

Digging Deep: Exploring the Joy of Systematic Theology

Class 31: The Doctrine of Salvation, part 12

Assurance

"... this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

John 17. 3

I. Defining "Assurance"

A God-given confidence for every true believer in Christ of their present approval & future acceptance by their heavenly Father.

The greatest of all Protestant heresies is assurance.

Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621)

We should all be concerned about our assurance of salvation, because if we lack assurance we lack joy, and if we lack joy our life is of probably of poor quality.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Sons of God"

II. What do the Reformed Confessions say?

From the **Westminster Confession of Faith** ...

- I. Although hypocrites & other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes & carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, & estate of salvation, (Mic 3:11; Deu 29:19; Jhn 8:41); (which hope of theirs shall perish, Mat 7:22-23): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, & love Him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, (1Jo 2:3; 1Jo 3:14, 18-19, 21, 24; 1Jo 5:13); & may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed, (Rom 5:2, 5).
- II. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope, (Hbr 6:11, 19); but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, (Hbr 6:17-18); the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, (2Pe 1:4-5, 10-11; 1Jo 2:3; 1Jo 3:14; 2Co 1:12); the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, (Rom 8:15-16); which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption, (Eph 1:13-14; Eph 4:30; 2Co 1:21-22).
- III. This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it, (1Jo 5:13; Isa 1:10; Mar 9:24; Psa 88; Psa 77:1-12); yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto, (1Co 2:12; 1Jo 4:13; Hbr 6:11-12; Eph 3:17-19). And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, (2Pe 1:10); that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, (Rom 5:1-2, 5; Rom 14:17; Rom 15:13; Eph 1:3-4; Psa 4:6-7; Psa 119:32); the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness, (1Jo 2:1-2; Rom 6:1-2; Tts 2:11-12, 14; 2Co 7:1; Rom 8:1, 12; 1Jo 3:2-3; Psa 130:4; 1Jo 1:6-7).

- IV. True believers may have the assurance of their salvation in many ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of His countenance, and suffering even such as fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light, (Psa 51:8, 12, 14; Eph 4:30-31; Psa 77:1-10; Mat 26:69-72; Psa 31:22; Psa 88; Isa 1:10): yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived, (1Jo 3:9; Luk 22:32; Job 13:15; Psa 73:15; Psa 51:8, 12; Isa 1:10); and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair, (Mic 7:7-9; Jer 32:40; Isa 54:7-10; Psa 22:1; Psa 88).

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XVIII. *Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation*

From the **Canons of Dordt** ...

Article 10: The Ground of This Assurance

This assurance does not derive from some private revelation beyond or outside the Word, but from faith in the promises of God which are very plentifully revealed in the Word for our comfort, from the testimony of "the Holy Spirit testifying with our spirit that we are God's children and heirs" (Rom. 8:16-17), and finally from a serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works. If God's chosen ones in this world did not have this well-founded comfort that the victory will be theirs and this reliable guarantee of eternal glory, they would be of all people most miserable.

Article 11: Doubts Concerning This Assurance

Meanwhile, Scripture testifies that believers have to contend in this life with various doubts of the flesh, and that under severe temptation they do not always experience this full assurance of faith and certainty of perseverance. But God, the Father of all comfort, "does not let them be tempted beyond what they can bear, but with the temptation he also provides a way out" (1 Cor. 10:13), and by the Holy Spirit revives in them the assurance of their perseverance.

Article 12: This Assurance as an Incentive to Godliness

This assurance of perseverance, however, so far from making true believers proud and carnally self-assured, is rather the true root of humility, of childlike respect, of genuine godliness, of endurance in every conflict, of fervent prayers, of steadfastness in cross-bearing and in confessing the truth, and of well-founded joy in God. Reflecting on this benefit provides an incentive to a serious and continual practice of thanksgiving and good works, as is evident from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints.

III. What are the Grounds for Assurance?

1. Faith in the promises of God. There are 3 truths in particular that the Scriptures direct our attention to for our assurance:
 - a. Our adoption into God's family

Adopted children need assurance that they belong, a perfect parent will not withhold it.

J.I. Packer, **Knowing God**

b. Our union with Christ

c. The all-sufficient work of Christ at the Cross.

⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹ for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, ¹² which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.

2 Timothy 1. 8-12

- see also Romans 4. 21; Hebrews 6. 18; 11.1-2; Titus 1.2; Malachi 3.6

2. The testimony of the Holy Spirit testifying to our spirits that we are children of God.

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ...

Romans 8. 15-17

3. Evidences of conversion & a transformed life (“a serious & holy pursuit of a clear conscience & of good works”) (CoD 5.10).

... by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments ... We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

1 John 2.3; 3.14

IV. Assurance & Doubts

Assurance is not the domain of a select class of Christian who never question their faith nor doubt their salvation. The opposite to faith is not doubt but disbelief and there is a corner of doubt in every Christian. “I believe; help my unbelief” is to some extent the normal Christian life. Even John Calvin recognized that “we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt.” Hence, Jude 22 writes, “Be merciful to those who doubt...”

Doubts may arise for a wide range of reasons including; outright disobedience, secret sins, lack of knowledge in God’s promises, misunderstanding suffering (Heb. 12:7), lack of sleep, and mental health issues to name but a few. Diagnosing the correct reason(s) for doubt and lack of assurance is a pastorally critical matter.

Ray Galea, “Assurance”