

THE BLESSING OF ASSURANCE, PART 1

Hebrews 6:11-12, Selected Texts [NASB]

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Deep in the rain forest, a tribal leader makes a sacrifice to the god of the river. Small animals are offered, as are plants and foods. Rituals are performed in the hope of receiving favor. But then the attention of the tribe must be turned to the gods of the forest, the god of the sky, the god of fertility. They also must be appeased. The tribe worries: have we done enough? Are there any gods we have forgotten? Then an elder reminds the tribe of the year that even after sacrifices had been made to the god of the river that the river rose and flooded the village, ruining their huts and drowning several people. The people despair: how can we ever be sure of the favor of the gods?

In India a Hindu travels at great personal expense to the holy river Ganges to perform ritual ablutions. The Ganges represents for him the doctrine that "all is one." At one point, a man uses the river as a toilet. Just downstream, a woman washes clothes, and a woman next to her dips a jug of drinking water. Yet further down river, a corpse is burned on a large pile of logs on the bank, and when it has burned low, the entire pile is tipped into the Ganges. Below this, the traveler submerges himself in the sacred flow as a representation of belief that life and death are one. What has become of hope for him? He hopes for obliteration in the afterlife, instead of reincarnation again and again. But no matter how many times he dips into the Ganges, he can never tell if his spiritual condition has improved. Nothing is ever certain.

In Europe, a woman enters a remarkable old cathedral to light a candle for her dead husband. Where has he gone? Is he in purgatory? In heaven? Surely he was not evil enough to go to hell! After all, he never killed anyone... But there was that episode with the waitress--better light another candle. Perhaps a fee can be paid to assist the dearly departed's spiritual status. Did he attend church often enough? Surely he didn't go to confession often enough. Then a spark of hope lights her heart: perhaps if she lays an offering of flowers on Mary's altar she would intercede for him with her Son. Maybe that would help her husband--or maybe not.

In America a man comes to his evangelical church with his wife for Sunday worship. He remembers praying the prayer of salvation as a teen, but he does not feel very saved. In fact, the preacher makes him feel uncomfortable almost every week. He looks down at the floor or out the window for relief. He remembers good times in youth group, but after going to work as a young man he just sort of dropped out of church. What a relief for his girlfriend when she asked him if he was born again, and he recited the Four Spiritual Laws! He even had the old Bible he used to read. She invited him to begin attending church with her, and soon they were married. She now wonders: Is he really saved? He wonders,

too.

Is there any way out of this perpetual wondering about our spiritual destiny? Do we have to spend every day suspended over the chasm of despair, ready to drop at any moment? Is there a solution for tribal people, Hindus, the orthodox, and doubt-filled evangelicals? The answer is yes, yes, yes, and yes! The God who really is--the one who has revealed himself clearly to the human race through the Bible--is not the kind of God who leaves us wondering about our spiritual status. God has spoken to the question of the hope of salvation in Hebrews 6:11-12, among many other places: "And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

The jungle gods always leave you wondering, but the God of the Bible has promised "full assurance" to those who exercise patient faith in him. The Ganges leaves you filthy and uncertain after your ritual ablutions, but the God of the Bible has promised definite cleansing: "...He made no distinction between us [Jews] and them [non-Jews], cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9). All versions of Christianity which force you to go to a priest for grace leave you wondering if you have gone enough times, but the God of the Bible grants grace freely and directly: "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:7). The evangelical believers who choose not to practice their faith rob themselves of confidence in God, but God promises assurance to all who choose to exercise their faith: "...Show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end" (Heb. 6:11b).

I am aware that times of spiritual uncertainty are common to many believers in the ebb and flow of the faith life, yet we have been granted a promise of the blessing of assurance. To grasp this promise, we must understand the distinction between the objective reality of our salvation by grace through faith and our inward feeling of confidence that we are saved. They are two very different things. It is possible to be saved and not feel saved. It is likewise possible to feel saved and not be! It is the promise of God that the normal condition for a believer is both to be saved and to know it with an inward sense of confidence.

Because salvation is an objective reality, we must be certain of where we stand with Christ, because there can be no assurance without a right relationship with him. Without Christ we are all described this way: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, /Each of us has turned to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). By the act of trusting Christ for salvation our status with God comes to be described by these words: "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, /He was crushed for our iniquities; /The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, /And by His scourging we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Salvation is a gift, and no gift can be diluted by requirements for its reception, or then it would cease to be a gift. Thus we step into right relationship with God the Father by believing in God the Son (Christ the Lord) who took our punishment for us. That relationship is the objective reality called salvation.

Our text in Hebrews tells us that we place ourselves in a position to inherit the promises of God by showing "diligence." It may sound at first blush that the hope of full assurance of salvation has just gone out the window when we hear that "diligence" is required. It sounds like we have just switched back to the worldly system where the rigorous, sweaty, and grasping people get the best results. That would be a mistake! We must answer the question: "diligence" in what? On what are we supposed to be constantly working? Paul the Apostle answers that question in Colossians 1:23: "...If indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister." The diligence required is simply that we not move away from our hope in the gospel of Christ.

In order to see the picture of a Christian hanging on to faith in Christ, just think of the way the average person hangs on to physical life. Recently I visited a brother in the hospital who subjected himself to a triple heart bypass surgery. I do not know exactly all this entails, but my understanding is that in the course of this surgery, a saw is used to separate the breastbone, and the chest is winched open by a large device called a retractor. Surgeons then take sections of vein from another part of the body, usually the legs, and graft them around the clogged places in the arteries feeding the heart. Then they wire and staple the chest back together, and watch to see that everything works correctly. Since it is very possible for the patient to die during this arduous procedure, why would anyone ever do it? Because the human drive to hold on to physical life is immense.

Think of how instinctively you do things to protect yourself, maintain your health, and provide for your future. In fact, when someone does not instinctively do these things, we think something is dreadfully wrong. We call such a person clinically depressed or suicidal. The freezing man moves toward the fire. The suffocating person fights for air. The person trapped in a burning house runs out. The starving person seeks desperately for anything to eat. Our powerful innate desire to stay alive with all of the specific behaviors protecting that life is a picture of how we stay near our hope in the gospel of Christ.

In the spiritual sense Christ is our life, and faith is the means to obtain it. The Apostle John explicitly wrote his account of Christ's life for this very purpose: "These [things] have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). This spiritual life is as real as your physical life, and the fight to preserve it must be just as real. Just as there is something wrong with a person who does not fight for his or her physical life, there is something wrong with someone who does not fight for spiritual life. It is this process of fighting for our spiritual lives which brings assurance.

We are focusing in this message and the next upon the specifics of that fight for assurance. The single greatest thing we can do to live with the blessing of the assurance of our salvation is to teach ourselves the habit of focusing our hope on the total sufficiency of Christ's death on the cross to pay for our sins and to purchase our eternal lives. Hebrews 10:11-14 states: "And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for

sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."

Note the features of this rich passage: Before the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, God had set up a system to care for our sins by having a priest offer sacrifices for them. But these sacrifices were never enough. Have you been living in that system? Always trying to please God somehow, but feeling that it was never enough? It never can be enough because such attempts to please God "can never take away sins." But then Christ came and gave himself for our sins, and sat down at the right hand of God to demonstrate that the work of taking away sins was complete. This is what he meant when on the cross, at the point when all the pain of our sin and all the anger of God over our sin was upon him, he cried out: "It is finished!"

So stop already. It is finished. The tribal people could quit their ritual offerings if they knew of Christ. The Hindu could skip the annual trip to the Ganges River. The religionist could extinguish the candles, rejoice in spiritual freedom, and escape the trap of guilt. The disoriented American evangelical could stop wondering if he is saved if he would grab hold of the total sufficiency of what Christ has done for him on the cross.

God wants you to know the utmost confidence in your salvation because it is based on work that Christ has done, not works which you have done. Have you placed all of your hope for spiritual life in this gospel? Are you fighting to live in it with the same vigor by which you fight for your physical life?

The main reason why Christ instituted the Lord's Supper was to give us a visual aid displaying his finished work on the cross for us. He did the work in history, and it is an objective fact for all time. We enter into that finished work by faith. Then we spend all time and eternity remembering the sacrifice made for us, and what it means: no more unfinished business with God over sin. All cared for--all done. Peace. Rest. Look upon the symbols of the body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, receive afresh what has been provided for you, and worship the Lamb that was Slain.

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