

ONE
ASSURANCE OF SALVATION—
IS IT POSSIBLE?



*Assurance is a precious gift, which many
that live in these days do undervalue, and tread under foot.*

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The Works of Andrew Gray

In 1858, the steamship *Austria* caught fire and sank in the Atlantic, killing 400 people. One survivor told how he and five Christian friends stood between the fire behind them and the water before them. They agreed that at the end they would leap from the sinking ship together. When the time arrived, they joined hands, looked at each other, and just before jumping into the cold waters of the Atlantic, expressed their confidence that in just a few moments they would all meet in Heaven.¹

The story greatly affected those in the prayer meeting where it was first told, and it had a powerful effect on me when I read it. What a beautiful way to meet death. What a joyful thought to imagine entering Heaven in a matter of minutes with an entire group of friends or loved ones. But most of all, what a wonderful thing it is, at the very moment of death, to have such strong confidence that you are going to Heaven.

When you think about the reality that each of us is going to die, there isn't anything more important than knowing whether you are going to Heaven.

Most people think they are going to Heaven. Researcher George Barna, in his book *What Americans Believe*, says 99 percent of Americans believe they're Heavenbound. When read the statement "When you die, you will not go to Heaven," only one in a hundred agreed.²

But the Bible disagrees. Jesus used the words *many* and *few* in a way that indicates that most people will not go to Heaven. As Matthew 7:13-14 records, He said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Obviously, many who think they are going to Heaven are mistaken. How can we avoid being deceived? Is there any way we can know *now* where we stand? Is it possible for us to have assurance like the people on the *Austria* did?

IT IS POSSIBLE, INDEED NORMAL, FOR THE CHRISTIAN TO EXPERIENCE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Assurance of salvation is a God-given awareness that He has accepted the death of Christ on your behalf and forgiven you of your sins. It involves confidence that God loves you, that He has chosen you, and that you will go to Heaven. Assurance includes a sense of freedom from the guilt of sin, relief from the fear of judgment, and joy in your relationship with God as your Father.

Unfortunately, many people don't believe assurance of salvation is possible in this world. (Some allow for the possibility if you are one of the extremely rare “saints” to whom God gives an unusual, extra-biblical revelation that you are saved.) They teach that, despite your earnest response to all you've been taught from Scripture, you must continue to live under the shadow of discovering at the Judgment that you are not saved. In the official teachings of at least one large group, curses are heaped upon those who say you may know in this life that you are right with God, your sins are forgiven, and you are going to Heaven.

But assurance of salvation is not only *possible*, it should be the *normal* experience for every Christian.

Romans 8:16 boldly declares, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.” That describes an ongoing, present-tense experience that is normative for the children of God. The assurance of salvation the Apostle Paul had should be the experience of every Christian: “I know whom I

have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day” (2 Timothy 1:12).

In 2 Peter 1:10 God actually *commands* us to pursue the assurance of our salvation: “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you” (NASB). He would not command every Christian to make this pursuit of certainty unless He intended to give certainty.

Clearest of all is 1 John 5:13. There the Apostle John tells us that the very reason he wrote that letter was so that those who believe in Jesus Christ would *know* that they have eternal life: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

Some teach that assurance is of the essence of faith, that is, a part of genuine faith. You haven't really come to believe in Christ, they contend, unless you are *sure* you are saved by Christ. They point to passages like Hebrews 11:1, which says, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Obviously, there must be at least some degree of certainty in the power and willingness of Christ to save you, or else you would not believe in Him to do so. But how much certainty is necessary? Some saved people will have strong assurance from the beginning, but not all do.

We must not say that firm, unshakable assurance is necessary for salvation to be real. You can be a true Christian without having a powerful sense of assurance. If that were not so, the Apostle John would not have said in 1 John 5:13 that he was writing to people he knew to be believers so that they would *know* that they had eternal life.

Even if we grant that some measure of assurance is intrinsic to faith, the Bible never emphasizes this when it tells us how to be saved. Instead it tells us (in Mark 1:15, for example) that we must repent and believe to become Christians. It does not say to repent, believe, *and* have assurance. So if there is a kind of assurance that is inherent to faith itself, it is different from what Hebrews 10:22 calls the “*full* assurance of faith” (emphasis added). Between these two points are *degrees* of assurance.

While the Bible does not require an unflinching, fully developed assurance of salvation for a person to be a Christian, it does tell us that it is possible—in fact, normal—for a Christian to enjoy a rich and satisfying assurance.

Think of it this way. If a governor pardons a death-row criminal, he will tell him. He will not force the condemned man to wait until his neck is in the noose to inform him he is pardoned. Likewise, when God pardons us and adopts us into His family, He does not want to hide our new status from us until the moment we stand quivering before Him, wondering if a trapdoor over hell is about to open beneath our feet. He wants us to know we're pardoned and to confidently "draw near . . . with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:22).

IT IS POSSIBLE, INDEED NORMAL FOR A NONCHRISTIAN TO HAVE A FALSE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

While many who doubt their salvation shouldn't, there are also many who *don't* doubt their salvation who *should*.

Speaking of the Day of Judgment, Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:22-23). Many will be shocked when they aren't accepted. Until that moment they will be confident—they have assurance—but it's a false assurance.

Remember the Barna survey—99 percent believe they are going to Heaven.

There was a prominent religious group in Jesus' day who had a false assurance. They were called the Pharisees, a scrupulously religious sect of the Jews. They were invariably at odds with the teaching of Jesus, but they were quite sure they were right with God. They would brazenly pray, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:11-12).

Their assurance, however, was not based upon truth. Despite their veneer of righteousness and obedience to God's commands, Jesus reserved His most withering words for them, such as "son of hell" and "How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:15,33).

A "son of hell" can feel quite secure and assured that he is bound for Heaven, even up to the moment of condemnation. How can this be? We will pick this up later, but for now, let's briefly note a few contrasts between true Christians and falsely assured professing Christians. Christians are fearful of sinning away their assurance. Believers know, usually by experience as well as by doctrine, that sometimes assurance atrophies as the result of sin. They will prize assurance enough to protect it. Spuriously assured persons, however, are usually unconcerned about the potential loss of assurance. Casual and nonchalant would describe their attitude toward assurance. They simply take their assurance for granted.

Another difference is that people with pseudoassurance turn first to other things for assurance rather than to the Word of God. As in Matthew 7:22-23, those surprised by condemnation at the Judgment do not say something like, "Lord, You promised in Your Word that if we would repent and believe You would receive us." Instead, they will base their confidence upon their prophesyings, exorcisms, and miracles. If such people are reminded today that Scripture should be the primary source of assurance, they would quickly say, "Oh yes, yes, of course I agree." But face to face with Christ Himself, they prove what they rely on by turning to things other than the promises of Scripture for their assurance.

How many people today, if asked why they are sure of their salvation, would answer, "I was baptized," or "I was confirmed," or "I go to church," or "I walked forward at the end of a church service," or "I prayed a prayer with someone," or "I was raised in a Christian home," or "I raised my hand in response to a sermon," or "I take the Lord's Supper" or "I did so many good things to help people"? These are essentially identical to the

answer Jesus said would be given by many at the Judgment. These people reflect an illusionary assurance based upon something done by man rather than something said and done by God.

Similarly, others are wrongly assured that they are right with God because of what they have *not* done. Like the Pharisee mentioned in Luke 18:11-12, they are self-confident before God because they are “not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers.” Most people understand why a Hitler or a mass murderer shouldn’t be in Heaven, but unless they are notoriously wicked (and virtually no one thinks he or she is), they can’t imagine God closing the door of eternity in *their* face. So while some have sham assurance thinking they *are so good*, others feel spiritually smug thinking they *aren’t so bad*.

As we will see later, assurance does involve examining ourselves for evidence of Christlike actions, but the first place a Christian should turn for assurance is the Bible. Our confidence is not in ourselves, but in God and His Word. The message of Christ and salvation is in the Scriptures; that should be our primary source of assurance that we know the Christ and have the salvation revealed in the Scriptures.

Jesus’ encounters with those in His day who had false assurance show us that it also breeds pride. The Pharisees seethed with an arrogant presumption of righteousness. Their spiritual conceit came from a self-conceived belief that they had earned the favor of God. Our own day has seen manifestations of arrogance from people under the same delusion of wrongly based assurance. Cult leader David Koresh was so egotistical about his place in Heaven that he sometimes signed letters as “Yahweh Koresh,” audaciously taking an Old Testament name of God as his own. Many who would strongly denounce both the Pharisees and Koresh, however, think in ways similarly presumptuous, because they believe they need no other spiritual direction beyond their own ideas. Some are so prideful about their spiritual condition that they refuse to recognize their own potential for unfounded assurance or self-deception.

If you have true assurance though, the result is different.

When your assurance is nurtured by the knowledge that your heart and life have been changed by *God*, and that Heaven is yours solely because of what *He* has done, you have an alternate attitude. You aren’t as prideful as those whose assurance mistakenly lounges upon what *they* have or have not done.

The Bible urges us to make sure we know Christ and are right with God, but it also warns us not to have a false sense of security. So it is important not only to have assurance of salvation, but also to know *why* you have it.

MORE APPLICATION

Do you believe in the reality of assurance of salvation?

The first step in gaining assurance of salvation is to believe that it exists. You may be, or have been, part of a church tradition which denies that once you become a Christian you can be sure you are a child of God. The turning point in the entire matter for you may be right here. Read 1 John 5:13 again. It plainly says, “You may know that you have eternal life.” Do you believe that?

Or you may need to believe in the reality of assurance on a more personal level. Will you believe, not just that God does save people and that He does give assurance to some, but that it is possible for *you* to have assurance of salvation? Even though you may not have it now, will you believe *it is possible* to have confidence that God has accepted you?

Do you believe in the importance of assurance of salvation? You may believe in the reality of assurance, but does the concept compel you? Do you believe it is a critical matter? Do you say to yourself, “I *must* be sure of my salvation,” or can you be content without strong assurance? Unlike the unbeliever, the person who knows Christ will realize that possessing the assurance of knowing Christ is not an incidental issue.

Do you believe in the pursuit of assurance of salvation? If you do believe that assurance is possible and important, then pursue it! Suppose you were on the brink of bankruptcy when an attorney called and notified you that you might be the heir of an unexpected fortune. You would do whatever was necessary to

discover your standing in the matter. With such potential offered to you, especially at that time, you would be a great fool not to probe the opportunity. In the same way, if you really understand the availability and value of assurance, you will pursue it.

A famous nineteenth-century British preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, stressed this in his sermon "Assurance Sought":

I can understand a man doubting whether he is truly converted or not, but I cannot countenance his apathy in resting quiet till he has solved the riddle. . . . How can you give sleep to your eyelids till you have known it? Not know whether you are in Christ or not; perhaps unreconciled, perhaps condemned already; perhaps on the brink of hell, perhaps with nothing more to keep you out of [hell] than the breath that is in your nostrils, or the circulating drop of blood which any one of ten thousand haps or mishaps may stop, and then your career is closed—your life-story ended . . . I entreat thee, I beseech thee, shake off this sluggishness. Ask the Lord to say unto thy soul tonight, "I am thy salvation." He is able, and He is willing; . . . He will do it for you when you eagerly seek it from Him.³

One day you will stand on the edge of death, just as those six men on the *Austria* did. When your turn comes to jump into eternity, where will you land? Do you have the assurance that you will land in Heaven? God is willing for all of His children to have that assurance. Are you willing to pursue it?

NOTES

1. Samuel Prime, *The Power of Prayer* (1859; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), page 160.
2. George Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991), pages 198-199.
3. C. H. Spurgeon, "Assurance Sought," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 63 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1917; reprint, Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1980), page 21.