

**14: Assurance - How can I be sure that I'm a Christian?****Introduction**

Those of us who've been coming through our course – looking at God's Great Salvation – have seen all that the Lord has done for helpless and hell-bound sinners. We've seen...

- Redemption accomplished: the once-for-all-time work that Christ accomplished in his obedient life, wrath-bearing death, glorious resurrection and heavenly rule
- Redemption applied: how it is that God the Spirit takes the work of Christ and applies it powerfully in the lives of individual men, women and children. This is a work that stretches from predestination all the way through to final glorification.

Our subject this morning is assurance. "How can I be sure that I'm a Christian?" Am I kidding myself? Does God's great salvation apply to me? That's a very real and important question.

As we begin let's read **Romans 8:1-15** and pray together.

Do you ever think things like this:

- Is the gospel really true – or is it all a con?
- Am I saved?
- Will I persevere, or will I fall away?
- I don't feel Christian?
- I'm a Christian, but I'm really stuck in sin – doesn't that mean I'm really not a Christian?
- I believe that Jesus died – but did he really die for me?
- God elects some people to everlasting life – but has he predestined ME?

All of which boil down to: "Do I really trust Jesus."

Or perhaps we meet other people who say they're Christians, but who seem to be living pretty inconsistently. And perhaps we wonder:

- Are you right to claim to be a Christian?
- Are you a Christian?
- Do you have a false assurance about your faith?
- How should I encourage you? By saying "Yes, Jesus died for you and it's OK... or not?"

These are real and practical questions. Those are the kind of questions which I ask – and which I bet you ask too. I remember lying on my bed as a 15 year old and through tears saying to myself: "there's no way MY name is written in the lamb's book of life."

If you serve in pastoral ministry in any way those are the kinds of questions you'll get asked. By children and young people, by friends, by those you serve.

We need to think biblically before we say or do anything. So, our plan is to start off with the theology – with what the Bible teaches about assurance. And then we'll move in an increasingly practical direction. Our next session is entirely given over to thinking about "What should I do when I lack assurance?"

## 1. What is “assurance”?

It’s worth saying at the top that the business of “assurance” is a complex one. We’re talking here about the state of mind of the professing Christian. Assurance is the felt and subjective certainty that he/she is a Christian.

To understand better what “assurance” is we need to start by seeing a crucial distinction. A **key distinction: saving faith and assurance are not the same**

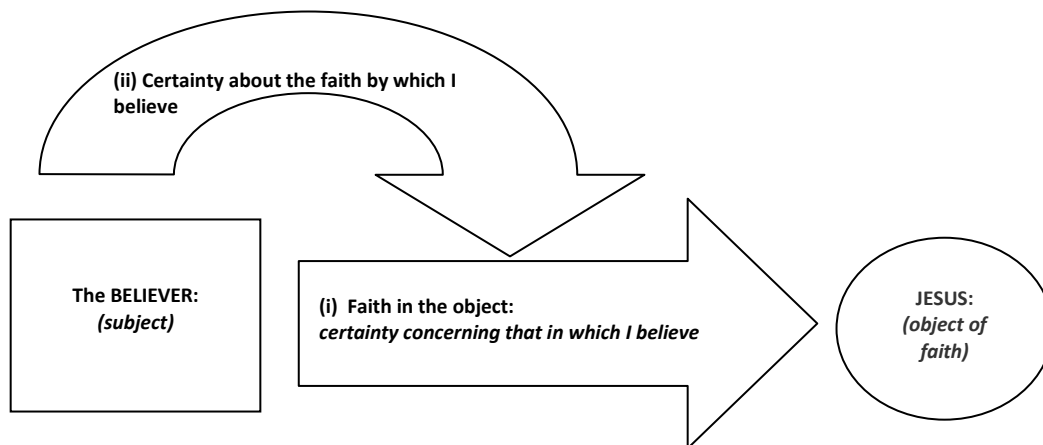
(i) **saving faith** = “I trust in Jesus”

This is a confidence in the OBJECT of faith – that object in which you have placed your trust. This is what is sometimes called “direct certainty.”

(ii) **assurance** = “I know that I trust in Jesus”

This is a confidence in the SUBJECT of faith – that person who is doing the believing. This is what is sometimes called “reflex certainty.”

That distinction is what this diagram tries to show:



Saving faith says: “I am certain about the object of faith, certain that what I read in the Scriptures is true,” etc. “I TRUST IN CHRIST”

Assurance says: “And I am certain about that. I KNOW that I trust in Christ. I am certain that I am a true believer.”

## 2. Why do real believers lack assurance?

Why does someone who IS saved DOUBT that they really ARE SAVED? Why does someone who is a CHILD of God think that they may actually be still an ENEMY of God?

### (a) Sin clouds self-knowledge

Remember our very first session when we looked at the sinfulness of sin. We are totally depraved. Sin is horrendous. Sin messes up our ability to think true thoughts.

Remember the three tenses of salvation which we looked at last week:

- we HAVE been saved from the PENALTY for sin
- we ARE being saved from the POWER of sin
- we WILL be saved from the PRESENCE of sin

This side of glory we still live life with the sinful nature , the flesh. We still do battle with the power of sin in our lives. One thing (among many) that indwelling sin does to us is this: it makes us doubt that we are

saved. It makes us doubt the gospel – all that Jesus has done for me. And it also makes me doubt that I have a share in the gospel.

And, of course, our sinful nature has a willing partner in the person of Satan the accuser, who wants to rob us of certainty and joy in Jesus.

### **(b) God removes assurance in loving discipline**

God wants his children to be pure and to be mature. And so he “disciplines those whom he loves” (Hebrews 12:6,10). So, when he bumps into sin and immaturity in his people, God may choose for a time to remove assurance from us. Here’s an example:

King Hezekiah was rescued from death. But then became proud. And it says that “God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart” (2 Chronicles 32:31.)<sup>1</sup> It’s NOT that Hezekiah lost his salvation. It’s not that the saving power of the Lord left him. This is a disciplinary leaving. It’s the frowning face of your Father in heaven, rather than the loving smile.

Why does the Lord do that? Because He won’t let true believers continue to have full assurance while they are persisting in sin.

The apostle Paul’s “thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7-9) may be another example of this. To keep Paul from pride, God in his wisdom gave to him a “messenger of Satan.” Given that Satan’s power in relation to the believer is exercised by accusation, this “thorn” is probably an ongoing battle with a particular sin that continued to dog Paul.

What sort of things are we talking about that may cloud our self-knowledge?  
What sort of things may lead to God to remove for a time the assurance of salvation.

### **(c) Faulty understanding of the Gospel**

If we misunderstand the Gospel, then it’s not surprising if we lack assurance.

For example, if we think that WE in any way merit or earn our salvation then of course we’ll always lack assurance.

For example, if we think that Christ’s saving work in any way needs adding-to by us, then of course we’ll lack assurance.

Here’s a bible-example of how wrong doctrine messes up Christians. In this instance we’re talking about the Thessalonians. We’ve not time to go into the details. But they had wrong ideas to do with the resurrection and the return of Christ. And so they found themselves living the Christian life without any hope (1 Thess 4:13ff, 2 Thess 2:2).

### **(d) Not cultivating faith in Christ**

Neglecting those means of grace which God has given us will also hit our assurance. Here’s a Bible example – this time from Hebrews. We can see this in Hebrews 5:11-6:12. Let’s look at that together.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Chronicles 32:25-31, “But Hezekiah’s heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the LORD’s wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>26</sup> Then Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD’s wrath did not come upon them during the days of Hezekiah. <sup>27</sup> Hezekiah had very great riches and honor, and he made treasuries for his silver and gold and for his precious stones, spices, shields and all kinds of valuables. <sup>28</sup> He also made buildings to store the harvest of grain, new wine and oil; and he made stalls for various kinds of cattle, and pens for the flocks. <sup>29</sup> He built villages and acquired great numbers of flocks and herds, for God had given him very great riches. <sup>30</sup> It was Hezekiah who blocked the upper outlet of the Gihon spring and channeled the water down to the west side of the City of David. He succeeded in everything he undertook. <sup>31</sup> But when envoys were sent by the rulers of Babylon to ask him about the miraculous sign that had occurred in the land, God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart.”

The Hebrew Christians are said to be “immature” (5:14). Why? Because they did not seek to grow in their understanding of the gospel. They remained as children in the faith, when they should have been growing up (5:13). In 6:11-12 they’re warned to show “diligence” and that they shouldn’t become “lazy.” And in the middle – in 6:4-8 – there’s a scary warning about falling away. The point for the Hebrews was: keep on pursuing the knowledge of God, keep on deepening your knowledge of God in the Bible.

#### **(e) Other sins or disobedience**

Disobedience to God’s commands. Worldliness. Prayerlessness. Other sins. These things will also destroy assurance. Why? Because God won’t let true believers continue to have full assurance while they are persisting in sin.

Here’s a Bible example. David in Psalm 51:11 prays “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.”

That sounds very like someone doubting that they’re really saved. And in this instance because David has just been exposed as a murderer and an adulterer.

#### **(f) Various human frailties: suffering, depression, temperament, dementia**

There are other factors that can rob a Christian of assurance – factors to do with living in a messed-up and frustrated world.

Things like serious suffering, bouts of depression, a temperament that is perhaps inclined to depression and lack of trust, dementia. Such things can also hit the assurance of a real believer.

Those things + sin + Satan can make powerful thieves of joy and confidence in Jesus. There do seem to be particular times and situations when it’s hard to keep on trusting Jesus.

#### **HOWEVER...**

We need to remember this last encouragement. *Real believers DO keep believing even if there’s little assurance.* However much struggling to believe. However much backslidden. The real believer is still a new creature – by the grace of God. And the real believer has not got de-converted. And however small, there will still be the seed of faith which clings onto Christ. Even if there’s little or assurance that the seed of faith is there.

### **3. Do I need to experience assurance of salvation?**

#### **(a) No. Only saving faith is necessary for salvation**

This is a really, really important point to make. Only saving faith is necessary for salvation. We could think of any number of Scriptures that make this point. For example John 5:24, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”

We take hold of salvation simple by believing – by resting, trusting in Jesus and in what he has done for us. We are not saved by being personally and subjectively certain of that salvation. Assurance is NOT necessary for salvation. And assurance is not always present in every true believer all the time – for reasons that we’ve already seen.

That means that a real Christian (who has been predestined, for whom Christ died and rose, who is joined to Christ in faith-union, who has been irresistibly called to Christ, who is born again and possesses the gift of repentance and faith, who is justified, and who will persevere to the end because they’re being preserved by God)... may not always believe that those things are true of them.

Do I need to be assured in order to be saved? No. HOWEVER, the Bible teaches that assurance IS possible and it IS desirable.

**(b) Yes. Assurance is possible and desirable**

In a moment we'll think about where assurance comes from. Next week we'll think practically about how the doubting believer can fight for assurance. But for now just look at a couple of Bible references:

1 John 5:13, "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." (Also 1 John 2:3, 3:14, 4:13 – we can "know").

Romans 8:38-39, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Both those verses are talking about "assurance." John's aim in his first letter is that the Christians he's writing to may KNOW that they have eternal life. Paul in Romans 8 displays that kind of assurance: he is CONVINCED that he (and the Roman Christians) is inseparably connected to the love of God.<sup>2</sup>

**4. From where does the assurance of salvation come?**

Our key point here is this: **assurance comes from God the Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures, in the heart.** Two key texts for us are these:

Romans 8:15-16, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

Galatians 4:6, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father"."

Here we see the heart of what assurance is: it's confidence that we are children of God. The highest height of our salvation is our adoption. Remember when we thought about being adopted as children of God? But where does it come from, this assurance of sonship?

**(a) From God the Holy Spirit**

He is the Spirit of sonship, the Spirit of Christ, who joins us to Christ and gives to us the status of adopted sons and daughters. By Him we know that we are children of God. He testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

**(b) In the heart**

The place where this confidence is felt is in the heart – our "spirit" as Romans 8:16 puts it: the deep heart-felt conviction that by the grace of God I am a child of God. That Christ died for ME. The "me" is the settling of assurance.

**(c) Through the Scriptures**

The sword of the Spirit – the tool by which he does his work – is the Bible. The assurance in question is that the Bible promises are true for ME:

John Piper writes: "The Holy Spirit doesn't whisper in your ear, "You're a Christian," because you could doubt that voice, couldn't you? You could say, "I think that was my pizza last night," or "It was the devil."

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<sup>2</sup> The Roman Catholic Church denies the possibility of assurance or reflex certainty. In the decrees of the Council of Trent (on justification) it states that "no one can know with the certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God."

The witness of the Holy Spirit is not a whispering in your ear. The witness of the Holy Spirit is the work of the Holy Spirit enabling you to look at Christ, feel him as your own, see him as precious, and say Galatians 2:20 personally: "I am crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." It's that *me* that is the settling of our assurance."

(John Piper - <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/how-can-i-know-if-my-repentance-is-genuine>)

## Q&A

**Next session:** what do I do when I struggle with a lack of assurance?

### **Extracts from the Westminster Confession of Faith on faith and assurance**

#### **Chapter 5 – Providence**

5. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption, and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.

#### **Chapter 14 – Saving Faith**

3. This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory; growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

#### **Chapter 18 – Of the assurance of grace and salvation**

1. Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.

2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

3. This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

4. True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.

**Hymn: "A debtor to mercy alone" (Augustus Toplady)**

A debtor to mercy alone,  
of covenant mercy I sing;  
Nor fear with Thy righteousness on,  
my person and off'ring to bring.  
The terrors of law and of God  
with me can have nothing to do;  
My Saviour's obedience & blood  
hide all my transgressions from view.

The work which His goodness began,  
the arm of His strength will complete;  
His promise is Yes and Amen,  
and never was forfeited yet.  
Things future, nor things that are now,  
nor powers below or above,  
Can make Him His purpose forgo,  
or sever my soul from His love.

Eternity cannot erase  
my name from the palms of His hands;  
In marks of indelible grace,  
impressed on His heart it remains.  
Yes, I to the end shall endure,  
as sure as the promise is given;  
More happy, but not more secure,  
[are] the glorified spirits in Heaven.

## **Appendix: some Bible texts on assurance**

*Only FAITH is necessary for salvation*

**John 5:24** "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

*The work of the Holy Spirit is instrumental*

**John 16:8** When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup> in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me;

*Assurance is desirable and possible, though not always present*

**1 John 5:13** 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.

**Romans 8:15-16** For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

**Romans 8:16** The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

**Romans 8:28** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

**Romans 8:38-39** For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, <sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*Self-examination is required. By this the believer comes to knowledge of self, in order that (ordinarily) they may be assured*

**2 Corinthians 13:5** Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you-- unless, of course, you fail the test?

**Hebrews 3:12** See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

**2 Peter 1:10** Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,

**Hebrews 6:11** We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.

**1 John 2:3-5** We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. <sup>4</sup> The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. <sup>5</sup> But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him:

**1 John 3:14** We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

**1 John 3:23** And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.



*Assurance through the immediate work of the Spirit without means*

**John 14:20** On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

**Romans 8:15-16** For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

**Galatians 4:6** Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

**2 Peter 1:1-15** Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: <sup>2</sup> Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. <sup>3</sup> His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup> Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. <sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; <sup>6</sup> and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; <sup>7</sup> and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. <sup>8</sup> For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, <sup>11</sup> and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. <sup>13</sup> I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, <sup>14</sup> because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. <sup>15</sup> And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

**2 Peter 3:18** But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

*Lack of assurance?*

**Psalms 51:11** Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

*The Lord's preserving of the wayward Christian - eg. Peter*

**Luke 22:31** "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. <sup>32</sup> But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." (see 22:54-61, 24:34, John 21:15-19)