

ASSURANCE

Background

Consider for a moment how those who know Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour may appear to others. Unbelievers can find it hard to understand how it is that Bible-believing Christians seem to have a deep, abiding *confidence* which marks their *belief* in Jesus and *relationship* with him. How can it be that so many of his followers are so convinced? Clearly this is more than intellectual certitude – that is part of it, but it is clearly *relational* too. There is evidently something going on here which is about *knowing a person* as well as being able to say what is true of that person; and both kinds of ‘knowing’ have important consequences for everything in the believer’s life in all its aspects – including what they say and how they behave. This often shows itself in the ethical area; it will certainly be obvious in the Christian believer’s abhorrence of the worship of other gods.

The profound awareness of a relationship which the believer experiences – and which can survive all challenges, obstacles, tests and trials in this world – is attested throughout the New Testament. The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks about the ‘hope of which we boast’ (3:6; see also 6:11; and see 6:19, from which we learn that the hope believers have is an ‘anchor for the soul’), and the assurance of faith (Hebrews 10:22; see also 11:1).

What do we really mean by ‘assurance’ in this context?

The believer’s firm underlying conviction is that by faith he or she is ‘*in Christ*’ – having *been saved* from the *penalty* of past sins by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ and his one sacrifice of himself on the cross; that the believer is now *being saved* through the work of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification (with which we are to co-operate) from the *power* of sin; and, looking forward to the great salvation which is to come, that the believer will ultimately know salvation from the *presence* of sin, when Christ will have judged the living and the dead. To be living *in him*, walking in faithful obedience, led by the Holy Spirit, means that one is being *kept* in eternal life which is found only *in Christ*. Thus we are to *abide* in him and to *go on believing in Jesus*.

That living faith is the essential reality underlying Christian assurance. We can have assurance because of the promises given by Jesus.

John 3:1-21; 4:13-14; 8:12; 10:7-10.

If we fall away, if we stop believing in Jesus, we may lose that true assurance. The answer to that is to return to him in repentance (remembering, of course, the great truth that to ‘repent’ means not merely feeling sorry – it includes stopping doing whatever it is that is offending God).

What about false ‘assurance’

There can be a false sense of ‘assurance’, of course. The Bible does not license persistent, unrepented, ungodly, sinful behaviour. Those who may once have believed in Jesus, who perhaps went forward at an evangelistic rally, but then fell away into grave sin and unbelief, are deluding themselves (and, sadly, maybe others too, if they reach positions of leadership) if they imagine that their final salvation is assured no matter what they later believe or do. The Epistle of Jude and the Book of Revelation make that perfectly clear. See Studies 10 and 12 in this series – students may want to refer to these for a balanced view on this vital subject. It is important to know that when we are continuing faithfully believing and trusting in Jesus, and are being led by the Holy Spirit, and are walking in obedience and repenting as and when the Spirit shows us to do so, we are being ‘kept’, and we are not going to be snatched out of Jesus’ hand by some external force against our will.

Galatians 6:7-10; 1 John 5:1-10

Is this a matter of ‘feelings’?

We are human, and of course we have feelings, but the kind of assurance attested to in the Epistle to the Hebrews means something much more than the way we feel! Assurance can only be known in real, living faith, belief and personal trust in God – the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know he keeps his word. We trust his promises. We know and trust in Jesus Christ for he is our Lord: he has ‘lordship’ over you as a Christian – he is in charge, he has authority over you and you seek to obey him, and that is a very practical, day-to-day fact about the Christian life. So assurance does not depend on our own feelings, which can change. Real assurance provides inner, personal confidence in our God.

1 John 4:7-21

Summary

There are two main aspects to assurance:

- (1) There is an immediate assurance that is the gift of every person who is born again.
- (2) There is an ongoing and developing assurance as we live out our lives in the care of Jesus, our Saviour, following him in his Way as his disciples.

In the second aspect we will see victory over doubt and temptation, and we will see answers to prayer. Life will not necessarily be easy and our discipleship may be imperfect, but nevertheless we see God's hand at work and our assurance is confirmed as we grow and mature.

Isaiah **32:17** [RSV] (Peace, quietness and trust); Romans **8:15–16, 38–39**; 2 Timothy **1:12**; **3:14–17**; **4:8, 18**; 1 Peter **1:3–9**; Jude v. 1.

What if I lack assurance? How can it be obtained?

As indicated already, we are to have faith in God's word (John **5:24**).

Jesus always *spoke* the truth. So begin by reading again the things that he taught, as recorded in the four Gospels. *Every word he uttered was truth and utterly dependable*. Look at the context of his words and ask: was he speaking to believers? He mainly spoke to Jews and could take for granted that they knew basic truths about God's self-revelation in what we call the Old Testament. God had been revealing himself to his people for many generations before he sent his Son, the Messiah (anointed one).

Remember that Jesus himself *is* the truth. He said so, and the New Testament testifies to this. He is the eternal *word* (Greek: *logos*; see John **1:1**). This means much more than the words we use in our human languages. It is a term of profound significance, and it signifies here the second person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus is perfect man and he is God incarnate.

Witnessing to Jesus, the Messiah – letting others know the essential truth that he is Lord, in charge of our lives, and that every knee will bow to him, and that he was raised from the dead and lives now – is vital. This has to do with our salvation (see Romans **10:9–11**). Of course we need to have assurance first, to know that we belong to him – or we can scarcely witness to others. But as we have courage to bear witness, our confidence grows. Testimony to the reality of the work of the Lord our God is a blessing to those who hear. The assurance of victory comes from a clear conscience. The believer is to walk in the way of obedience to God. So there is to be no known, unconfessed sin or stiff-necked attitude marring our relationship with God.

We should be wary of false assurance based on self-effort, men's praise or 'success'.

Psalm **17:8**; **91:11**; **121:3, 8**; Isaiah **26:3**; Matthew **7:22–23** (false assurance); John **10:10–14, 27–30**; **11:26**; **17:11**; Romans **8:28–39**; 2 Corinthians **1:10**; Ephesians **1:13**; **4:30**; Philippians **1:3–6**; Titus **1:1–3**; Hebrews **6:11**; **7:25**; **10:19–23**; Jude v. 24; Revelation **3:10**.

Note

Whilst some of the Old Testament references are made in relation to Israel, God's chosen people, they nevertheless show God's heart towards all those whom he has chosen and who follow him faithfully. We can justifiably assert that they apply to the faithful followers of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.