

THE BLESSING OF ASSURANCE, PART 2

Romans 8:16-17 (NASB)

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12 September, 1999

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Among the greatest privileges of believers in Jesus Christ is the promise of assurance, or confidence, in our salvation. This is unique among world religions, every one of which is based upon a standard of religious performance. Assurance of God's favor is the normal daily reality of the genuine Christian, but the other religious programs of the world leave their followers in constant wondering: Will I achieve immortality, and if I do, will it be a favorable one?

It must be said that there is a religion which teaches absolute acceptance with God which takes the name Christianity, but which, as pointed out by J. Gresham Machen, is actually a different religion entirely. This religion uses the terms of Christianity and redefines them in such a way as to eliminate the need for its followers to admit sin and seek atonement through Christ. It proclaims, without any authority except the desire for such a religion, that everyone is automatically a child of God with an unassailable claim to bliss with God for eternity. This is not historic, orthodox, Biblical Christianity, which offers acceptance before God by grace through faith, on the ground of the blood of Christ shed to atone for our sins. As the Scripture says, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

Once forgiveness is received, then a precious daily reality begins to work within genuine believers to replace all the anxiety which came before: "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16). This is the mystical placing into our lives of a very practical experience of confidence before God. Fear of spiritual failure is driven out, endless efforts to please God in our own strength cease, and a blissful rest takes its place. Since this assurance is a work of God, not ourselves, it is the normal reality of every Christian.

If this peaceful assurance is our born-again birthright as believers, why are so many among us filled with anxieties of all sorts? Why do we hear bitter recriminations of human failures in this area or that? Why do we all find ourselves, at times, harassed by fear and doubt? These are vital and important questions which have solid Biblical answers. The continuation of Paul's explanation of assurance in Romans 8:16 (see above) points us to the general reason why we are not experiencing the blessing of assurance: "...And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him." In this context, our choice to suffer along with Christ is simply Paul's way of saying that we choose to actually follow him, since Christ's way is the way of suffering. If we are, at any particular time, choosing not to follow Christ, we are guaranteed to have assurance vanish like a puff of smoke.

As we saw in our last study, the expenditure of energy to maintain our hope in Christ (Col. 1:23) is necessary to our daily experience of assurance. Certainly, God's intention to grant us assurance by the Holy Spirit does not waver from day to day. It is our willingness to walk in Christ which wavers. On some days, we just instinctively rejoice to "walk the Jesus road," as our African brethren put it. On other days, the Jesus road seems muddy, pocked with holes, and beset by dangers, and on that day, we retract from our walk. Anxiety is the inevitable outcome. Our behavior and experience become dictated by things we are trying to avoid instead of the loving Lord we are seeking to follow. This is no way for a Christian to live.

But wait a minute. There is a serious possibility that some church people are not redeemed at all! What other explanation can there be for the many people with a profession of faith in Christ but who refuse to avail themselves of the means of walking with Christ provided by the church? They are not interested in prayer or Bible study, the sermon is considered mere entertainment, and the ministries of the church are considered work for other people. Then the cry arises: "We are unhappy, Pastor! What will you do to make us feel better?" When the normal functions of a living church are offered as the Biblical means to lead them into assurance and joy, the response is all too often: "We don't want that. We want something else--and you should give it to us!"

Paul the Apostle had a group of such people in the church at Corinth and he wrote this to help them: "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?" (2 Cor. 13:5). Ultimately, every one of us has to face God alone. No one can look into your heart and see whether or not you are trusting Christ alone for eternal life. But, as Paul did, anyone can observe your outward behaviors and expressions of belief and raise the question: Are you really saved at all? And those same tests of belief and behavior can be used by each one of us to test ourselves.

The book of 1 John was written to clear away such confusion. It is jammed with tests which can be used to test ourselves: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8). "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" (2:4). "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (2:15b). "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us" (2:19). "And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (3:3). "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (4:20). Finally, "And we have beheld and bear witness that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God." (4:14-15). These tests are just a sample of the many contained in this rich letter of the Apostle John to his beloved brethren. Any honest person should be able to determine his own spiritual condition by reading and applying these words.

But what of the genuine, believing Christian who fights with fears and doubts? What if we pass John's tests but still fail to realize the blessing of assurance God has promised to his

children? One reason might be a lack of acquaintance with the objective nature and facts of the historic Christian faith. We do not believe in faith itself, and we do not trust in a religion invented by humans. Our trust is placed in the real God who has revealed himself to all mankind by breaking into world history in the form of Jesus Christ, for whose life and acts the historical record is more certain than it is for Napoleon Bonaparte. This same God has explained himself to all mankind by using people as instruments to write the sacred Scriptures found in the sixty-six books of the canonical Bible.

The assurance of the true believer in Christ is partly supported by an awareness of these objective facts. So Luke wrote: "To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days" (Acts 1:3a). Each of us should spend time in the gospels and Acts to ground ourselves in the historic facts of Christ's earthly ministry, death, and resurrection. Reading good Christian history books is wonderfully encouraging. The study of apologetics also reveals to us wonderful facts which bolster our confidence.

A second reason believers find themselves in a condition of doubt or anxiety is that they may be laboring under a false standard of performance for their own faith or the practice of their church. This can be hard to discern because the practice of grace is the easiest thing in the world to lose. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." (5:2-4)

Once any of us adopts a false performance standard for the Christian walk, we switch religious systems entirely. Christ had to die for us because human religious performance could never save anyone. Performance-based religion wears out the follower in a never ending cycle of works, doubt, and guilt. Christ died to save us from that treadmill, and if only one performance standard is reintroduced, the entirely principle of salvation by grace through faith goes out the window. I believe that we do this at regular intervals in the church, and we are mystified to find ourselves miserable by our own doing.

Performance standards for the Christian faith seem so logical because they appeal to our fleshly nature which would dearly love to be the cause of our salvation, our sanctification, and our success in ministry. As a pastor, I am amazed at the ease with which Christians condemn themselves and other believers on the basis of such false standards. I often hear various humanly-devised ministry methods promoted as essential to the faithfulness of the church. Such talk makes great marketing! Who wants to be unfaithful? Yet the failure of a particular method to produce the desired results produces a bitterness so intense that many believers withdraw from ministry as too painful.

In fact, it is not the ministry which is painful for them. Indeed, it is not even the humanly-devised methods themselves, most of which have some value. It is the proclamation of a false performance standard which plows the church into the dirt when a particular method eventually fails--and they all do! The only way out of this is to fight for the principle of

grace with all our might. We must forever be vigilant to brand every false performance standard for Christians as what it truly is: a reversion to the principle of law-keeping, a falling from grace, and a repudiation of Christ. So Paul wrote to the Galatians. There can be no blessing of assurance for the believer who succumbs to a false religious performance standard.

A third and probably the most common reason believers fail to enjoy the blessing of assurance is a concealed practice of sin. King David wrote of his awareness of this loss in Psalm 32:3-4: "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away /Through my groaning all day long. /For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; /My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer." Notice that this was the express act of God to place David under a heavy hand. When we first commit a particular sin, we sense that spiritual heaviness immediately as the work of God's Holy Spirit to bring conviction to our hearts. If we do not respond to that conviction, our conscience begins to be seared in that area of spiritual life. It becomes progressively easier to commit the same sin. And if we persevere against the Lord's guidance we contract a long-term spiritual disease which may be fatal to our faith.

There is no level of Christian ministry attainment which prevents this danger. I have seen new Christians fall directly into a practice of sin, and I have seen pastors, missionaries, and denominational executives do the same. We have all observed the fall of famous Christians from music and teaching ministries. The path back is the same for them and for us, as David explained: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' -- and you forgave the guilt of my sin." (Ps. 32:5, NIV)

Have you been cheated out of the blessing of assurance? If God is truly your Father, then you have been promised a peaceful confidence that you are indeed his child. Fight for your birthright!

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