

# Real Assurance for Real Christians

## 1 John 5:13

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Steve DeWitt

I always feel a little sentimental when we come to the end of an exposition through a book of the Bible. This weekend we conclude almost a yearlong study of 1 John. I hope it has enriched our church family and fulfilled what the Holy Spirit intended when he inspired John to write it.

I shared last week how 1 John's core theme of assurance has been a struggle and passion in my whole spiritual journey. How can I know I am saved or not? In my story, this was in spite of growing up in the church and knowing Jesus and the gospel for as long as I can remember. I heard from others, "You were describing me too!" I hope it was a help.

Our last verse to study has something to say to every true Christian—young convert, midlife convert, old convert—doesn't matter. This is John's summary statement of all that he has said and all that he really wants us to know and spiritually feel as true in our own souls.

*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 ESV)*

John is called the Apostle of Love but he could also be called the Apostle of Belief. He ends 1 John with this purpose statement of confident assurance of eternal life to all who *believe* in Jesus' name. Here is how he ends the writing he is most famous for, the gospel of John: *But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)*

He has a similar purpose in writing his gospel as he does his letter. Yet, there is one major difference. The gospel of John is written to unbelievers that they might believe and have eternal life. 1 John is written to those who are already believers to assure them that they have eternal life. One he writes as an evangelist, the other as a pastor.

We have enjoyed the pastoral tone of his letter. He has repeatedly called us, *My children; My dear children; Beloved*, and through John's love we have sensed our heavenly Father's desire for us to know we are his dear and beloved children. As 1 John 5:13 says boldly, *that you may know you have eternal life.*

In our final message, I want to pull everything we've learned together and make it clear, how we can know we have eternal life. First, let's define assurance of salvation:

***Assurance of salvation is that gift of God to the believer whereby he, based on the promises of God and the inner confirmation of the Holy Spirit, receives confidence that he is truly God's child.***

We all want this. In fact, this may be the internal emotion we want the most. We want to know that we are good with God and he's good with us and eternal life with God is awaiting us. In terms of our standing before God, sinners are constantly crying out to God in fear, *Are we good? Is our relationship whole?* We desperately want to know inwardly that God is good with us. But like all relationships, for me to feel assurance of relationship, there must

be restoration that happens first. Objective peace precedes and enables subjective assurance of love.

## **How Real Christians Can Have Real Assurance**

### **The Objective Basis—Christ's full and finished redemption for us**

The Christian's assurance is based on something real and true. It has an objective basis. We are not simply making this up like some kind of spiritual yoga meditation. Salvation is grounded and rooted in one central reality: the person of Jesus and what he did dying on the cross for our sins. This is why the central claims of Christianity are the foundation upon which the entire superstructure rests. *Who was Jesus? Was he God's Son? Did God accept his sacrifice? Was he fully man? Did he actually live on this earth? Was there a real Pilate? Were there real Pharisees? Did Jesus actually die on a cross? Was he fully dead or merely dazed? Was he dead in the tomb or just in a weak condition? Did he really rise from the dead?* When you distill all the Christian claims to truth and salvation, it comes down to whether those are realities that actually happened and if Jesus was who he claimed to be.

The kind of faith that saves doesn't merely assent to these or find them religiously interesting. Saving faith rests one's entire hope for the future on Jesus and these objective, historical realities. It is to personally and internally trust in them as true and rely on Christ and him alone for my personal salvation. Solus Christus. In Christ alone.

In this way, faith is external or at least it is reaching externally toward a historical person and historical events as forming the foundation for all future hope of right standing before God. Faith brings the external into the internal.

Objective confidence in Jesus must precede our subjective internal assurance or our assurance is a mind game. We are not playing mind games or spiritual games. Our faith is creedal. It rests in the truth claims of the Bible and Christianity.

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen. (The Apostles' Creed)*

Here is how Paul writes of this objective peace with God, *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* (Romans 5:1) I want you to see the order of this. We *have been justified*. Past tense. We have already been declared righteous by God.

*Justified by faith.* Faith is the condition for this declaration of righteous standing before God. The result of this is that we have "peace with God." Our past faith creates present peace. But that peace is not primarily internal. It is objective peace. It's like two countries at war who sign a peace agreement. That makes peace official; ratified; objective. There is peace between the sinner and Almighty God. This is known as justification.

*Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.* (Romans 5:2) There it is...the subjective, internal

peace that is built upon the objective, external peace. 1 John 5:13 says the same, *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you might know that you have eternal life*. Belief in Jesus precedes the knowing or assurance of eternal life. You must have objective peace to have subjective peace.

### **An internal confidence**

God wants us to know objectively and experience that assurance as an internal reality. I am not saved because I feel saved. A recent survey showed that 99% of Americans believe they are going to heaven. Feeling saved is not the same as being saved. Clearly, many are falsely assured. That is a very dangerous place to be.

But the inverse is also important. There are many people who seek internal assurance of salvation, rarely have it, and when they die, go to heaven. As I shared last week, in my worst moments of fear and trembling about my own personal standing before God, if I would have died I would have gone to heaven. Not because of my feelings, but because of my knowing. My faith was in Jesus.

Romans 8:16 says, *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God*. Assurance is not a simple formula and our personalities and backgrounds are so different and varied that I cannot simply say that the saved always feel assured. William Cowper, who wrote the hymn, "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood," struggled with a lack of assurance his whole life and died without assurance. From everything I have read, that guy is in heaven. Even Charles Spurgeon confessed moments of doubt and wondering in spite of all his spiritual fruit. We all have doubts and fears and times of wondering. This is why we cannot look to our assurance for assurance, we must look to Christ. I am not saved because I feel saved. I am saved because of what Christ has done for me.

Martin Luther was asked if he felt saved. He responded, "No, but my confidence in Christ's promise is greater than my doubts."

### **Do I trust God?—Assurance based on God's promises**

- *...In hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began.* (Titus 1:2)
- *...Partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.* (Ephesians 3:6)
- *...So that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.* (Galatians 3:22)
- *...And this is the promise he made to us—eternal life.* (1 John 2:25)

Is God trustworthy or not? Are we going to get to heaven and hear him say, "I lied"? Is he going to have his fingers crossed? *Gotcha!* Will he change his mind? Will he decide to enact a new policy? Or do I believe that God is true? Do I believe that he never lies and that he will do what he said he will do?

When I am struggling with confidence regarding my eternal destiny, I can reassure myself with the promises of God which are built on his nature. God is true. He never lies. He never changes. What has he said? If you believe in Jesus, you will be saved. *I do believe*. If the Bible is false or God is wishy-washy, then what can I know for sure about anything? But if the Bible is true, and truthfully communicates God's will, then I am as most certainly saved as the Bible is true.

## **Do I see personal evidence of spiritual life?—Assurance based on spiritual fruit**

This is what 1 John has hit over and over again. Do you want to know you have eternal life? Do you show evidence of salvation in your life now? John has revolved his letter around three key tests that show evidence of our true spiritual condition.

- The Doctrinal Test—*Do I believe Jesus is the Son of God?*
- The Moral Test—*Is the direction and desire of my life toward the will of God?*
- The Social Test—*Do I love others in attitude and action?*

The danger in this is to mistakenly think these evidences are the actual grounds of our salvation; that I am saved because of my love or saved because of my obedience. That is a works-based salvation and a works-based assurance. Both are wrong. If you try and get assurance based on your religious performance, you will die in despair because our “performance” is always inadequate. We are still sinners.

But as I continue to trust in Jesus as my Savior, God changes me. My attitude toward sin changes. My attitude toward others changes. My actions then also change. These are the byproducts of genuine salvation. John wants us to look at these evidences and to be assured of God’s saving work in our lives.

## **Am I suffocating the assurance I could have by...?**

We must not take assurance for granted or think the internal experience of it is automatic. We can diminish it. Did you know that? We can suffocate the internal confidence that we have that we’re actually saved. Assurance is not like a stent in your heart or something. Once they put it in there it stays. Assurance is dynamic. It comes to us by the Holy Spirit and we can, by our own actions and rebellion and sins, diminish confidence within us that we are saved. You say, “In what way?” Donald Whitney wrote a wonderful book on assurance of salvation called *How Can I Be Sure That I am A Christian?* and these are his points:

### **Refusal to deal with known sin**

*Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.* (Ephesians 4:30)

When we refuse to deal with sin, we suffocate assurance of our salvation. We cannot experience high levels of assurance while participating in low levels of obedience. Sin is an assurance killer. Confess it. Run from it. And assurance will increase.

### **Spiritual Laziness**

Since assurance comes by the Holy Spirit and is dynamic in my life, I can slide into spiritual indifference and my experience of assurance can go away too. Look at assurance like being in spiritual shape. When I am active, eating healthy, and exercising, I feel like a million bucks. When I am lazy, acting like a couch potato, and eating junk food, I feel like I can’t move. Spiritually, when I am taking in the junk values and teaching of the world and living for the things of this world and not serving the Lord in any meaningful or sacrificial way, I will not and should feel assured.

But as the lazy or indifferent Christian repents of their lethargy and gets active in their personal walk and ministry, now the Spirit’s means of assurance are online and we can feel that internal confidence in our true spiritual condition.

**Objective Assurance**

*Based on Christ's Work for us  
Our position before God  
Sin is forgiven  
Salvation applied by the Spirit*

**Subjective Assurance**

*Based on God's Work in us  
Our practice before God  
Sin is resisted  
Salvation assured by the Spirit*

How wonderful is confidence and assurance of eternal life? Imagine how great it was when this letter was read in the church for the first time. *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)

*We do? Did you hear John? He says if we believe Jesus is the Son of God (and we most certainly do) we have eternal life. That's fantastic! Those fellows who used to teach here had me pretty bewildered! And so many people followed them and left. But if the guy that knew Jesus personally, who was asked to care for Jesus' mother, and who saw Jesus resurrected—if that guy says we have eternal life—that's good enough for me!*

Such joy! Since we have it in Holy Scripture, not only is John saying it to us today, God himself is saying this today.

Again, to use the illustration, imagine Jesus pulling you aside after church and saying to you, *I know you believe in me. I just want you to know that you're going to live forever. I guarantee it.* How might that change your worries about Tuesday? Imagine Jesus standing outside the Burrell Cancer center and pulling aside a woman with no hair, weak from chemo. *I know you believe in me. I want you to know that this cancer is a temporary hurt, but you are going to live forever. Oh, and there's no cancer there.*

Imagine Jesus walking down the hall of the hospital and turning into a room, and there you are lying in the bed. Tomorrow is the surgery and it's a big scary one. He smiles at you and says, *I know your faith and I know you believe in me. I also know you have this surgery tomorrow. I'm sorry for the pain and discomfort and fear. I just want you to know that no matter what happens tomorrow, I guarantee you will someday be with me in paradise and there, every day is better than the best day you've ever had here. We call it eternal life. You're going to be there. I guarantee it.*

How does the walk to the car after church and the walk to the car after chemo and the surgery prep feel when you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and because of him you KNOW that you have eternal life?

I conclude this whole study of the book with something that happened this week. A member of our church, Jim Watt, at the age of 95, went home to be with the Lord. He had been a Christian for many years. He was a Naval commanding officer in WWII. A Wheaton College graduate. He was 95. Recently his health declined and he was moved into hospice. He insisted that no special measures be taken to keep him alive. He was eager to leave this world and be with his Savior. After one particularly long nap, he woke up and exclaimed loudly, "Am I still here?" Isn't that great? His family said he was very disappointed to find himself still in his weak body, still here.

Monday, Jim Watt went to sleep and he didn't wake up here. He woke up there. He died in full assurance of his righteous standing before God, not based on all his years of being a Christian, but because of what Christ had done for him.

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