Assurance of Salvation

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Many Christians wrestle with the issue of assurance of salvation at some point. How can we be certain that we will spend eternity with Jesus, and what do we base this assurance on?

Christians who are seeking to find assurance often drift toward one of two extremes, either they develop a false sense of security, or they constantly struggle with insecurity about their place in God's Kingdom. How can we avoid these pitfalls and find the true, peaceful assurance that Christ offers?

False Security

Many 'believers' think they are safe for eternity, but their assurance is not well-founded because they have a deficient understanding of salvation. For example, many who have prayed a prayer of salvation at some point in their lives now believe they are secure. They view the salvation prayer as a magical formula that guarantees entrance into heaven as long as they maintain a vague belief in Jesus.

Others try to live by a set of ethical or moral guidelines which they vaguely consider "Christian". They typically believe they are good people compared to others and assume they will get into heaven based on their good merits.

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Then there are still others who, with a weak faith and a sincere desire for assurance, turn to proof-texts from Scripture to convince themselves of their salvation. The problem with this strategy is that our salvation is rooted in a person – the person of Christ. When Scripture is correctly used (as I will describe later), it can certainly strengthen our faith and confidence before God. However, the primary purpose of the Scriptures is to point us toward faith in the person of Jesus. As Scripture says,

"He has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life." 1 John 5:11-12

Salvation is not just a formula to be followed; it is a life-giving relationship with the only person who can save you – Jesus Christ. This is evident in His interactions with people in Scripture, where He warns those who are negligent in their faith (Hebrews 10:26-27) and comforts those facing hardship and persecution (Romans 8:38-39). Only through a relationship with Jesus can we truly understand what He wants to communicate to us through His Word.

Insecurity

On the other extreme, some genuine believers are constantly plagued by doubt and a sense of rejection. They never truly feel like they deserve to belong to the family of God. In my experience as a pastor, people who wrestle with this kind of doubt have often been hurt and suffer from a general sense of feeling unworthy to be loved and accepted by people and by God. But the truth is that when we put our faith in Jesus, a real transition from the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of God does take place (Colossians 1:13). We were enemies of God but are now sons and friends of God. (1 John 3:1). God has set his seal of ownership on us by giving us his Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:22).

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People can develop a skewed view of God as being ungracious, nit-picky, and fault-finding, therefore imagining that He is always trying to 'catch us out' and send us to the 'naughty corner'. These people are burdened by trying to work their way back into God's 'good books'.

Healing for this kind of relational brokenness comes through renewing your mind with the truth

about God's character and building healthy relationships within church family. Only then can we have peace about our place in God's Kingdom.

How Can We Experience True Assurance?

Now that we have covered unhelpful ways to think about salvation, how can we find a healthy, biblical confidence about where we stand with God?

1. The Witness of My Conscience

A good test of the genuineness of our faith is the fruit of our lives. The Apostle John frequently wrote about discerning whether a person is truly in Christ:

"By this we can be sure that we have come to know Him: if we keep His commandments. If anyone says, "I know Him," but does not keep His commandments, he is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone keeps His word, the love of God has been truly perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him: Whoever claims to abide in Him must walk as Jesus walked." 1 John 2:3-6

The life of a true believer is characterised by obedience to the voice of God. When we are walking on the 'narrow path' of obedience, our conscience will be clear before God and we will not be ashamed to come freely into His presence. This does not mean that we live out sinless perfection as Christians. In fact, John says in the same book,

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:8-9

True Christians own up to their sins and sincerely repent of them, rather than continuing to walk in disobedience to Christ. This gives us a clean conscience that does not condemn us.

So, our conscience can be a helpful indicator of our salvation, but on its own, this is not enough because it can be a 'faulty witness'. Scripture warns us in 1 Timothy 4:2 that our consciences can become 'seared'. This happens when we consistently ignore its warnings against the dangers of sin. Even the Apostle Paul says,

"My conscience is clear, but that does not vindicate me. It is the Lord who judges me." 1 Corinthians 4:4

2. The Spirit Testifies with My Spirit

"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!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Romans 8:15-16

The best way that I have heard this described is in the words of Wesley who said,

“The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ has loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.”

The Holy Spirit adds His witness to our clear conscience, affirming that we are forgiven and now children of God. He takes the general truths of Scripture and makes them personal. I go from believing that Christ is the King of the world and died for its sins, to believing that He is my King and has forgiven my sins. It is through the Spirit of God that we are convinced that we are in Christ and that we are safe. He is the ‘seal’ and the ‘deposit’ of the inheritance of the salvation which awaits us. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Of course, all these things are only true if we are in Christ and living out true repentance and faith in Him. If we are not living according to the Spirit, we can lose the peace and sense of security that should be normal for a true Christian.

3. The Truth of Scripture

“If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples.” John 8:31

Earlier I discussed how some try to find assurance of salvation from proof-texts alone, pointing out the dangers in doing this. However, Scripture can help us gain confidence in our standing with God.

Jesus Himself said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’ (John 14:6) We cannot find the way to salvation without the truth of God’s Word. It helps us to judge what is true and what is false, especially when it comes to salvation. The Scriptures point to Jesus and make it possible for us to come to Him and find eternal life.

They also tell us what God’s will is for our lives and so they are essential for walking in genuine obedience to Christ. The Scriptures are crucial for us to truly understand what Christ requires of us.

4. The Testimony of the Church

“You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous, and blameless our conduct was among you who believed.” 1 Thessalonians 2:10

There is one final witness which is hugely beneficial in knowing whether we are truly saved, and

that is the witness of the church community that we are in.

The Scriptures testify how easy it is to be deceived if we are isolated and not living in accountability with fellow believers. Sometimes we have sinful habits we are oblivious to, but they are glaringly obvious to everyone around us. God has made us to need godly community for true sanctification (holiness).

“You must warn each other every day, while it is still “today,” so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God.” Hebrews 3:13

Sin makes us vulnerable to deception and God will often use the church community to warn us of unseen dangers. Sin is deceptive and can draw us into a lifestyle that puts us in enmity with God. It can even cloud how we read and understand our Bibles (1 Corinthians 13:9).

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The Bible tells us that the corporate church is “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), and God has appointed apostles and elders to keep the church aligned with the truth (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Again, the testimony of the church is not a reliable testimony on its own. In the book of Revelation we see whole churches that have wandered into sin or deception, and some with only a remnant that are still in the faith. So an unhealthy church can be a dangerous place, but a godly church can be a valuable safeguard for keeping us in the truth.

A Word in Closing

The New Testament uses Noah’s Ark as a picture of salvation (1 Peter 3). Jesus Christ is the ‘Ark’ that saves us from the ‘flood’ of God’s judgement. As we remain in the Ark of Christ, we need not fear God’s judgement or anything in the world that opposes our faith, because God protects us by His great power (John 10:28; Romans 8:39).

Christ is powerful and His grace is sufficient. Our responsibility is to make sure that we stay in the boat!