provide a good, simple definition: assurance is **“the divinely given confidence of the believer that he or she is truly saved”** (*Biblical Doctrine*, 924). Joel Beeke provides a similar explanation: assurance is “the conviction that one has been redeemed by Christ and will enjoy everlasting salvation” (“The Fullness of Grace,” 107).

Key idea:
A God-given confidence that a person has been saved and possessed eternal life.

It is important to note that assurance is implicit in the very definition of faith itself. As Hebrews 11:1 states, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Saving faith is not wishful thinking but *justified belief*—*belief* in the promises of the gospel that is *justified* by the authority, veracity, and reliability of the One who made those promises. These promises (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; Acts 16:31; Rom 10:9, 13; 1 John 2:25) are to be received not as mere possibilities, but as guarantees to those who receive them. “The promises of God are,” as Thomas Brooks stated, “a Christian’s *magna carta*, his chiefest evidences of heaven.” The authority of these promises led the Apostle Paul to state, “For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day” (2 Tim 1:12; cf. 4:12; Phil 1:6).

The possibility—even necessity—of assurance is communicated directly by the Apostle John in 1 John. To encourage believers who were experiencing the growing influence of false teaching, false professions, and apostasy from their midst, John provides a series of key doctrinal, moral, and social tests that would help them distinguish true faith from false faith. He then concludes, “These things I have written 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). John’s words provide an important qualification: the basis for assurance is not to be sought in vague and fluctuating impressions, but in the unchanging, clear knowledge of God’s Word.

“It is the word of God alone which can first and effectually cheer the heart of the sinner. . . . There is no sure or solid peace to be enjoyed in the world except in the way of reposing upon the promises of God.” —Calvin

2. **“Internal Testimony of the Spirit.”** The objective knowledge of Scripture is not the only means by which assurance of salvation is experienced. The Apostle Paul also points to another means—the ministry of the Holy Spirit from within the believer:

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*. (Rom 8:15-17)

What is this ministry of the Holy Spirit, and *how* does operate? The internal testimony of the Spirit can be described as **the subjective persuasion of the Spirit as He provides comfort and peace to the soul of the true believer in response to the salvation promises of God’s Word.** In other words, the assurance of salvation is received from two sources: the primary source is the objective knowledge provided by God’s Words—all the

THE TWO-FOLD BASIS FOR ASSURANCE	
The Testimony of Scripture	The Testimony of the Spirit
Objective Proof	Subjective Persuasion
Reveals Truth	Affirms Truth
From Without	From Within
Primary in Nature	Secondary in Nature

promises of salvation and all the descriptions God gives of the nature of saving faith. But it comes also from the Holy Spirit who “testifies with” (συνμαρτυρέω, *summartureō*; Rom 8:16) the believer’s spirit that he is an adopted child of God. The Spirit provides this testimony through the persuasion He brings to the believer’s soul. As the believer contemplates God’s promises, he is comforted that these promises are true, that they

come from a God who cannot lie, and that they are glorious. As Sproul describes,

The Scripture declares that the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. This inner testimony of the Holy Spirit is as vital as it is complex. It can be subjected to severe distortions, being confused with subjectivism and self-delusion. The Spirit gives His testimony with the Word and through the Word, never against the Word or without the Word. (R. C. Sproul, *In the Presence of God*, 51-52)

3. **“Spurious Faith.”** Any discussion of assurance must also take into consideration the reality of *spurious* or false *faith*. This kind of faith is a belief that is not salvific in nature. It does acknowledge a degree of truthfulness in the gospel, and may even devote a degree of loyalty to its message. But it is a humanly-manufactured faith—not the kind given as a gracious gift of God (Eph 2:8-9). It is often temporary in nature, although sometimes it continues through the duration of a person’s life, and is even accompanied by false assurance.

This kind of faith is best pictured in Jesus' parable of the four soils (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23). While the first soil represents direct rejection of the gospel (13:4, 19), and the fourth soil represents saving faith (13:8, 23), the two middle soils—the soil of rocky places and the soil infested by weeds—represent various kinds of spurious faith (13:5-7; 20-23). In both cases, no fruit is produced. The soils are worthless. The reality of spurious faith reminds us of the importance of not confusing true assurance with the mere profession of assurance. See also Matt 7:21-23; 1 John 2:29; 2 John 9; etc.

4. **“Apostasy.”** MacArthur and Mayhue define apostasy as **“a ‘falling away,’ usually a deliberate and total abandonment of the faith previously held”** (*Biblical Doctrine*, 924). A more comprehensive definition is provided by D. A. Carson:

It is the decisive turning away from a religious position and stance once firmly held. It differs from ordinary unbelief in that it involves turning away from a position of belief; it differs from backsliding in that it is calculated, decisive, and irrevocable; it differs from merely changing one's mind over some relatively minor theological point in that it involves the rejection of an entire position and stance. (Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” 13)

As these definitions indicate, apostasy is not “backsliding” into a period of sin, nor is it equated with struggles with doubt or a lack of assurance. Apostasy is the deliberate and complete rejection of the promises of the gospel. What was once professed is now scorned (see the example of Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Tim 1:18-20). Perhaps the most vivid description is given in Hebrews 6:4-8. Similar to Jesus' parable, the writer notes that the lives of such apostates “yields thorns and thistles,” and “is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned” (Heb 6:8; cf. Matt 13:20-22). In other words, **such apostasy occurred because of the spurious nature of their faith.** They never truly possessed that which they professed, and with time the weeds of their lives choked out their temporary, self-manufactured religious conviction. In contrast to them, the writer of Hebrews had confidence in the authentic nature of his readers' faith: “But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way” (Heb 6:9).

B. Essential Characteristics

1. **Genuine assurance is founded upon divine testimony, not personal impressions.** As Proverbs 28:26a states, “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool.” Assurance cannot be based upon the ever-changing, ambiguous impressions that a believer may feel. Instead, the justification for assurance must arise from the *objective knowledge* of the Bible's teaching on salvation, and upon the *subjective persuasion* wrought by the Holy Spirit. To discern whether one's salvation is real, one must begin with the question, “Do I know and understand the gospel as presented in Scripture?” Then he must answer the question, “Am I personally drawn to the gospel and persuaded by its power, its necessity for my life, and its beauty?”
2. **Genuine assurance is a gracious gift to all believers, not a select few.** It is “the birthright and privilege of every true believer in Christ” (MacArthur, “Forward,” *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian*). Ferguson writes, “Assurance, then, is not reserved only reserved for Christians who have attained to the highest and holiness of conditions (‘saints’ in the Roman Catholic sense); it is for all of God's children (‘saints’ in the biblical sense) even—indeed, especially—at their weakest and neediest.” (“Assurance Justified,” *Assured by God*, 104).
3. **Genuine assurance is true faith's fruit, not its root.** It is wrong to equate faith with assurance, for to do so would be to conclude that any believer who doubted his faith was not saved, and any false teacher who claimed assurance was a child of God. True believers do struggle with assurance; saving faith and self-doubt can co-exist. But with the strengthening of the root (faith), the fruit (assurance) must inevitably come.
4. **Genuine assurance is granted for the believer's well-being, not his being.** While assurance does not necessarily mark all true believers, and while it may wax and wane throughout life depending on trials and disciplines, it must be recognized that assurance is God's gracious design for His children. He intends that assurance provide comfort, hope, and confidence in the Christian life. Romans 8:15-29.
5. **Genuine assurance is consistent with humility, not pride.** There is a popular perception, even among many theologians today, that persistent doubt and skepticism concerning the promises of salvation and one's place in them reflects profound humility. In reality, the exact opposite is true. As John Newton makes writes,

Unbelief often deceives us under the *guise of humility*, as though it would be *presumption*, in such sinners as we are, to believe the declarations of the God of truth. Many serious people, who are burdened with a sense of other sins, leave this radical evil, unbelief, out of their list of sin. They rather indulge it, and think they ought not to believe, until they can find a warrant from marks and evidences *within* themselves. But this is an affront to the wisdom and goodness of God.

6. **Genuine assurance is fostered by transformation, not mere profession.** Those of spurious faith frequently point to a past *profession* of faith—a raised hand at a crusade, walking the aisle in response to an altar call, or the repetition of “the sinner’s prayer”—as the basis of their assurance. In contrast, the Apostle John bases the assessment of one’s faith in a myriad of tests, centered on one’s *doctrinal convictions*, one’s *moral behaviors*, and one’s *horizontal relationships* (see 1 John). Ultimately, since the purpose of redemption is to conform every believer to the likeness of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29), the powerful proof for the authenticity of salvation will be found in the professor’s progress in transformation to that likeness.
7. **Genuine assurance is evidence in the pain of discipline, not just the joy of blessing.** The experience of sorrow over sin and the pain of God’s discipline for it often causes the believer to question the validity of his faith. But as Hebrews 12:7-11 states, that experience is actually evidence of a Father-son relationship. The basis for concern is rather to be found in the absence of sorrow over sin and its resulting discipline. Indeed, at times the believer may enter periods of life when the blessing of God may be obscured. But such times do not necessarily mean that salvation does not exist. The Father does this to the believer to: chastise him for specific sins, reveal to him hidden weakness, wean him off the world, cause him to long for heaven, and even prove that he does, in fact, love Christ (think of Peter’s restoration in John 21:15-19).
8. **Genuine assurance does not exclude the need for self-examination, but incorporates it.** See 1 Corinthians 11:28-29; 2 Corinthians 13:5; and 2 Peter 1:10-11.
9. **Genuine assurance is centered on Christ, not self.** Assurance can never be based on the believer’s merits. Rather, it must always be anchored in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It must always and only be Christ-centered. Consequently, believers must guard against excessive self-examination or introspection. Such excessive evaluation will undoubtedly turn up much which falls short of the standard of Jesus Christ. But for every look at self, there must be ten looks at Christ. He alone has merit. He alone is the anchor for our souls. And it is His desire that those who follow Him find rest for their weary souls in Him.

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: Romans 8:15-16

Recommended Reading:

- MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 649-653.
- John MacArthur, *Saved without a Doubt: Being Sure of Your Salvation*.
- Burk Parsons, ed., *Assured by God: Living in the Fullness of God’s Grace*.

Homework:

- In your own words, define the doctrine *assurance*, the *internal witness of the Spirit*, and *apostasy*.
- Over the next week, read through 1 John several times. As you do, note the criteria John gives for finding assurance in salvation. Attempt to list those criteria in the categories of *doctrinal convictions*, *moral behaviors*, and *horizontal relationships*.
- Use the criteria you discovered in 1 John to evaluate your own life. As you do, pray that God’s Spirit would provide personal persuasion if you are indeed a believer. If you do not have that assurance, make an appointment to talk with your group leader.
- Take time this week to sing through the hymns listed below. Use these hymns to assist you in worshipping God for the assurance He gives to His children.

Hymns: “Blessed Assurance” (*Hymns of Grace* #403); “My Faith Has Found a Resting Place” (#414); “Christ, the Sure and Steady Anchor” (#406); “It Is Well with My Soul” (#407)

This Week’s Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: May 13 – “Glorification”