

Peter's Forthright Wisdom On Assurance (October 28, 2012)



Let me tell you about Simon.

Simon grew up pretty rough around the edges. He was a tradie, enjoyed life with the boys. He married a pretty young thing and he looked to have a bright future.

Then he encountered Christ. He felt called to the ministry. Most people thought he was going to have an outstanding career as a pastor.

He studied for three years but just when he was about to graduate it all seemed to come tumbling down.

His faith was tested and he failed the test. He felt like his life was dissolving about him. For a short time he denied the faith. When he came to his senses he felt the pastorate was not for him and he went back to his tools.

Soon after he found himself asking the question – am I actually saved?

He was fairly sure his conversion was genuine – but his ups and downs – his failures – his times of doubt and disobedience gave him pause.

For a time he wondered – since even the best of men fail – can I know for sure that I have eternal life?

This is a great question.

George Whitefield summed up the heart of men in a telling observation made in a letter to John Wesley:

Go where thou wilt, though thou shouldst be in the purest society under Heaven thou wilt find that the best of men are but men at best.¹

If the best of men – even saved men – are but men at best – and we all know this is true – there is not one man or woman among us who has not struggled with sin, doubts, worldliness – then can anyone ever know for certain that they are a child of God – who is headed for heaven?

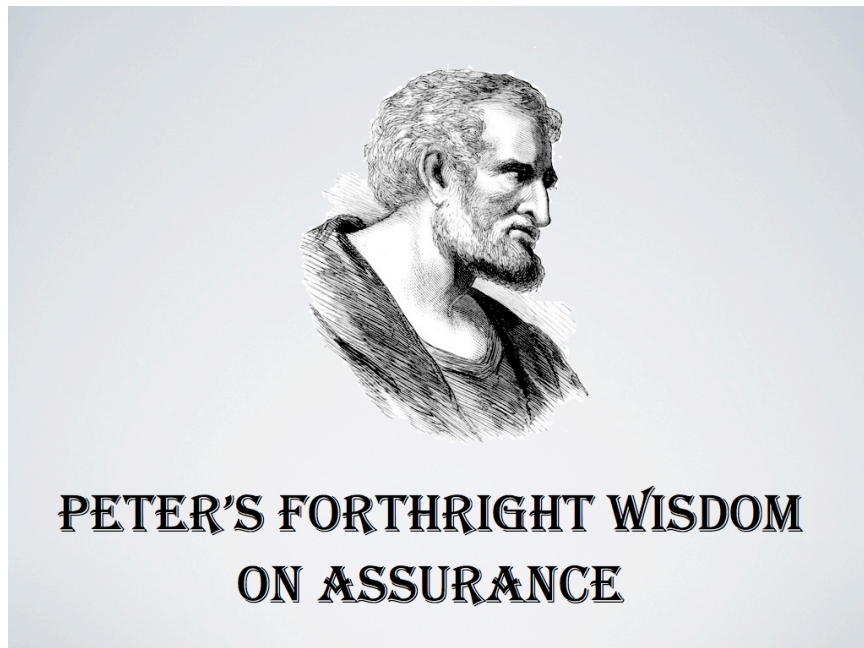
This is the question I want to address today. How can imperfect men – men with doubts and struggles with faith – how can they know they are saved? How can they know heaven is actually theirs?

I opened with the illustration of Simon because I trust that you have realised by now that Simon – is actually Simon Peter – one of the twelve Apostles. Peter is one of us. Human. Failings. Ups and downs.

A man who struggled mightily with sin and faith – but a man who came to know he was a true child of God and wrote telling us how we too can know we are a true child of God.

This morning we are finishing our series looking at *4 Perspectives on Assurance of Salvation*.

Today the perspective we are going to look at is:



Peter's Forthright Wisdom On Assurance.

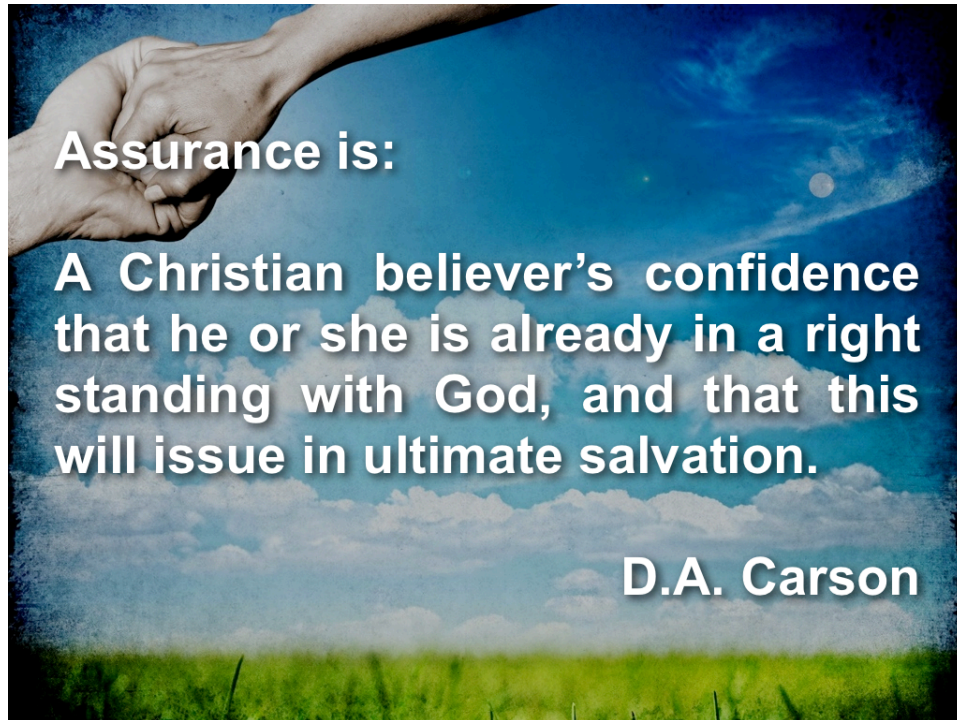
Peter was a straight shooter. It often got him into trouble. But when he speaks on a subject – he speaks forthrightly.

¹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1990), pp. 159-160.

Before we look at what he has to say about assurance, we need to remember that assurance is one of the most crucial – but also most difficult doctrines – believers have to deal with.

Let me remind you what assurance is.

Don Carson gives this excellent definition of assurance:



Assurance is:

A Christian believer's confidence that he or she is already in a right standing with God, and that this will issue in ultimate salvation.²

Basically, it is living knowing that you are a Christian and you are going to heaven.

Unfortunately some believers spend their lives paralysed by a fear that they are fooling themselves – that they aren't elect – that despite their lives following Christ they will hear depart from me you who practice lawlessness.

Others live lives filled with sin and just shrug it off – grace and the cross will cover that. Many of them will be found wanting on the Day of Judgment.

Getting the balance right is hard.

But I think that part of the difficulty is that we over analyse every part of our salvation to the point that we forget the glory of God saving us and working in us to produce fruit.

² D.A. Carson, "Reflections on Assurance" in Schreiner and Ware, *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will Vol. 2*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1995) p. 384.

You may have heard this story. It concerns three men who had applied to attend a seminary. As part of the interview process they were asked this question:

“How do you know you are saved?”

The first man thought that was not too hard a question and replied, “I believe in Christ. I believe He is God. I believe He died on the cross to pay the sins of men. And like the Philippian jailer – I believed and was saved.”

The seminary professor interviewing them responded, “Young man, you may be well be saved. But faith alone is not enough. Remember that James tells us there is a faith that does not save. There is a faith that even the demons possess. Faith without works is dead. Remember, the Philippian jailer released Paul, was baptised and lived for Christ. So again, how do you know your faith is real?”

It was the turn of the second man to respond. He had listened carefully to what the seminary professor had said and he wasn't going to just mention faith. He replied, “Sir, I too believe in Christ. I believe He is God. I believe He died on the cross to pay the sins of men. And I too have faith like the Philippian jailer. **But** as well, I have performed many works in the name of Christ. I have faith and works. I have trusted and obeyed.”

The seminary professor responded, “That is good. Young man, you may be well be saved. But remember the words of the Lord Himself in Matthew 7, where He tells us that calling Him Lord and doing works are not enough. Many call Him Lord and do works, but they are His only if their faith and works flow from a changed heart. They might have a measure of faith and do some works but if their heart is not changed they will continue to practice lawlessness. Such faith and works are not enough. So, I ask you, how do you know your faith is real?”

The third man listened and actually thought that the answers the first two men gave were pretty good. But he also realised the truth of what the seminary professor had said.

He searched his heart and thought long and hard before he responded, “Sir, I know that I am a sinner and have been from my mother's womb. And I know there is nothing in me that deserves the New Jerusalem. But I know this. Whereas I once hated what is good and loved sin. And whereas I once could not believe in Christ. Today, I know with all my heart I that I am His because I know that He breathed life into my spiritually dead body. I know this because I now believe what once seemed foolishness. I believe that Christ is God, that His death atoned for my sins and that He has saved me. And I know I am saved because I now desire to obey Him and I hate my sin because of my love for Christ. He has changed my heart and enabled me to believe and obey. These miracles can only be His work.”

And the seminary professor responded, “That is a faith that is real.”

The story is cute. It makes a few points. But I don't know about you but the overall impression is that it is really hard to be sure that you are saved – even seminary students struggle.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at 1 John 5:13:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

God saves us and wants us to **know** that we are saved.

He does not want us to live in a state of uncertainty.

Nor does He want us to bask in easy believism and sin.

And so we have the Word of God to guide us. And one of the most forthright discussions of assurance is found in Peter.

Peter gives us a unique perspective – because his life is one where his errors are so obvious. He was far from perfect – in faith or works.

Just think with me about the life of Peter.

A fisherman – called by Jesus – he leaves his nets, his livelihood to follow Jesus.

He has highs. His great confession – you are the Christ – and lows – immediately after Jesus tells him – Get behind me Satan.

Perhaps his greatest lows surrounded the death of Jesus. The night of Jesus' arrest – Peter denied Him three times – I do **not** know this man!

Then even after Jesus rose again and commissioned the disciples to take the gospel to the world – what did Peter do? He was the instigator of the disciples abandoning the cause and going fishing.

Jesus comes to them and they still don't recognise Him. It takes the miraculous catch for their eyes to be opened.

Peter jumps in and races to shore.

They eat breakfast together. The disciples are fairly sheepish. Then Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

He said to him, "Feed my lambs."

We are supposed to think back to the court of the high priest where people were sitting around a charcoal fire and Peter was asked about his allegiance to Jesus.

Back then he was asked three times and three times he denied his allegiance to Jesus. Now he is asked again three times – does he love Jesus?

Peter has another opportunity. Jesus looks at Peter and asks him – do you love Me?

And somewhat indignantly Peter responds, “Yes Lord; You know that I love You.”

But, in John 14:15 Jesus said:

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

Love is not a matter of what we say – it is what we *do*. Are we obedient?

Saying we belong to Jesus is not enough. We have to do what Jesus commands us.

That is the proof that we are His. Peter never forgot this lesson.

So Jesus says, “Tend My lambs.” Do what I instructed you to do. That is what shows your love.

Jesus passed a legacy onto the church – to take the gospel to the world.

But here was Peter, the one willing to lay down his life to show his devotion to Jesus – and he was fishing. He had gone back to his old livelihood. He was catching fish rather than catching men. He was not gathering a flock and feeding them.

He was not carrying out the commission Jesus had repeatedly given him.

Jesus left Peter with a task. Tending His lambs. Where were the lambs? Who was he reaching with the gospel? Who was he discipling?

You say you love Me – then where is the obedience? I left you to tend My lambs not catch fish.

So Jesus asked again:

Simon, son of John, do you love Me?

Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.

Then – Tend My sheep.

Don't just say you love Me – show it in your life.

Just as Peter denied Him three times instead of declaring His love and devotion for Christ and testifying of Him – so three times he had to publicly declare his love.

[Jesus] said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know everything; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.”

Don't just say you love Me – obey Me.

And just in case Peter still didn't get it – look at verse 19 – *Follow Me!*

And in verse 22 – *You follow Me!*

The Bible is filled with flawed characters. Jacob, Samson, David, Peter – and one of the reasons is that we relate to them. They are like us – flawed, fallible, messing up their lives. They don't lead neat lives of perfection.

But, as Hebrews 11 points out – at the heart of their existence they loved God and they wanted to be His.

When Jesus restored Peter on that Galilean beach – Peter took away a lesson that stayed with Him all his life.



If you love Jesus, you will keep His commandments. John 14:15

So this becomes the framework of Peter's wisdom on assurance.

But, Peter of all people understands that this is not perfectionism.

As Dave put it – it is direction **not** perfection.

Even after Jesus reinstates Him – even after Pentecost, even after Peter has the vision of the unclean animals which shows the gospel is to go to the Gentiles – Peter blows it.

In Galatians 2 Paul tells us that Peter was influenced by some Judaisers, he withdrew from the Gentile converts and acted hypocritically. Paul had to confront him.

Peter knows full well that it is direction not perfection.

So with all of this in mind – we have the background to look at *Peter's Forthright Wisdom on Assurance*.

Brothers and sisters – unless you are very different to me – there are times in your life when you look to the heavens and ask – God let me know I am truly one of yours. I have too much sin, too little heart for the task – but I truly want to be yours.

In my mind, one of the clearest passage telling us how we can know is found in 2 Peter 1:3-11.

But, like so many other parts of the Word – it is not as clear to others.

This passage has an interesting place in church history.

During the Reformation, a controversy arose over 2 Peter 1:10 where Peter says:

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

In large part based on this verse, Dutch Theologian Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) taught that believers have to be nourished and encouraged so that they might remain in a saved state. He taught that those who were not diligent to make their calling certain fell from grace and lost their salvation.

In his mind, those who failed to practice holiness – fell from grace.

In other words they were saved – but their sin led them to lose their salvation.

So whereas I just told you I think this is one of the clearest passages that is meant to give believers an assurance of salvation – in the hands of others actually is made to do the opposite. Christians were taught that you can gain, lose, gain, lose your salvation – depending on how your walk with Christ is going.

The result is that many live in a state of not knowing if they are saved or not.

However, I want to suggest that this view takes this one verse out of its context – and that is not at all what Peter intended.

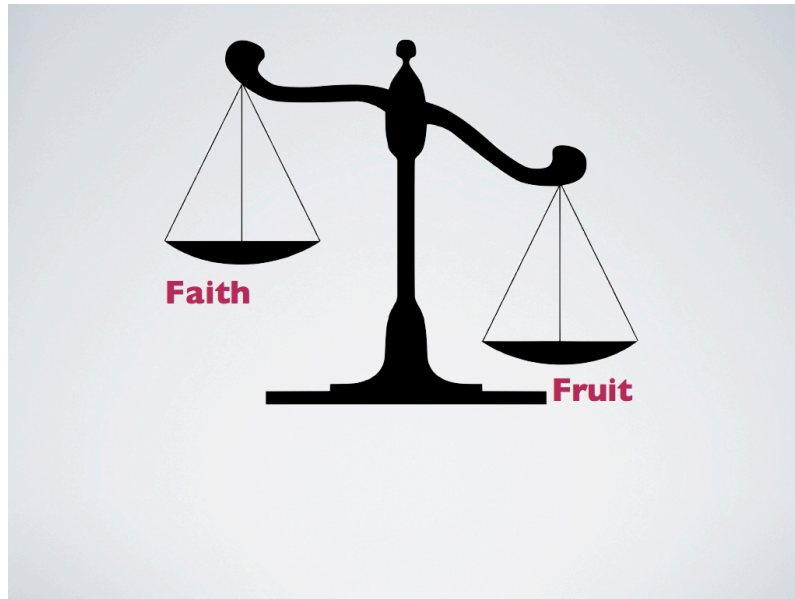
Have a look with me at the whole context.

2 Peter 1:3–11:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly

affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Here is my take. Our bent is to take a truth and run with it.

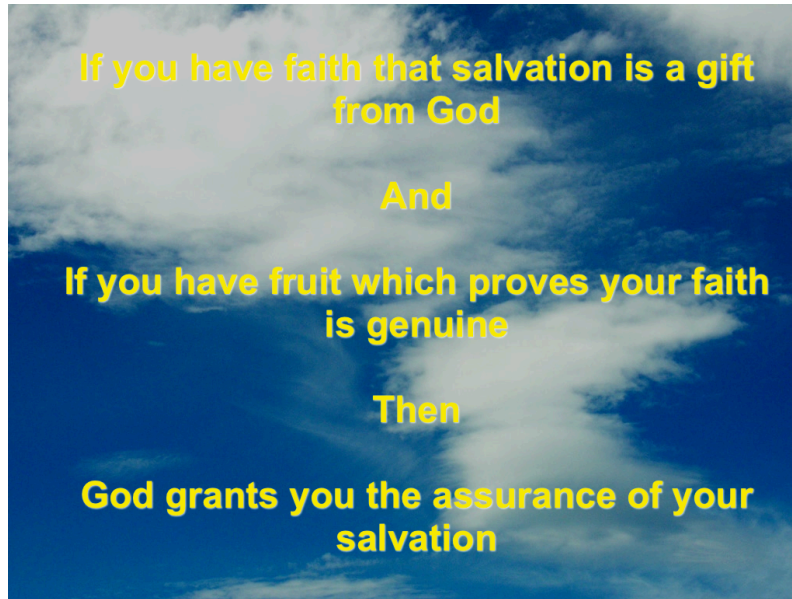


Salvation by faith. But taken too far, this leads to false ways to live. Let go and let God. If God saves you – he does it all.

Faith without works is dead. But taken too far, this leads to false ways to live. We try and earn our salvation.

Scripture is brilliant at giving the balance – faith and fruit – God and man.

The more I read over this passage from Peter – the more I was stunned at the balance here. Here is what Peter says:



If you have faith that salvation is a gift from God

And

If you have fruit which proves your faith is genuine

Then

God grants you the assurance of your salvation

We start with verse 3:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.

This is a crucial verse.

Everything relating to eternal life and to godliness comes from God as a gift.

When God chooses to bestow salvation on someone – He gives them everything they need – everything pertaining to life and to godliness.

If our salvation were dependent on our efforts – we would fail miserably.

It is not – salvation – as well as holiness – is a gift from God.

Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 2:8–10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith – *salvation is by grace through faith* – And this is not your own doing – *it is not according to our works or efforts* – it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Salvation is a gift of God – and the good works are a gift of God.

God gives us everything we need for eternal life and this life.

Peter continues in verses 3-5:

Through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

God calls us – to His own glory – and grants us these incredible promises – namely that we become partakers of the divine nature and escape corruption and its consequences.

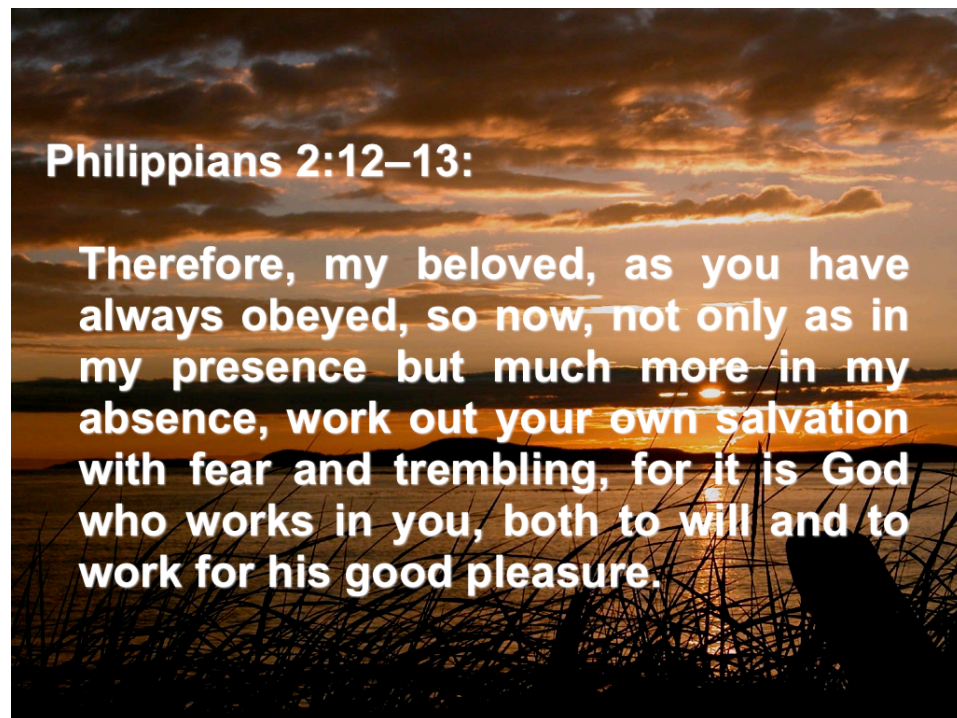
Salvation begins with God and ends with God. When He calls you – he changes your heart and your desires and gives you the Holy Spirit to walk holy.

That is why Paul can say:

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6:

But, because salvation begins and ends with God – does not mean that we have no part.

We have to strive for holiness. Listen again to Paul.



Philippians 2:12–13:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

We have to work out our own salvation – but because we can't do it – God is at work in us.

Logic can't put these together. God does it all but we still have to do it.

But Scripture has no problem with this.

The Bible repeatedly says – Salvation belongs to the Lord.

Then it says – Be holy as I am holy.

Peter has no difficulty putting these together. He tells us everything pertaining to life and godliness comes from God.

And he tells us – be holy.

1 Peter 1:14–16:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

1 Peter 2:11–12:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

2 Peter 3:11:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness,

So right in our text – Peter links faith in God's salvation with holiness.

Look at 2 Peter 1:5:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your **faith** with **virtue**.

Because of the great salvation God has blessed us with.

Because we are those who have escaped the corruption of this temporary world.

For this reason – add to our faith – virtue.

Add works to the faith that saves.

Add the works of virtue and self-control and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection and love.

Verses 8-10:

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

Do believers sin? Yes.

Do believers sin horribly at times? Yes.

But God who began a good work in us will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

God works in us to provide spiritual fruit – evidence Of His calling and election.

Say you were saved at fifteen and live to eighty.

If we took a snapshot of your life at any time in that sixty-five years – we might find you at a great time of your life – loving the Lord, reading the Word, sharing the gospel, marriage two thumbs up.

You look like the ideal Christian.

Or we might strike you at a bad time. Work strife. Marriage trouble. Kid worries. Slacking off the spiritual disciplines. You have let sin creep in and at times it wells up and overpowers you.

You look anything but a Christian.

However – it is not snapshots that matter – it is trajectory.

If these qualities are yours and are increasing – you can confirm your calling and election – you will never fall.

This does not mean you won't have tough times. It means God will ultimately finish the work begun in you.

Peter had bad times. Paul had bad times. We all have bad times.

But – throughout that sixty-five years there should be growth. A growing practice of these godly qualities. A deeper love for God. An overcoming of the sins that beset us.

Edward Griffin said this:

Show me a man in whom holiness and sin are struggling for dominion, and I will show you one who is already born again.³

Non-Christians don't hate their sin, lament their sin, beg for it to be taken away.

The struggle is evidence of the hand of God.

So when you do what Paul exhorts us to do in 2 Corinthians 13:5 and we:

Examine ourselves, to see whether we are in the faith.

Despite our failings, we should see evidence of God at work in us and then we can know we are called of God – elected by Him and verse 11:

In this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Westminster Confession sums up this idea well:

Those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed. (18:1).

How can sinners like us know we are saved? We examine our hearts and there we find faith in God, a love for God, a desire to obey Him and live holy – and we know this can only come from above.

The Puritans were masters of saying this in a way that I can't emulate.

Thomas Goodwin described our assurance of salvation like this:

There is a light that cometh, and overpowereth a man's soul and assureth him that God is his, and he is God's, and that God loved him from everlasting ... It is a light beyond the light of ordinary faith ... the next thing to heaven: you have no more, you can have no more until you come hither ... It is faith elevated and raised up above its ordinary rate, it is electing love of God brought home to the soul.⁴

Can you know you are saved? Absolutely.

Does this mean we never question our salvation? No.

Sin, doubts, the world – they sap our assurance.

³ Edward Griffin, *A Series of Lectures Delivered in Park Street Church Boston* (Boston, 1813) p. 124.

⁴ Quoted in Tony Sargent, *The Sacred Anointing*, (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1994), p. 45.

But when we test ourselves – when we look at our desires and heart and the trajectory of our lives we see His hand.

The world tells us we came about by chance – there is no God – but in the face of the wisdom of man – our soul declares – I know My Creator lives.

The world seeks to claim our souls – yet even when we sin – instead of finding pleasure in sin – it is fleeting – and we hate it – for we know it grieves our God.

We look at our lives and we have chosen again and again to say no to the world and yes to God. Not perfectly – far from it. But we see evidence of His loving hand in our lives.

Then we can know we are loved by Him and He is ours and we are His.

John Calvin said it well:

Assurance ... is a thing that is above the capacity of the human mind, it is the part of the Holy Spirit to confirm within us what God promises.

If after all of this you are still unsure of your calling and election – go and talk to the One who has the power to make His love soar in our hearts.

He delights to answer prayer. Ask Him to make your little faith into mountain moving faith.

Ask Him to show His glory in your life.

Look unto Jesus is the author, the founder, the perfecter of our faith.

Realise that your salvation is not dependent on you and your pitiful works but on His already finished works.

Here is my experience – the more we meditate on Christ – His finished work, His power, His love for sinners – the more we are flooded with assurance.

I thank God for men like Peter. Flawed men. Men like me.

Peter reminds me that the only way anyone gets to heaven is by God saving us. David was a man after God's own heart and he ended up an adulterous, murderous, lying fool. Only God can save.

Peter reminds me that even after salvation we make mistakes – huge mistakes. Foolish mistakes.

But Peter reminds me that God finishes the good work He begins.

Despite the dips and troughs – He shapes us, knocks off a few rough edges, encourages us and gets us to eternity.

Christians come in all shapes and sizes. Different levels of faith and holiness.

I think of Richard Wurmbrand of *Voice of the Martyrs* who told this story.

There was a province in Romania called Besarabia, which the Soviet Union annexed during the communist regime. Some time after the invasion, the Soviet army entered a village in that province and ordered every Christian, some 200 of them, into a field. There they were forced to dig their own graves. They told them they were to be shot for being Christians.

When they were finished, the captain who led the execution declared, "Whoever renounces Christ may leave and return to their homes. Whoever does not will be shot."

Many refused to recant and remained on the side of Christ. Others renounced their faith to save their lives.

As those who recanted left for their homes, a man who had been expelled from the church for gross sins came running from the village shouting, "Shoot me, too! Shoot me, too! I am a bad Christian, but a bad Christian is also a Christian. A bad Christian also has the right to die for Christ."

Wurmbrand says that when that man examined his heart – there was a love for Christ. Yes he had messed up. But there was a love for Christ that would take him to his grave.

If you see a faith and a virtue that you cannot explain but by the hand of God – then you can be sure the Spirit of God is at work in you and heaven is God's gift to you.

Peter's Forthright Wisdom On Assurance (October 28, 2012)

Main Point:

All Christians sin and struggle. But God gives them supernatural faith and fruit which assure the child of God of their salvation.

Read 2 Peter 1:3-11

- Why do you think the Bible tells us about so many flawed individuals?
- Why do you think God used such a flawed man as Peter?
- Discuss this quote George Whitefield made in a letter to John Wesley:

Go where thou wilt, though thou shouldst be in the purest society under Heaven thou wilt find that the best of men are but men at best.⁵

What do you think he means by this?

- Read over the illustration of the three seminary students. Was there a lot wrong with the answers the first two students gave?
- How would you answer the question – “How do you know you are saved?”
- What lessons on assurance can we learn from Peter's three denials and then His restoration when Jesus asked him three times if he loved Him?
- In 2 Peter 1 – Peter seems to suggest that faith and holiness are both gifts from God that come as a part of salvation. Why is this the way it has to be? What does this teach us about assurance?
- What are the promises God has granted to us?
- If God grants us godliness – why do we have to strive to supplement faith with virtue? Why do we have to work when it is a gift of God?
- Discuss Philippians 2:12–13 – working out our salvation and God working in us.
- In light of this – in verses like 1 Peter 1:14–16:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

What does this teach us about fruit helping us have assurance?

⁵ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1990), pp. 159-160.

- During the Reformation, a controversy arose over 2 Peter 1:10 where Peter says:

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

Some take this as teaching you can lose your salvation and thus undermines assurance. If so – can you have any assurance?

Others take it as teaching you are reassured you are saved by seeing the hand of God at work in your life – and thus gives assurance.

Discuss these views.

- Since we sin – can we have assurance? How?
- Discuss the idea that assurance should not be based on snapshots of your life but its trajectory.
- Discuss this quote by Edward Griffin:

Show me a man in whom holiness and sin are struggling for dominion, and I will show you one who is already born again.⁶

The idea is that non-Christians don't hate their sin, lament their sin, beg for it to be taken away.

- Discuss this quote by Thomas Goodwin:

There is a light that cometh, and overpowereth a man's soul and assureth him that God is his, and he is God's, and that God loved him from everlasting ... It is a light beyond the light of ordinary faith ... the next thing to heaven: you have no more, you can have no more until you come hither ... It is faith elevated and raised up above its ordinary rate, it is electing love of God brought home to the soul.⁷

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