

The Assurance of Salvation

By Dennis Cornish

In 2 Peter 1, the apostle admonishes us to make our call and election sure, for if we rightly act upon these things we will never stumble. Peter is concerned about our salvation and is teaching us in these passages to take steps to be certain of it. The assurance of salvation is not optional for Christians, it is a duty. It is something that we are to be established in from the very beginning, although it is also a state or condition of our being that we are to consistently monitor to guarantee we remain faithful to what God would have of us. It is not a thing to be held up and boasted about, but it is more like a tool that is used so that we can grow deeper in our faith and not be paralyzed in our fearful concern about our spiritual progress. If we know that we are reconciled to God and that our works don't earn our salvation, then we can have the peace and freedom to grow in our obedience to the Lord.

Peter says: *"for this reason, I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth"*. The people he was writing to know this truth, but it was vital that they be reminded of their need to be certain of their salvation. The reality of one's assurance wavers in the lives of most believers, and we are cautioned to be diligent to make our call and election sure. Peter indicates in this passage from his second letter that we can know the difference, and that we can examine ourselves alongside Christian standards and be able see for ourselves whether we are in the faith. If our faith is true, then we will bear fruit.

Peter writes, *"add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge."* We begin in faith, and from that faith blossoms the fruit of the Spirit and these are indicators that we are indeed in a state of grace. It is not in our works, or the fruit that it bears, that we base our assurance on, rather it is our unyielding faith in Jesus, His finished work, and the grace that He bestows upon us when we are clothed in His righteousness.

We stumble when we do not remember who we are, that we are children of God, loved by Him with an everlasting love, and protected by Him so that not one of His precious

ones will be snatched from His hand. Still assurance of our sonship is often difficult. How, then, do we keep the balance between false presumption of saving grace and the true assurance that we have been saved from God's wrath and sealed with the Holy Spirit? How do we have assurance of salvation so we can grow as believers and bear much fruit?

First let us consider how it is possible to have false assurance. Basically, there are two ways, one is to have a false view of the essential requirements of salvation, and the second is to have a false view of one's own self. In order to have true assurance of our salvation, we must avoid the first error, it is imperative that we have a right view of salvation. This means that we must understand the Gospel. All are sinners and are under God's condemnation, aside from the saving work of Jesus on the cross. It is only by God's sovereign grace that He enables some people to have faith in Jesus Christ. This faith involves resting on Christ's righteousness alone for our salvation. Because our salvation is determined by the merit of Christ, we cannot fall from the state of grace. Those who have faith in Christ have been sealed with the Holy Spirit. They will be kept until the day when they come into the presence of God in heaven and are seated at the feet of Jesus.

Some people believe that everyone is saved, but such an unbiblical view only leads to false assurance because it is a fatal error. Only those who have faith in Jesus Christ, and who trust in His righteousness alone, are truly saved.

The church enjoys the benefits of salvation because God, out of His infinite goodness, graciously condescends to receive into favor those who were once His enemies. David says in his Psalms that he can enter the assembly of God's people only by the multitude of His great mercy. We have nothing to bring to the Lord that deserves His favor, and our salvation is not dependent upon anything we do or say. It is by God's grace and is secured by His forbearance. Once we understand this truth, we can understand the certainty of salvation. Those who continue to struggle to believe in the assurance of the doctrine of salvation ultimately are struggling with coming to terms with grace. If they

understood that salvation is by grace alone, they also would understand that just as we can do nothing to obtain it, we can do nothing as His children to lose it. Those who are God's elect can rest assured that nothing will separate them from the love of Christ. They can be certain that God has set a watchman upon the walls of their hearts, and that He will not rest until their salvation is complete. Those who are truly His can rejoice in the certainty that they never will be forsaken and that the Lord will rejoice over them.

The first epistle of John, which deals with the question of discerning one's own salvation, says: "*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 5:13).*" John's message here signifies two things: first, that you can indeed be saved and yet be uncertain about your salvation, and second, that you can be certain of your salvation in this life and have confidence in the fact that it is God's desire that you have assurance of your salvation.

Having confidence in your salvation can be a tricky consideration. Just because you have confidence, doesn't mean that you are actually saved. An example would be the Pharisees who thought they were saved. The problem with them is that they relied on their good works as the evidence, and actually deemed them as the very foundation of their salvation. Their assurance was a false assurance for that very reason. The problem was that they didn't rest on the grace and mercy of God. They couldn't see the inadequacy of their own efforts and the uncertainty of their legalistic commitments to tradition. Like many of us, they failed to understand that if their salvation was dependent upon themselves, they could never be certain of it because human beings are fallible and always changing. Scripture is clear about what Jesus said, that many will come to Him saying Lord, Lord, didn't we do this or that in your name, but that alone won't be enough. As such, people will continue to have a false assurance of salvation when they remain futilely dependent on their own ineffective works to earn a place in heaven. When they stand before Christ on judgement day, He will tell them to depart from Him and that He never knew them. This should not be a discouragement to us. Just because there are a multitude of misconceived views on salvation does not mean

that there is no way we can have an assurance of our salvation, as long as we base that assurance on the finished work of Christ alone.

If we want to have assurance of our salvation, we need to look for it in the right place. Not to be unnecessarily repetitious, but assurance is not based upon our works, but upon God's character, on the work of Jesus, and on the sure promises of God. We can be certain of our salvation because God is perfect and good. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:12 of the assurance he had because of the character of God: *"...for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day."* Paul had no doubt that God would preserve him because he understood the character of God. God loves His people perfectly, and He shows perfect mercy to those who have repented of their sins. Jesus told us that: *"The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out (John 6:37)"*. When Satan creeps into our minds under the guise of doubt we must remember that Jesus has begun a good work in us, and He will bring it to completion, and of this we can be sure. When Jesus left His disciples He told them that He would send another helper, the Holy Spirit. At times of our doubts or in our questioning, we need to pray and rely upon the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit and it will be helpful to reread Romans 8 where Paul writes; *"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,' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."* The Spirit stirs our consciences so that we have an inner sense of assurance, and inner comfort that God is our Father. The Spirit does this so that we can have an inner joy in the comfort of our salvation, and so we don't fall prey to the enemy who bombards us with doubt and despair.

We know that our God is faithful and all of His promises will be kept. This is true of the promise He made in John 3:16, that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have everlasting life. And again, in John 5:24, He promised that whoever believed in Him would not be condemned, *"but has passed from death into life."* And in Acts 2:21 he declares that *"whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."* God is immutable and these are His everlasting promises to those who have truly put their faith

in Jesus. This saving faith is not ours by just knowing about Jesus, or a mere affirmation that the Bible is true, but it is nothing less than repentance of our sin and our complete reliance upon Jesus alone for salvation. It is in our striving for perfection as we work through our salvation alongside the Holy Spirit while at the same time putting on the cloak of perfection that is already ours when we abide in Christ alone.

Another example of the assurance that we can have is in the desire to be in fellowship with other Christians. The person who hates to be around believers, who doesn't want to pray or have fellowship with the body of Christ, cannot have assurance of his salvation. John says that if we walk in the light as Christ is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another. One evidence is that we have a renewed mind and our wills have been transformed by His grace in that we now want to obey God's commandments, even if we do so imperfectly, and another is that we have a hatred for sin and no longer desire to follow after the world and its trappings.

God works in and through His Word to keep us in faith, encouraging us to persevere and warning us lest we fall away. These encouragements and warnings are God's means of keeping us in His grace, for the Spirit always works in the hearts of the elect to make them heed these encouragements and warnings so that they never fall away fully and finally from Christ (Isa. 55:10–11; Mark 4:1–20; John 16:13; Heb. 6:9–12; 12:1–2; James 5:19–20; 1 John 2:19).

We need to search our hearts to see whether we are harboring sin and the associated guilt of that sin, and if we are, we must repent and cling to Christ even tighter and thereby to persevere in our faith. One encouraging way to look at saving grace is that all who have been saved will persevere in faith and repentance until the end of their lives, and only those who persevere in faith and repentance until the end of their lives have been saved (Matt. 10:22b; Rom. 8:38–39).

God's sovereignty in our salvation is one of the most comforting truths revealed to us in Scripture. If our justification is due to the Lord alone, then we need not fear that those

of us He has accounted as righteous in Christ will ever be accounted unrighteous and be cut off from the hope of glory. In Zephaniah 3 we read: *"The Lord has taken away the judgments against you."* These judgments are the inescapable condemnation that we incur when we sin against God's holiness. In and of ourselves these condemnations are justifiably ours to receive; we can do nothing to deny this fact. It is only God who can forgive us our sin and tell us that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. Isaiah 53 tells us that His Son, the Suffering Servant, makes *"many that will be accounted righteous..."* because *"...He bears their inequities"*.

In obedience we fulfill the law of God through our love of Him and our neighbor (Rom. 13:8–10), but Paul is clear that our futile attempts to fulfill the law is not what grants us salvation. Our fulfillment of the law remains imperfect in this life, for we continue to struggle against sin (1 John 1:8–9). The only reason why we can even begin to fulfill the law lies in the fact that Christ was born under the law and fulfilled it for us, succeeding where both Adam and Israel failed (Rom. 5:12–21; Gal. 4:4–5). Through faith alone His obedience is imputed to us, and we are justified, or declared righteous in the sight of God (Rom. 3:21–26).

Paul speaks elsewhere of salvation as a past event, using the word salvation as a synonym for justification (Ephesians 2:8–9). However, the apostle does not use the term salvation only for the past event of our once-for-all justification. Just consider when Paul says our *"salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed"* (Rom. 13:11). Paul's varied usage of the term salvation reflects the Bible's insistence that redemption is a past, present, and a future reality. We were saved; we are being saved; and we will be saved. If we look at salvation as an overarching concept that encompasses past, present, and future, it becomes clear that Scripture views salvation as a work that begins with regeneration and justification, continues on in our sanctification, and then is finally brought to completion in our glorification, the point at which all remnants of sin are purged from us entirely (Rom. 5:1; 1 Cor. 1:18; Phil. 2:12–13; Titus 3:5). Without a doubt the Lord guarantees the present and future aspects of salvation by what He has

done in the past. However, the future aspect of our salvation that we will enjoy in our glorification is nearer now than when we first believed (13:11).

If we are in Christ now, if we have been redeemed through the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, we are in Him forever.

In Romans 8:30 we find what has been deemed, "the golden chain" and we are given the order of redemption: first God predestines them, which means that He has chosen someone for salvation in eternity past; then He effectually calls them by regenerating an elect person by the His Spirit; next He justifies them by imputing to them the righteousness of Christ; and finally, He glorifies them by conferring a resurrected body upon those He has justified.

It is important to note that, when God does any one of the things mentioned above, He does them all. In other words, no one who is predestined will fail to be justified, and the Lord will certainly glorify everyone who is justified. God never starts the work of salvation without finishing it (Phil. 2:6). The predestined person is always called, justified, and glorified. This defines what is meant by the term "God's Effectual Calling."

I wrote this after a somewhat lengthy discussion around this topic that was had during a weekly small group meeting of fellow believers. It is not an exhaustive treatment of what can be a complex topic, but I have given a sufficient number of Scriptural references for someone to be a good Berean and check out for themselves that what I have written is based upon God's Word. These issues have been debated for centuries and will continue to be debated, but this is what I believe is God's word for us, and I more than welcome any Biblical references that would correct me if I have erred.

In conclusion, God, in His infinite love for us, has provided a perfect means for our eternal salvation, *"...that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."*