

ASSURANCE

from

Psalm 119: An Exposition

by

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We conclude with giving a full and Scriptural view of the principles and character of Christian assurance. *That a full sense of acceptance with God grounded upon the Divine testimonies is attainable*--there can be no doubt. The "covenant ordered in all things and sure"--(2 Sam. 23:5) offers ample warrant for the most assured confidence. The promises of this covenant are full, free, multiplied; adapted to all possible diversity of cases; attested by the oath and seal of God for this declared end--"the full assurance of hope," and the "strong consolation" of his people. (Heb. 6:11-18.) The instructions of our Lord and his Apostles had the same blessed purpose in view. (John 15:11, 16:33; 1 John 5:13.) The design and efficacy of his atonement, as contrasted with the weakness of legal services, was, to make his people "perfect as pertaining to the conscience." (Heb. 9:9 with 10:14.) Under both dispensations has this sense of appropriation and conscious security been maintained. (Job 19:25; Ps. 18:1; Cant. 2:16, 7:10 with 2 Tim. 1:12; 1 John 4:16, 5:19, 20.) Its basis is ground common to all. (Rom. 8:35, 38, 39 with 31-34.) *Faith* (Eph. 1:13; Heb. 6:17, 18), *Obedience* (Isa. 32:17, 48:17, 18, 64:5; John 14:21-23; 1 John 3:14, 18-21, 4:12), *Diligence* (Heb. 6:11; 2 Pet. 1:5-11), *Perseverance* (Hos. 6:3), *on our part*, *Affliction* (Zech. 13:9), *The gift of the Spirit* (Rom. 8:16; 1 John 3:24, 4:13) *on God's part*--are the means of its attainment. *Active devotedness* (Isa. 6:1-8), *Support in temptation* (Job 19:21-25), *in suffering* (2 Tim. 1:12), and *in the prospect of eternity* (2 Cor. 5:1; 2 Tim. 4:6-8), are its blessed results.

It is evidently, therefore, our Father's will, that his children's complete acceptance should not be with them a matter of present uncertainty. He intends, not only that they should reach heaven at last, but that heaven should commence on earth in a state of conscious security and peace; not only that *they should have eternal life, but that they should know that they have it.* (1 John 5:13.) The gospel, instead of forbidding this privilege, warrants, produces, and establishes it; for the conviction of the professor, the excitement of the slumbering, and the encouragement of the weak.

Yet we must not so identify assurance with faith, as to conclude all that are destitute of it to be unbelievers. It springs indeed from faith, and can grow upon no other root. All the practical principles connected with it are the fruits of faith. "The promise of the Spirit," by whom the privilege is applied, "is received by faith." (Gal. 3:14.) The want of assurance also is, in fact, a want of faith. It is the soul seeking "confidence in the flesh," instead of "rejoicing in Christ Jesus." The revolting view of its own sin, *unconnected with the covering of the atonement*, produces despondency instead of assurance. Whereas, on the other hand, a clear apprehension of the doctrines of the Gospel is always a ground for the exercise of faith, and a means of establishing Christian confidence.

And yet, unless we separate between *the principle* and *the conscious interest in the objects* of faith, we shall, in a spirit of evangelical self-righteousness, rest our salvation, not upon faith as a means of laying hold of Christ, but upon some feeling or sensation of our own mind. Besides, the Old Testament saints occasionally lost their *consciousness of the Divine favour*--that is, *their assurance* (Job 13:24, 19:11; Ps. 13:1, 31:22, 77:7-9, 88:7, 14-16): while "the root of the matter,"--*the root of faith*--was still "in them." With the disciples, while they were engrafted *by faith*, as living branches of the true vine, *the privilege of assurance was prospective*. (John 15:1-5 with 14:20.) Faith, as a means of salvation, does not seem *necessarily* to imply an *appropriating interest in the Gospel*. (John 1:49, 50; Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:9; 1 John 5:1.) The Apostles exhort *to assurance* those "who had obtained like precious faith with them." (2 Pet. 1:1-10.) They write to *sincere believers, that they might be assured believers*; plainly distinguishing between *believing unto life* and "*knowing that we have life*;" and defining assurance to be rather the *strengthened exercise, than the essential principle, of faith*. (1 John 5:13.) They separate again between faith as *the result of hearing*, and the sealing of the Spirit, i.e. *assurance--as the consequence of faith*. (Eph. 1:13); as also between "*the things that are freely given to us of God*," and *our knowledge or perception of them by the Spirit of God*. (1 Cor. 2:12.) And is our knowledge of these free gifts always distinct? Have we no part in them, till we have fully cleared up our interest in them? And does the right of the heir depend upon his consciousness of the validity of his title? The "command" *instantly* to "believe on the name of Jesus Christ," is indeed as binding upon us all, as any part of the Decalogue. (John 6:28, 29; 1 John 3:23.) But as faith is the means of *obtaining forgiveness* (Acts 10:43, 13:38, 39, 26:18)--if it be supposed to imply a *persuasion of forgiveness*, it would involve the absurdity of believing *that we are accepted, that we may be accepted*. Thus forgiveness would be made to precede faith, instead of being the result of it. Again--as faith is the instrument by which we are engrafted into Christ (John 15:4), and brought into this state of acceptance, we must have faith, before we can be in this state--consequently before we can *have assurance that we are in it*. Faith therefore must be supposed separable from, and antecedent to, assurance. Thus also--if assurance be correctly defined--"*knowing whom we have believed*" (2 Tim. 1:12)--consciousness supposes the previous exercise of faith on its object--that is--faith preceding assurance.

Nor do many of the exercises of faith recorded in the Gospels exhibit distinct marks of assurance. Sense of need, desire, use of the appointed means, and a spirit of dependence, mainly characterized the applicants for the Saviour's mercy. Doubts of his willingness (Matt. 8:2, 3) or his ability (Mark 9:22) often mingled themselves with the sincere workings of faith. Our Lord himself seemed to consider the centurion's case as an exception. (Matt. 8:8-10.) Seldom did dependence amount to *certainty*; and *appropriation* was generally rather the result than the principle of the application.

"The assurance of faith"--as it properly respects a *dependence upon the record*--is indeed the essential principle of Christian life. But "the assurance of hope"--*a conscious interest in the record--the real privilege of assurance*--seems to be a distinct and separable idea. The truth of the record--*Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out*--may be implicitly received; yet a consciousness of coming or having come, may be much obscured

by negligence, self-righteousness, indistinct perception of the acts of faith, or the power of unbelief in some of its various forms. Consequently, there will be doubt of an interest in the record--*a want of assurance*. For the Bible is not the "Lamb's book of life," the register of the elect of God. No man can, therefore, bring from thence a direct testimony for his personal salvation. His character, not his name, is in the record. The declaration is--"*He that believeth,*" not *any particular individual mentioned by name*--"shall be saved." No man is commanded in the first instance to believe that Christ died for him *individually*, but for such as he is--for the unworthy, the guilty, the condemned, the perishing. This is the warrant of his own application, the event of which will--*ultimately, if not immediately*--be appropriation and assurance.

We are deeply convinced, that a lowered exhibition of this precious doctrine and inestimable privilege has greatly deteriorated the standard of Evangelical religion. The objections against it are founded in ignorance or misconception. Instead of *savouring of presumption*, it is the very principle of humility. It is the reception of the Divine testimony without *reasoning or disputation*. Whereas doubting may be justly considered (to use an anomalous term) *proud humility*. *For does not the doubt on account of our unworthiness, imply a secret dependence on worthiness as a ground of acceptance? Nor again does assurance militate against the influence of godly fear*, which was never meant to impair the certainty of our faith, but to guard us against carnal security and self-confidence. We work out our salvation "*with fear and trembling,*" upon the ground of *assurance*--that is--upon the appropriating confidence in God "*working all our works in us.*" (Phil. 2:12, 13; Isa. 26:12.) The assured hope of the gospel is the *principle*, not the hindrance, of godly fear. (Heb. 12:28.) Indeed we must consider this doctrine, scripturally stated, to be the life of present privilege, and the spring of practical devotedness. Where, therefore, it is defectively set forth, or scarcely set forth at all, or guarded with an over-anxious care against abuse; the privilege is but little known, and the springs of active love are weak and uncertain. And thus believers too often, in a languid and highly sinful state of unbelief, acquiesce in a feeble exercise of this vital principle, indolently yielding up all effort for a vigorous and healthy habit of faith. They go about their duties, like an expiring person about his work; agitated about the business of the moment; while the desirableness of health and strength, the Physician and remedy, are given up in despondency. Their case is perfectly recoverable by due attention to the appointed means, and to the real nature and symptoms of their disease. Yet they sit down to the miserable and degrading conclusion, that their powers are paralyzed; and though they may preserve the notion of spiritual life, and the hope of salvation at last; yet they think they must be content to be feeble, comfortless, and unprofitable.

Much injury has also arisen from restricting this privilege to a higher order of Christians, or to a more full maturity of Christian experience. Many defraud themselves of the sure and warranted comfort of the gospel, by not aiming at a more simple dependence upon the record. They acknowledge confidence to be their duty, and they look forward to some indefinitely future day, when they shall enjoy it as their happiness. But does not the apostle place this privilege at the very threshold of the gospel, when he wrote to "little children--because their sins were forgiven them for Christ's name's sake?" (1 John 2:12.) And ought we not, after the inspired pattern, to "desire every one to give diligence," in

pressing towards this mark? (Heb. 6:11,12.) It is undoubtedly the equal and common right of every member of the family--the youngest as well as the oldest--according to the terms of the covenant of grace. Unbelief, sloth, or backsliding, may for a while preclude the enjoyment of it. But our gracious Lord has linked it to the first, no less than to the latter, exercises of faith; to its most trembling, as well as its most collected, act. (Acts 13:38, 39.) Indeed the first genuine act of faith is at least as strenuous as any subsequent act; and perseverance in this act, where the hand is trembling, is often the characteristic of the greatest decision, courage, and maturity. Nothing therefore stands in the way of our consolation, if we do not "beguile" ourselves "of our reward by a voluntary humility." Nothing shall exclude us, if we do not exclude ourselves.

Serious errors, however, prevail as to the nature and ground of this privilege. Not unfrequently is it identified with warm and sensible excitement, connected at least as much with the bodily as the spiritual temperament, and of course subject to all the variations of this temperament. Now this is the assurance of feeling. The true blessing is the assurance of faith, often without, and even in despite of, feeling. (Job 13:15; Isa. 50:10.) The Christian confidence is--"I know"--not what I feel--or what I have felt, but--"whom I have believed." (2 Tim. 1:12.) It is grounded, not upon spiritual sensation within, but upon the person, work, and office of the Saviour set out in the testimony. (Heb. 10:19-22.) Grounded upon this rock--unlike its counterfeit, its influence is steady and powerfully effective. We would not indeed have a religion without feelings. The flow of the affections is the choicest joy of life. But a religion grounded upon feeling, is a religion of delusion. And the intelligent, self-observant Christian learns to distrust his feelings, the more they are excited. Else will they "corrupt" him insensibly "from the simplicity that is in Christ" into a subtle spiritual self-righteousness.

Perhaps also another mistake in the nature of assurance may sometimes obscure the apprehension. The sincere Christian, intent solely on "working out his salvation," feels a repugnance to any doctrine, which, but in appearance, seems contradictory to this unquestionable and constant duty. He does not clearly apprehend the distinct views, which we ought always to maintain, of the Saviour and of ourselves in the great business. Hence he feels an inconsistency between a due and abiding sense of his utter weakness and unworthiness, and between being "strong in the Lord," and accepted in his love. He does not realize the connexion between self-distrust and rejoicing confidence in the Lord. But he who was most bold in the expression of his own personal assurance, was not less clear in the acknowledgment of his weakness and liability to fall, except as the Lord kept him humble, diligent, and persevering. (2 Tim. 1:12 with 1 Cor. 9:27.)

Upon the whole then it appears, that all should be exhorted to assurance; nor should the youngest be satisfied without the attainment of it. Many realize it at a very early stage of experience. And where they fall short of it, it is not from defect in the object, or in the warrant, but in the mean. It is offered to all. All are invited to it. And were it not for the obstacles I have mentioned, most would attain it in greater degree, and at an earlier period. But too often the testimony--*which is the sole ground of the privilege*--is not received and appropriated with that simplicity, which brings with it "joy and peace in believing." (See Acts 8:5, 8, 39; 16:31-34; 1 Thess. 1:6.)

We cannot, however, absolutely identify faith and assurance. Adoption into the family of God "by faith" (Gal. 3:26) does not, as we conceive, depend upon, nor is it in all cases connected with, consciousness of this relation. A child may be fully assured of his interest in the family, and title to the patrimony. But while an infant--when his relation and interest were as complete as at any subsequent period--he had no such consciousness. And thus many of the dear children of God have no consciousness that they are so; yet they cry, they long, they walk, or they try to walk, as children; and so they evince that they are children. Or, (to use another illustration) we may have light sufficient to distinguish objects, and to guide us on our way: while yet we do not see clearly, and therefore cannot possibly be conscious that we see clearly. What judgment, we may also ask, must we form of those distressing cases of constitutional infirmity, the characteristic of which is, not so much positive unbelief, (though the symptoms may present a mixture of this principle) as a want of mental power (often sudden and unaccountable), to apprehend the objects of faith in any distinct gospel relation? They cannot be seen in their true light and bearing. The spiritual optics, though not destroyed, are greatly obscured; so that the eye of sense and natural conscience fills the retina of contemplation with its own false views. This is a very different case from spiritual indolence, or want of laboriously distinct statement--that is--where the view of the elementary materials is clear, and wants only the exercise of industry in the arrangements of them. This is the state of a person in a swoon, not of a corpse. The principle of life is not extinct, though the consciousness of it is wholly wanting, and may continue so for some time.

If, again, assurance be the essential principle of faith, then faith can never be conceived in an imperfect state, or connected with any variation of growth or declension, or of spiritual intelligence. All that are destitute of it, must also be in a state of unbelief. We have therefore to account for the strange anomaly of unbelievers, "knowing the plague of their own hearts," hating sin, separate from the world, and renewed in heart, temper, life, and conduct. For such unquestionably, are many, who, though kept in bondage by their doubts and fears, and far from having attained a conscious interest in Christ, are yet (upon this supposition) bringing forth the fruits of faith upon the root of unbelief! Is not this a stumbling to the unconverted? Is it not rather "despising" than cherishing "the day of small things?" Is it not breaking rather than binding up the "bruised reed?" Let us pray for faith to receive and to exhibit "the fulness of the blessing," "the high calling," and consequent responsibilities; but let us not shut the "little ones" out of the camp. Like Jacob of old, and after the pattern of a more wise and tender shepherd than he, we must "gently lead those that are with young." (Gen. 33:13, 14; Isa. 40:11.)

The Scripture seems therefore fully to warrant the distinction prevalent among the Puritan divines--that assurance is 'necessary to the Christian--for his well-being, not for his being;' for his consolation and establishment, not for his salvation. For our own part--though we would not scruple to say--"He that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16), we dare not say--'He that is not assured shall be damned.' There can indeed be no peace without some conscious liberty to call God our own. And to be satisfied without the exercise of freedom, is alike to rob God and ourselves.

Yet let not the trembling believer conclude too hastily against himself from the want of this assurance. Diligence and dependence will ensure the blessing. Let him remember, when he prays for stronger faith, to act the faith that is given, and expect the strength to be vouchsafed, not in yielding to the natural impossibility, but in the endeavour to believe. (See Mark 3:1-5.) In this practical "obedience of faith," ere long will he record his profession of confidence--"I know whom I have believed." (2 Tim. 1:12.)