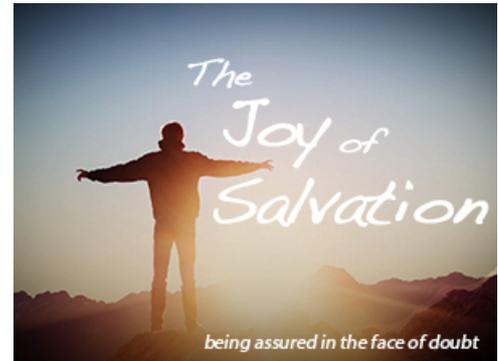


# THE JOY OF SALVATION: ASSURANCE IN THE FACE OF DOUBT

18th March 2018

Readings: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

John was a young man wanting to please God. While at university he and two friends wanted to be the best Christians they could. So, they met each day for Bible study and prayer from six 'till nine. They fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. They visited prisoners in jail and the sick. However, there was a restlessness within John. It was like, he could never do enough to please God. Maybe, if he worked harder God would be happy. So, even though John knew the Bible better than most of us in this room, probably all of us; and even though he prayed and fasted more than any of us - certainly me - he had no assurance, no peace with God. Was he saved? Convinced of Jesus in his head, but troubled in his heart - he could never resolve if he'd done enough to please God.



So, what was he to do? What would you do? Well, after graduating John signed up as a missionary and traveled to the other side of the world. Surely this would please God. This would be enough. But missionary life was isolated and hard. Still, he persevered. Then a ray of light. John got engaged to lovely young lady, who then broke it off for another man. Devastated, he felt a failure: a failure in serving God and failure in love. The boat ride home was the longest in his life. But it got worse. Nearing home they struck a storm. A violent tempest. The mother of all storms. As the ship was tossed and lurched in the raging seas John feared for his life. Yet - on board - there was a group of Christians who were different. They calmly prayed, sung hymns and encouraged each other while everyone else trembled. What did these Christians have that he didn't? This plagued John - no end. Finally, finding himself safe and at home but burdened with the guilt, John decided to attend a Bible Study group.

Now, we'll leave John's story for a time and consider what's happening here. What's he wrestling with?... Though in the extreme, John's actually going through what a number of Christians go through: the struggle of assurance. It's the "Am I really saved" question. We're sure Jesus was raised from the dead and he's the key to following God. We pray, read the Bible and attend church, giving the appearance all is well. But in our quiet moments - deep down - we're not so sure. We're troubled. Have we done enough?

And this is what we'll explore this morning. Last week we looked at John 3 and Jesus' instructions to born again. But even those born again can struggle with assurance.

So, this morning we're look at

- I. Why we need assurance (or where do our doubts come from)
- II. How we get assurance

### **I. Why we need assurance**

So, why do we need assurance if we're born again? If we've repented, that is we've confessed our sin, if we've asked Christ to be our Lord, if we're committed to reading the Bible, praying, attending church - all that stuff - why doubt? Why are we not sure? Why our frustration? Well, we'll look at two main reasons. First...

#### **1. Our Conditioning**

We are condition against the generosity of God. You see, salvation is freely given, but part of us expects we must work for it. For the offer of salvation is made before we've done anything or passed any test. Not only this but it's given freely to we who least deserve it.

This is where our conditioning works against us. We've learned in life to receive only what we work for, what we earn, what we deserve. We go to work, we get a pay packet. We work on fitness and skills and we do well in sport. We put hours into study and we do well at school.

Even in other religions we're told reward only comes after hard work. A Buddhist follows the Eightfold Path and if she works hard enough she might reach Nirvana. A Muslim obeys the Quran and lives out the Five Pillars of Islam and might- he's told - earn his place in Paradise. A Hindu must appease all manner of god's with offerings of incense and food. If she works hard enough she'll reincarnated to do the whole thing again, and again again until - maybe - eventually rest. If she's good enough.

So, so in life and in other religions we learn – we're conditioned - that reward only follows work - hard work. So when God's grace breaks through, we struggle to accept it without us having to earn it. So, Paul reminds us...

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.  
Ephesians 2:8–9

This then is the first reason why we struggle with assurance - we're conditioned against accepting God's gift as free. This conditioning is something Satan loves to take advantage of and brings us to the second reason we struggle with assurance.

## 2. The work of Satan

In the Bible the devil is described as a roaring lion.

Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, 1 Peter 5:8–9

Satan is against us and loves to destroy our faith and ridicule God. Sometimes he does this in a frontal attack, akin to a roaring lion but often he's more subtle. In the Parable of the Sower Jesus describes a farmer sowing seed where some falls onto a hard path. Do remember what happens? The birds eat the seed. They gobble it up. Jesus goes on to explain Satan is like these birds who take away God's Word from our lives. And so the devil picks away undermining God's truth. "You're far too unworthy to be saved. Why would God care about you? Remember the time when you..." And a previous sin, failure, heart break comes to mind. And we begin to believe the lie. "Well, maybe I'm not saved" Other times the lie is, "If God really loved you wouldn't be ill or redundant, or lonely" Satan belittles God in our mind. So, in all manner of ways the devil picks away out our confidence in God and in his Word - so we doubt our salvation.

So, both by our conditioning to earn salvation and by the attacks of the devil we doubt our salvation. If this is the problem, and I believe all Christian struggle with this at times, then what's the answer. How do we move from doubt to confidence, from struggle to freedom, from defeat to victory? How do we get assurance?

## II. How we get assurance

To counter our conditioning and Satan's schemes we need to do two things. We need to Cling to God's Promises and Lift Christ Up. Let's explore these two strategies.

### 1. Cling to God's Promises

Now what is faith? Faith is standing on God's Word in the face of doubt. We take hold of God's Word, his promises, his truths even when our conditioning, the devil's lies and the world tell us different. The greater the doubt the tighter we grip - we cling to God's promises. Listen to 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. 1 John 5:13

God's Word is given to us for a number of reasons with one key reason so that we can believe in Jesus - despite all that demands we don't and ridicules us when we do. God's Word is given so we might be saved, and with this salvation a full, complete and confident assurance.

What promises do we cling too? Well, there are many. John 3:16 - which is awesome

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

But two verses on we read...

**Whoever believes in him is not condemned... John 3:18a**

Cling to, mediate, learn by heart John 3:16 and the first part of 18.

Remember Romans 10:9

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9

But four verses on in 13

For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved". Romans 10:13

Cling to, mediate, learn by heart Romans 10:9 and 13

The Bible is full of such promises that as we cling to, mediate and ponder on the Holy Spirit will make real to the very depths of our heart

## **2. Lift Christ Up**

And as we cling to God's promise we also lift Jesus up. What do I mean by this? Well back in John 3 Jesus' finishes his conversation to Nicodemus with a riddle.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. John 3:14–15

What's Jesus doing here? Already he's pointing to the cross. Not only that, he's also shedding light on the amazing work he'll do on that cross. You see the snake in the desert is a reference to a dark day in Israel's history. Though rescued from slavery in Egypt Israel grumbled and complained against God, even wanting go back to slavery. After one such episode God sent venomous snakes amongst the Israelites. A great number were bitten and many died so God's people cried out, confessing their sins. So God in his mercy removed the snakes but also sent healing. How? Moses was to make a bronze snake on a pole. This was the to be lifted up so that all who looked to it would receive mercy and be healed and so God's people were saved.

Now, hundreds of years later Jesus tells Nicodemus that when he, himself - the very Son of God - is lifted up on a stake those doomed to death for rebellion - that's you and I - will look to him and be saved. We will receive eternal life. Not just here

but three other times in this Gospel Jesus talks about being lifted up. Each time he's referring to his crucifixion - his work on the cross. Which is to draw all people to him that we might be saved.

Do want assurance of salvation. Cling to the promise of God, and gaze upon Christ who was lifted up that you might be saved. Now, in this lead up to Easter we can do just that. We lift up Christ in our hearts and minds.

And this is what happened to our friend John. When we left him he had just returned from the mission field a failure. In anguish of heart and deeply troubled doubting he could ever please God he found himself in a Bible study group. There something unexpected and amazing happened. As the leader read the introduction to the study everything changed. Later that night John wrote in his diary...

... my heart felt strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.' (John Wesley Journal, May 24th 1738, Vol. 1. p.103)

What's key here - not that his heart was strangely warmed - special though this was. No, it was the final realisation that it was by Christ alone he was saved. Not "Christ with prayer and fasting", Not "Christ and visiting the sick and in prison", not "Christ and being missionary" but in "Christ alone" John was saved.

Now many of us have heard of John. We know him well. For his last name is... what? Wesley (*show diary notation*). The same John Wesley who went on to be the greatest evangelist of the 18th century, with thousands coming to Christ and the founder of the Methodist church.

Listen, it's not God's will that you doubt your salvation. God wants each of us to have full assurance in him. To know the freedom of a life lived to the full, in Christ. You know, when we doubt our salvation we're saying to Jesus, "I'm too much of a sinner even for what you did on the cross". Don't give yourself that much credit! Yes, our sin is bad but what Christ did on the cross is way more powerful. When Christ was lifted up on Calvary there was no sin his blood could not wash away, no heart of stone that could not be transformed into a heart of flesh, no life that the Holy Spirit could take up residence in.

And listen, if God can take a life like John Wesley's and use it for his glory, imagine what he can do with your life. Imagine what he can do with this church. I dare you to imagine. For as we cling to the promises of God's Word and as lift Christ up in our lives there's nothing God can't do for his glory in our lives and those around us. Let's pray