

Studies on Saving Faith

Part 4 – ASSURANCE

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CHAPTER 11

INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction and in order to acquaint the reader with the particular angle of viewpoint from which we now approach our present theme, let it be pointed out that changing conditions in Christendom call for an ever-varying emphasis on different aspects of Divine Truth. At different periods the true servants of God have had to face widely different situations, and meet errors of varied character. This has called for a campaign of offense and defense adapted to the exigencies of many situations. The weapons suited to one conflict were quite useless for another; fresh ones needing to be constantly drawn from the armory of Scripture.

At the close of that lengthy period known as the "dark ages"(though throughout it God never left Himself without a clear witness), when the Lord caused a flood of light to break forth upon Christendom, the Reformers were faced by the hoary errors of Romanism, among which was her insistence that none could be positively assured of his salvation till the hour of death was reached. This caused Luther and his contemporaries to deliver a positive message, seeking to stimulate confidence toward God and the laying hold of His sure promises. Yet it has to be acknowledged there were times when their zeal carried them too far, leading to a position which could not be successfully defended from the Scriptures. Many of the Reformers insisted that assurance was an essential element in saving faith itself, and that unless a person knew he was "accepted in the Beloved" he was yet in his sins. Thus, in the revolt from Romanism, the Protestant pendulum swung too far to the opposite side.

In the great mercy of God the balance of Truth was restored in the days of the Puritans. The principal doctrine which Luther and his fellows had emphasized so forcibly was justification by faith alone, but at the close of the sixteenth century and in the early part of the seventeenth such men as Perkins, Gattaker, Rollock, etc., made prominent the collateral doctrine of sanctification by the Spirit. For the next fifty years the Church on earth was blest with many men "mighty in the Scriptures," deeply taught of God, enabled by Him to maintain a well-rounded ministry. Such men as Goodwin, Owen, Charnock, Flavel, Sibbs, etc., though living in troublous times and suffering fierce persecution, taught the Word more helpfully (in our judgment) and were more used of God than any since the days of the apostles to the present hour.

The ministry of the Puritans was an exceedingly searching one. While magnifying the free grace of God in no uncertain terms, while teaching plainly that the satisfaction of Christ alone gave title to Heaven, while emphatically repudiating all creature-merits, they nevertheless insisted that a supernatural and transforming work of the Spirit in the heart and life of the believer was indispensable to fit him for Heaven. Professors were rigidly tested, and the

results and fruits of faith were demanded before its presence was admitted. Self-examination was frequently insisted upon, and full details given as to how one might ascertain that he was a "new creature in Christ Jesus." Christians were constantly urged to "make their calling and election sure" by ascertaining that they had clear evidence of the same. While conditions were far from being perfect, yet there is good reason to conclude that more deluded souls were undeceived and more hypocrites exposed than at any other period since the first century A.D.

The eighteenth century witnessed a sad declension and departure from the faith. Worldly prosperity brought in spiritual deterioration. As the Puritan leaders died off, none were raised up to fill their places. Arminianism spread rapidly, followed by Deism (Unitarianism) and other fatal errors. Worldliness engulfed the churches, and lawlessness and wickedness were rampant without. The Gospel-trumpet was almost silent, and the remnant of God's people dwindled down to an insignificant and helpless handful. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. Again the light of God shone forth powerfully in the darkness: Whitefield, Romaine, Gill, Hervey, and others being raised up by God to revive His saints and convert many sinners to Christ. The main emphasis of their preaching and teaching was upon the sovereign grace of God as exhibited in the everlasting covenant, the certain efficacy of Christ's atonement unto all for whom it was made, and the work of the Spirit in regeneration.

Under the God-given revivals of the latter part of the eighteenth century the great doctrines of the Christian faith occupied the most prominent place. In order that the balance of truth might be preserved during the next two or three generations it became necessary for the servants of God to emphasize the experimental side of things. Intellectual orthodoxy qualifies none for Heaven: there must be a moral and spiritual transformation, a miracle of grace wrought within the soul, which begins at regeneration and is carried on by sanctification. During that period doctrinal exposition receded more and more into the background, and the practical application of the Word to the heart and life was the characteristic feature in orthodox circles. This called for serious self-examination, and that, in many cases, resulted in doubtings and despondency. Where a due balance is not preserved by preachers and teachers between the objective and subjective sides of the truth, where the latter preponderates, either a species of mysticism or a lack of assurance ensues.

The second half of last century found many circles of professing Christians on the borders of the Slough of Despond. In many companies the full assurance of salvation was looked upon as a species of fanaticism or as carnal presumption. Unduly occupied with themselves, ill-instructed upon the "two natures" in the Christian, thousands of poor souls regarded doubts and fears, sighs and groans, as the highest evidence of a regenerate state; but those being mixed with worldly and fleshly lustings, the subjects were afraid to affirm they were children of God. To meet this situation many ill-trained evangelists and teachers sought to direct

attention to Christ and His "finished work," and to get their hearers' confidence placed upon the bare Word of God. While one evil was corrected another was committed: while the letter of Scripture was honored, the work of the Spirit was (unwittingly) dishonored. Supposing they had a remedy which was sure to work in all cases alike, a superficial work resulted, the aftermath of which we are now reaping. Thousands of souls who give no evidence of being born again are quite confident that Christ has saved them.

From the brief outline presented above, it will be seen that the pendulum has swung from one side to the other. Man is a creature of extremes, and nought but the grace of God can enable any of us to steer a middle path. A careful study of the course of religious history also reveals the fact that the servants of God have been obliged, from time to time, to vary their note of emphasis. This is one meaning of that expression, "and be established in the present truth" (2 Peter 1:12), namely that particular aspect or line of truth which is most needful at any given time. Instead of gaining ground, the Puritans had lost it had they merely echoed what the Reformers had taught. It was not that Owen contradicted Luther, rather did he supplement him. Where particular stress has been laid on the counsels of sovereign grace and the imputed righteousness of Christ, this needs to be followed by attention being drawn to the work of the Spirit within the saints. In like manner, where much ministry has been given on the Christian's state, there is a need for a clear exposition of his standing before God.

It is truly deplorable that so few have recognized the need for applying the principle that has just been mentioned. So many, having a zeal which is not tempered by knowledge, suppose that because some honored servant of God in the past was granted much success through his dwelling so largely upon one particular line of truth, that they will have equal success provided they imitate him. But circumstances alter cases. The different states through which the professing Church passes, calls for different ministry. There is such a thing as "a word spoken in due season" (Proverbs 15:23): O that it may please God to open the eyes of many to see what is most "seasonable" for the degenerate times in which our lot is cast, and grant them spiritual discernment to recognize that even many portions of Divine truth may prove highly injurious to souls if given them out of season.

We recognize this fact easily enough in connection with material things, why are we so slow to do so when it concerns spiritual things? Meats and nuts are nutritious, but who would think of feeding an infant upon them? So too sickness of the body calls for a change of diet. The same is true of the soul. To make this clearer, let us select one or two extreme cases. The truth of eternal punishment should be faithfully preached by every servant of God, but would a broken-hearted woman who had just lost her husband or child, be a suitable audience? The glory and bliss of the heavenly state is a precious theme, but would it be fitting to present it unto a professing Christian who was intoxicated? The eternal

security of the saints is clearly revealed in Holy Writ, but does that justify me in pressing it on the attention of a backslidden child of God?

Our introduction has been a lengthy one, yet we deemed it necessary to pave the way for what follows. The servant of God is facing today a dreadfully serious and solemn situation. Much that is dearest of all to his heart he has largely to be silent upon. If he is to faithfully deal with souls, he must address himself to the condition they are in. Unless he is much upon his guard, unless he constantly seeks wisdom and guidance from above, he is likely to make bad matters worse. On every side are people full of assurance, certain that they are journeying to Heaven; yet their daily lives show plainly that they are deceived, and that their assurance is only a fleshly one. Thousands are, to use their own words, "resting on John 3:16," or 5:24, and have not the slightest doubt they will spend eternity with Christ. Nevertheless it is the bounden duty of every real servant of God to tell the great majority of them that they are woefully deluded by Satan. O that it may please God to give us the ear and serious attention of some of them.

Some time ago we read of an incident which, as nearly as we recall, was as follows. Nearly one hundred years since, conditions in England were similar to what they have recently been in this country. Banks were failing, and people were panic-stricken. One man who had lost confidence in the banks, drew out all his money in five-pound notes, and then got a friend to change them into gold. Conditions grew worse, other banks failed, and some of this man's friends told him they had lost their all. With much confidence he informed them that he had drawn out his money, had changed it into gold, and that this was secretly hidden where no one would find it; so that he was perfectly safe. A little later, when needing to buy some things, he went to his secret hoard and took out five golden sovereigns. He went from one shop to another, but none would accept them—they were bad ones. Thoroughly alarmed, he went to his hidden money, only to find that it was all counterfeit coin!

Now, dear reader, you too may be quite sure that your faith in Christ is true "gold," and yet, after all, be mistaken. The danger of this is not to be fancied, but real. The human heart is dreadfully deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9). God's Word plainly warns us that

"There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness" (Proverbs 30:12).

Do you ask (O that you may, in deep earnestness and sincerity) How can I be sure that my faith is a genuine and saving one? The answer is, Test it.

Make certain that it is the "faith of God's elect" (Titus 1:1). Ascertain whether or no your faith is accompanied with those fruits which are inseparable from a God-given and Spirit-wrought faith.

Probably many are ready to say, There is no need for me to be put to any such trouble; I know that my faith is a saving one, for I am resting on the finished work of Christ. But dear friend, it is foolish to talk like that. God Himself bids His people to make their "calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). Is that a needless exhortation? O pit not your vain confidence against Divine wisdom. It is Satan who is striving so hard to keep many from this very task, lest they discover that their house is built on the sand. There is hope for one who discovers his illusion, but there is none for those who go on believing the Devil's lie, and rest content with the very real but false peace which he gives to so many of his poor victims.

God Himself has supplied us with tests, and we are mad if we do not avail ourselves of them, and honestly measure ourselves by them.

"These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God: that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe (more intelligently) on the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13).

The Holy Spirit Himself moved one of His servants to write a whole Epistle to instruct us how we might know whether or not we have eternal life. Does that look as though the question may be determined and settled as easily as so many present-day preachers and writers represent it? If nothing more than a firm persuasion of the truth of John 3:16 or 5:24 be needed to assure me of my salvation, then why did God give a whole Epistle to instruct us on this subject?

Let the really concerned soul read slowly and thoughtfully through this first epistle of John, and let him duly observe that not once in its five chapters are we told "We know that we have passed from death unto life because we are resting on the finished work of Christ." The total absence of such a statement ought, surely, to convince us that something must be radically wrong with so much of the popular teaching of the day on this subject. But not only is there no such declaration made in this epistle, the very first passage which contains the familiar "we know" is quite the reverse of what is now being so widely advocated as the ground of Christian assurance.

"And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments" (1 John 2:3).

Is not that plain enough? A godly life is the first proof that I am a child of God.

But let us observe the solemn declaration that immediately follows.

"He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4).

Do these words anger you? We trust not: they are God's, not ours. Do you refuse to read any more of this article? That would be a bad sign: an honest heart does

not fear the light. A sincere soul is willing to be searched by the Truth. If you are unable to endure now the feeble probing of one of His servants, how will it fare in a soon-coming day when the Lord Himself shall search you through and through? O dear friend, give your poor soul a fair chance, be willing to ascertain whether your faith is real wheat, or only chaff. If it prove to be the latter, there is still time for you to humble yourself before God and cry unto Him to give you saving faith. But in that Day it will be too late!

"He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4).

How plain and pointed is this language! How awful its clear intimation! Do you not see, dear reader, this verse plainly implies that there are those who claim to know Christ, and yet are liars. The father of lies has deceived them, and he is doing everything in his power to keep them from being undeceived. That is why the unregenerate reader finds this article so unpalatable, and wishes to turn from it. O resist this inclination, we beseech you. God has given us this very verse by which we may measure ourselves, and discover whether or not our "assurance of salvation" will stand the test of His Holy Word. Then act not like the silly ostrich, which buries his head in the sand rather than face his danger.

Let us quote one more verse from this first "we know" passage in John's epistle:

"But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him" (1 John 2:5).

This stands in sharp contrast from the preceding verse. The apostle was here moved to set before us some clear scriptural evidences of spiritual faith and love, which constitute the vital difference between sheep and goats. In verse 4 it is the empty professor who says "I know Christ as my personal Savior." He has a theoretical, but not a vital knowledge of Him. He boasts that he is resting on Christ's finished work, and is confident that he is saved; but keeps not His commandments. He is still a self-pleaser. Like Solomon's sluggard, he is "wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can give a reason" (Proverbs 26:16).

He talks boldly, but walks carelessly.

In verse 5 it is the genuine Christian who is in view. He does not say "I know Him," instead he proves it. The apostle is not here presenting Christ as the immediate Object of faith, but is describing him who has savingly fled to the Lord for refuge, and this, by the effects produced. In him Christ's Word is everything: his food, his constant meditation, his chart. He "keeps" it, in memory, in heart, in action. Christ's "commandments" occupy his thoughts and prayers as much as do His promises. That Word working in him subdues his carnal desires, feeds his graces, and draws them into real exercise and act. That Word has such a place in his heart and mind that he cannot but give proof of the same in his talk and

walk. In this way the "love of God is perfected": the Family likeness is plainly stamped upon him; all can see to which "father" he belongs—contrast John 8:44.

"Whoso keepeth his word...hereby (in this way) know we that we are in Him." Keep His Word perfectly? No. But actually, characteristically, in deep desire and honest effort to do so. Yes. Regeneration is that miracle of Divine grace wrought in the soul which enlists the affections Godward, which brings the human will into subjection to the Divine, and which produces a real and radical change in the life. That change is from worldliness to godliness, from disobedience to obedience. At the new birth, the love of God is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit, and that love is manifested in a dominating longing and sincere purpose to please in all things the One who has plucked me as a brand from the burning. There is a greater difference between the genuine Christian and the deceived professing Christian than there is between a living man and a corpse. None need remain in doubt if they will honestly measure themselves by the Holy Word of God.

There is only space for us to consider one other scripture in this opening article, namely, the Parable of the Sower. Why did the Lord Jesus give us that parable? Why, but to stir me up to serious inquiry and diligent examination so as to discover which kind of a "hearer" I am. In that parable, Christ likened those who hear the Word unto various sorts of ground upon which the seed falls. He divided them into four different classes. Three out of the four brought no fruit to perfection. That is exceedingly solemn and searching. In one case, the Devil catches away the good seed out of the heart (Luke 8:12). In another case, they "for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:13). In another case, they are "choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life" (Luke 8:14). Are you, my reader, described in one of these? Do not ignore this question; we beg you: face it honestly, and make sure which of the various soils represents your heart.

But there are some "good ground" hearers. And how are they to be identified? What did the infallible Son of God say of them? How did He describe them? Did He say, "that on the good ground are they who rest on the Word of God, and doubt not His promises; are thoroughly persuaded they are saved, and yet go on living the same kind of life as previously"? No, He did not. Instead, He declared,

"But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15).

Ah, dear readers, the test is fruit: not knowledge, not boastings, not orthodoxy, not joy, but FRUIT; and such "fruit" as mere nature cannot produce. It is the fruit of the Vine, namely, likeness to Christ, being conformed to His image. May the Holy Spirit search each one of us.

Question: "Can true believers be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and that they shall persevere therein unto salvation?"

Answer: Such as truly believe in Christ, and endeavor to walk in all good conscience before Him (1 John 2:3), may, without extraordinary revelation, by faith grounded upon the truth of God's promises, and by the Spirit enabling them to discern in themselves those graces to which the promises of life are made (1 John 3:14, 18, 19, 21, 24; Hebrews 6:11-12, etc.), and bearing witness with their spirits that they are the children of God (Romans 8:16), be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace and shall persevere therein unto salvation (1 John 5:13; 2 Timothy 1:12)."

"Assurance is the believer's full conviction that, through the work of Christ alone, received by faith, he is in possession of a salvation in which he will be eternally kept. And this assurance rests only upon the Scripture promises to him who believes."

The careful reader will perceive a considerable difference of doctrine in the two quotations given above. The former is the product of the Puritans, the latter is a fair sample of what the boasted enlightenment of the twentieth century has brought forth. The one is extracted from the Westminster Confession of Faith (the doctrinal statement of the Presbyterians), the other is taken from the "Scofield Bible." In the one, the balance of Truth is helpfully preserved; in the second, the work and witness of the Holy Spirit is altogether ignored. This example is only one out of scores we could cite, which sadly illustrates how far we have gone backward. The answer given by the Puritans is calculated to lead to heart searchings; the definition (if such it may be called) of the popular dispensationalist is likely to bolster up the deluded. This brings us to consider, more definitely, the nature of assurance.

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