

Overcoming Doubt

1 John 3:19-24

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I have told you my story and my struggle in years past with doubt about my salvation. I grew up hearing the gospel and knowing about Jesus and salvation. I professed faith in Jesus when I was a boy. As I grew older, I began to seriously wonder, *What if I am not a Christian after all? What if the prayer I prayed to receive Christ was not quite right? What if I wasn't sincere enough as I prayed it?* Doubt is one thing; the fear it produces is another—especially with salvation, because the consequences of dying and NOT being a Christian terrified me. I had heard enough about hell to know that I didn't want to end up there. This fear led me to pray for salvation over and over. I walked the aisle for altar calls hoping that by going forward I could prove to myself that I was a Christian. I obsessed over my doubt and it created tremendous fear.

Doubt and fear. These are two tools that Satan uses with great effectiveness, only he does it the opposite of what we would suspect. This is his cleverness: "The Devil's diabolical strategy, in general, is to convince lost people that they are saved and saved people that they are lost." (Donald Whitney, *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian?*, p. 85) This ensures that the people who need to feel fear don't and the people who shouldn't feel fear do. It guarantees the unsaved stay that way and the saved are enslaved to their fears and fail to flourish as confident children of God.

In 1 John, the Apostle John wants the truly saved to know it. The key verse is, *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.* (1 John 5:13)

Knowledge. Confidence. Assurance. These are the opposite of doubt and fear. Listen as John gives reassurance to the truly saved concerning their doubts and fears about their salvation. I wish I would have heard this message years ago.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us. (1 John 3:19-24)

On first read, this sounds confusing. It doesn't have to be if you simply see what John is trying to do. It is a kind of summary statement of all that he has said about how we can know that we are genuinely saved. The twist here is that some of what he says is objective evidence and some of it is subjective evidence.

Let me connect with Mother's Day a second because it is similar to what we are talking about. How do we know which mom goes with which child? There are *objective* proofs and there are *subjective* proofs which work even in adoption and other special situations. Objectively, there is paperwork to prove it—birth certificates, Social Security documents, other official documents that say so-and-so is the child of so-and-so. In paternity, there are

blood tests and DNA tests that can prove it. Objective evidence. The *subjective* test is far easier. When the child cries, who comes running? Mom. At the 6th grade band recital, when the 4th chair trombone player waves to the crowd, who waves back? Mom does. Sometimes you see it in physical appearance. Sometimes mannerisms will subjectively show whose child is whose. There is objective and there is subjective evidence.

John does the same here. If you want to know who the child of God is and who isn't, there are objective and subjective indicators. All moms want their children to be confident of their love and God is the same. God doesn't want us to doubt, he wants us to be confident and we can be as long as we are placing our confidence in the right places.

Overcoming Doubt with *Objective Evidence* (Verses 23-24)

Let's start with the objective side in verses 23-24. *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him.*

This is a summary statement of the whole letter. There are three objective indicators of genuine salvation: *Faith* – believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ. *Love* one another. *Keep* his commandments. Faith. Love. Obedience.

Faith - Believe in God's Son, Jesus Christ

Salvation is first creedal and confessional. We must have personal faith in Christ and what he did on the cross. This is the testimony of Scripture and the example of the Apostles. In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were in prison. An earthquake hit and all the doors of the jail swung open. The Roman jailer was tasked with keeping all the prisoners. The Roman policy was if they escape, the soldier responsible dies. The jailer sees all the doors open and assumes everyone is gone. He draws his sword to take his life before his supervisors find out and take it for him...

But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. (Acts 16:28-31)

Believing in Jesus is the first step. Faith is what I have. Jesus is where I place it. Specifically, I must believe he is the Son of God who died for my sins on the cross. I embrace him as my Savior and I become his disciple. It is the necessary step. Without this, there is no salvation. As Acts 4:12 says, *There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.* So I must objectively ask, is Jesus objectively the object of my faith and hope?

Love

...That we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. (Verse 23)

We talked about love last week. Gospel-generating love sees Jesus laying down his life for us—amazing, unearned love. The genuine Christian appropriates God's love by expressing it as their love to others. Vertical love means horizontal love. God engineered salvation to work this way. This horizontal love creates a willing, sacrificial, self-giving for one another that Jesus said would mark the true believer. Verse 17 doesn't let us love generally. It says

that when a brother has material resources and hears of the need in another, does our heart open or close? Does it arrow to the need or not? If not, "How does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3:17)

Love is an objective indicator of relationship. Again, the same is true in mother/child relationships. It's fairly easy on Mother's Day to know who goes with whom; who loves whom. Children today gather dandelion bouquets and give them to mom. Adult Children call or write or send a card to indicate, *I love you*. Love shows relationship. When we give of ourselves for others, it shows vertical relationship with God.

Obedience

Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. (Verse 24)

If you just took this verse you could think, "If I obey enough, I'll be saved." Many people trip on this and try to earn their salvation or earn their assurance. Obedience is never the condition for salvation; it is the evidence of it. "Doing what is characteristic to the realm of truth is the sign that we belong to that realm." (Ian H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 197.) Whoever abides in God keeps his commandments. The one evidences the other.



These all feed and flow into each other. They form a kind of assurance-producing tri-unity. I need all three. I must believe rightly in Jesus. I can love and obey, but if I am without faith or have misplaced faith, I can have no assurance of salvation. If I claim to believe Jesus but have no concern for obeying God's Word or wanting to please him, I should have no assurance of my salvation. If I claim to believe and try to obey but am a hater of others, there's no room for a hating-others Christian. That's an oxymoron.

But if I look honestly and as best I can, my trust is in Jesus. I want to obey him. I don't do it perfectly, but the fact that I even care about obedience shows something. And if I love others in a self-giving way, there must be some extraordinary explanation. Yes, there is. Do you see how this is a helpful triad? Faith in Jesus. Love for others. Moral obedience. Objective. Observable. Helpful.

Overcoming Doubt with Subjective Evidence

The subjective is where most of us long for reassurance. Inside. In our hearts; our souls. There we want to know with confidence that we are under God's grace and truly saved. John knows this and gives two blessings of strong assurance of salvation in verses 21-22, *confidence before God* and *confidence in prayer* that God will answer us. We all want both of

those but we can't be confident in either if we are not confident of our status before God. Here John pastors us through our weaknesses and frailties, even our inconsistencies to love and obey.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. (1 John 19-20)

By this we shall know and reassure our heart. So this is internal knowing; internal confidence. This is what I was looking for when I was filled with doubts and fear, walking aisles at altar calls and praying for salvation over and over. Can you relate to "reassure our heart before him"? I would guess many of us can. The key is verse 20: *...for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.*"

John portrays my agony exactly. *When our hearts condemn us.* Keep this in the context. When the objective evidences are there, we believe. We love. We obey. And our hearts condemn us still saying we are not saved, and if we were saved, we wouldn't feel this way. When the objective evidence tells us we are saved and our heart says we are not or might not be, remember, *God is greater than our heart.*

Doubter, this may become your favorite verse. Here's what it means: *We can be saved yet not feel confident we are.*

We are not saved because we feel we are saved. We are saved because God says we are. God is the judge, not my feelings or my lack of assurance or whatever my heart may say. What God says goes. God is greater than my heart. God's judgment is more important than my heart's judgment.

One reason genuine Christians struggle with assurance is that we see with greater clarity how we fail God. The more we mature as Christians, the more we realize how broken we are. I think of Paul, who called himself "chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). In Romans 7 he wrote, *For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing... Wretched man that I am!* (Romans 7:19, 24) Does that sound like a great path to assurance?

It's like what they say about education. The more you learn, the more you realize you don't know. You can see this in the words of Mark Twain: "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

The maturing Christian sees more and more how his heart is prideful and selfish. Yes, a Christian is changed and is loving, believing, and obeying, but like an onion, one layer taken off reveals yet another and another. We never get to the place where our heart says, "You've arrived! You're perfect!" If we base our assurance on us or on arriving at a place where our conscience no longer tells us we are a sinner, we will never have assurance.

There are many genuine Christians who are never at restful peace inside with God. Their hearts are always condemning them. To this John says, *God is greater than our heart.* What God says stands and what he says is, believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. *Assurance of salvation must rest on the nature of God, not on our feelings.*

I heard someone say once, *"We must not live by our feelings but by our knowings."* Feelings come and go. 'Knowings' must be grounded in Scripture and the character of God. I think

this is one reason I struggled so much in the past. I obsessed over my feelings of being saved. My focus was on me and the more I looked at me, the less saved I felt. John says, get your focus off of your heart and what it is saying; focus on the God who knows everything and who is greater than you.

As Charles Spurgeon said, *I looked at Christ and a dove of peace flew into my heart. I looked at the dove and it flew away.* When I rest my salvation on the promises of God and believe in my heart that he is true to his word, I feel peace and inward assurance. When I focus on the inward assurance, away it goes.

Meditate on the truthfulness of God. Think about God who knows everything including your massive inconsistencies, yet loves you still. Go with your knowings and you may get peace. Go with your peace and you won't have it long.

Objective assurance precedes subjective assurance

Please don't misapply the previous point. There is objective evidence: faith in Jesus, loving one another, and a desire to please God through obedience. As I observe the objective, I can feel the subjective. I don't want anyone without objective evidence to feel subjective assurance. But I do want everyone with objective evidence to feel subjective assurance.

Imagine that it's late February and you are at the Lake County Fairgrounds. You are sledding with your friends. Yes, your adult friends. One particular run you get so much speed that your sled goes out to the middle of the lake. Your friends start screaming, "*Look out! The ice is thin. Don't fall through!*" Now you're terrified. You're spread eagle on the ice. You're listening for the sound of cracking. You think to yourself, "*Am I going to die at the Lake County Fairgrounds? Seriously?*" You start to inch your way toward shore. Every muscle is tense. You don't want to die in the lake at the County Fairgrounds.

Then, all of a sudden you look over, and here comes the Bethel Church youth bus filled with teenagers. It starts driving on the ice, doing doughnuts all over the lake. Kids are laughing and cheering as the one-ton bus drives all over the lake. How would that change your assurance? *Apparently the ice is thick. The ice is strong. If the ice can hold the bus, the ice can hold me.* You would stand up and whistle as you pulled your sled to shore. The objective evidence has reassured and created subjective confidence.

What John says here is, "Friends, the ice is thick. God is greater than our hearts. God's grace is greater than all our sin. Don't tremble on the ice, it will hold. Have confidence in God. He is really good at saving sinners. *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.* (Romans 10:13)

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