

ASSURANCE

from

Psalm 119: An Exposition

by

Charles Bridges

(Abridged and Paraphrased)

We conclude with giving a full and Scriptural view of the principles and character of Christian assurance. There can be no doubt that a full sense of acceptance with God, grounded upon the Divine Word, is attainable. The "covenant ordered in all things and sure" (2 Sam. 23:5) offers ample justification for the most assured confidence on the part of the believer. The promises of this covenant are not only full, free, and multiplied, but they are adapted to all people, as diverse as their experiences may be. They are attested by the oath and seal of God for this declared goal--"*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 this same blessed purpose in view. The design and efficacy of Christ's atonement, contrasted with the weakness of legal services, was *to make his people "perfect as pertaining to the conscience,"* and under both dispensations this sense of appropriation and conscious security has been maintained.

- The foundation for this assurance is ground common to all.
- The means of its attainment on our part are *faith, obedience, diligence, and perseverance.*
- On God's part they are *affliction and the gift of the Spirit.*
- The blessed results of this assurance are *active devotion, support in temptation and suffering, and the sure prospect of eternity.*

It is evidently, therefore, our Father's will that his children should have no uncertainty about his complete acceptance of them. He intends that they should not only reach heaven at last, but that heaven should begin on earth in a state of conscious security and peace; not only that they should have eternal life, but that they should *know* they have it (1 John 5:13). This privilege of assurance is not forbidden to us by the Gospel, but rather the Gospel authorizes, produces, and establishes it for the conviction of the mature believer, the excitement of the slumbering, and the encouragement of the weak.

Yet assurance and faith are not identical, and we must not conclude that all who lack this assurance are unbelievers. Nevertheless, assurance does spring from faith and can grow upon no other root. All aspects of assurance are the fruits of faith. Moreover, "the promise of the Spirit," by whom this privilege of assurance is produced in us, "is received by faith" (Gal. 3:14). Thus, there is a sense in which the lack of assurance is a lack of

faith, though not necessarily saving faith. It is possible even for a believer to have an element of "confidence in the flesh" instead of "rejoicing in Christ Jesus." This prevents the development of assurance. The full and clear apprehension of the doctrines of the Gospel is not only the proper ground for the exercise of faith, but also the only means of establishing Christian confidence.

Thus we as believers must maintain this proper difference between faith and assurance, or we may develop a spirit of evangelical self-righteousness, and rest our salvation not upon faith in Christ but upon some feeling or sensation of our own mind. Our acceptance before God rests on the objective work of Christ, not some feeling of assurance that we are righteous. But there is also another danger that can arise when we do not maintain the difference between faith and assurance: we might conclude we have lost salvation if something occurs that shakes our assurance. However, the Old Testament saints occasionally lost their *consciousness of the Divine favor* (that is, they lost their assurance) even though the root of faith was still "in them." With the disciples, while they were already engrafted by faith as living branches of the true vine, *the privilege of assurance was still future for them.*

According to the Scriptures, faith, as a means of salvation, does not seem *necessarily* to imply the assurance that we have *appropriated a share in the Gospel* (John 1:49, 50; Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:9; 1 John 5:1). For example, it is those "who *had obtained like precious faith with them*" whom the Apostles exhorted to have assurance (2 Pet. 1:1-10). In addition, their aim in writing to *sincere believers* was so that they might be *assured believers*, plainly distinguishing between *believing unto life* and *knowing that we have life*. The Apostles seem to define assurance as the *strengthened exercise of faith* rather than *essence of faith itself* (1 John 5:13). Thus they distinguish 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).

Not only are faith and assurance distinct, but faith must precede assurance. Since faith is the instrument by which we are engrafted into Christ and brought into this state of acceptance, we must have faith before we can *be* in this state, and, consequently, before we can *have assurance that we are in it*. Faith therefore is both distinct from and antecedent to assurance. If assurance be correctly defined--"*knowing whom we have believed*"--then our consciousness of assurance logically assumes the previous exercise of our faith on its object, that is, Christ's atoning work. In other words, faith precedes assurance.

Not many of the exercises of faith recorded in the Gospels exhibit distinct marks of assurance. Those asking for the Savior's mercy are characterized by a sense of need, desire, use of the appointed means, and a spirit of dependence. Doubts of Jesus' willingness or ability 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 such *assurance* was generally the outgrowth of faith and dependence on Christ rather than being simultaneous with it.

"The assurance of faith" is the *dependence upon the written Word* and is indeed the

essential principle of the Christian life. But "the assurance of hope" is a *conscious assurance that you possess the promise made in the written Word*. This latter would seem to be a distinct and separate idea. For example, the truth of the Word, "He who comes to me I will in no wise cast out," may be implicitly received by faith. Yet a consciousness of having "truly come" to Jesus in a way that saves may be much obscured by negligence, self-righteousness, indistinct perception of the acts of faith, or the power of unbelief in one or more of its various forms. Consequently, there would be a *lack of assurance*. The Bible is not the "Lamb's book of life"--that list or register of the elect of God. No man can, therefore, bring from the Scriptures alone a direct statement of his own personal salvation. His name is not in the Bible, but a general declaration is: "He who *believes*" (not any particular individual mentioned by name) "shall be saved." This is a general invitation to all those who are unworthy, guilty, condemned, and perishing. This biblical declaration, therefore, is the justification for his own appeal to Christ for salvation, the result of which will be appropriation of salvation and assurance, the latter if not immediately, certainly ultimately.

Assurance is a precious doctrine and a priceless privilege of the Christian. We are deeply convinced that understating its importance has greatly deteriorated the standard of Evangelical religion. The objections against assurance are founded on ignorance or misconception. Here are two examples.

(1) Misconception 1: Assurance "savors of presumption." No, it does not. In fact, it is the very essence of humility. It is the reception of the Divine testimony without question or argument. Doubting, on the other hand, may be justly considered (to use an anomalous term) *proud humility*. For if we use our unworthiness as a reason to doubt, do we not imply a secret dependence on worthiness as a ground of acceptance?

(2) Misconception 2: Assurance works against the influence of godly fear. No, godly fear was never meant to impair the certainty of our faith but rather 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 that it is God who works in us to do his good pleasure. Assurance of salvation is the motive behind, not the hindrance to, godly fear.

Indeed, we must consider this doctrine, Scripturally stated, to be the life of present privilege and the spring of practical devotion. When, therefore, it is defectively set forth, 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.

The standard of Evangelical religion also suffers much injury when the privilege of assurance is restricted to a higher order of Christians or to those with a fuller maturity of Christian experience. Consequently, when not encouraged to aim for a simpler dependence upon the written Word, many Christians young in the faith needlessly fail to obtain the sure and justifiable comfort of the Gospel. True, they acknowledge that having confidence is their duty, and they look forward to some indefinite future day when they shall enjoy it as their happiness. But let us note that the Apostle John placed this

privilege at the very threshold of the Gospel when he wrote to "little children": "*I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.*" Should we not, after the inspired pattern, desire everyone to give diligence in pursuing this assurance? According to the terms of the covenant of grace, assurance is undoubtedly the equal and common right of every member of the family of God, from the youngest in the faith to the oldest. Unbelief, sloth, or backsliding may for a while preclude the enjoyment of it, but our gracious Lord has linked assurance to the first, no less than to the latter, exercises of faith; to its most trembling as well as to its most composed acts. Indeed, the first genuine act of faith is at least as demanding as any subsequent act. To persevere (that is, to stand with confidence upon the written Word) when the hand is trembling is often the characteristic of the greatest determination, courage, and maturity. Nothing, therefore, stands in the way of our consolation as long as we do not beguile ourselves of the reward by a misguided humility. Nothing shall exclude us from assurance if we do not exclude ourselves.

Serious errors, however, prevail as to the nature and ground of this privilege. All too often assurance is identified with warm and sensible excitement, connected as much with the natural as with the spiritual dispositions and, of course, subject to all their fluctuations. However, this is not the assurance of *faith* but rather the assurance of *feeling*. The true blessing--assurance of faith--is often without, and even in despite of, feeling. The Christian confidence is not anchored on what I feel or what I have felt, but on what I know--"*I know* whom I have believed." It is not grounded upon emotions but upon the person, work, and office of the Savior as set forth in the Bible. Being grounded upon this rock, its influence is steady and powerfully effective. We would not, of course, want a religion *without* feelings. The flow of the affections is the choicest joy of life. But a religion *grounded upon* feelings is a religion of delusion. The intelligent, self-observant Christian learns to distrust his feelings the more those feelings are excited. Otherwise they will corrupt him imperceptibly from the simplicity that is in Christ into a subtle, spiritual self-righteousness.

There is another error concerning assurance that can sometimes cloud the truth. The sincere Christian, intent solely on "working out his salvation," feels a strong aversion to any doctrine that seems to contradict this duty. In this, however, he fails to clearly grasp both sides of the issue--the distinction between the Savior's work and our own in this great business of Christian assurance. Hence he feels an inconsistency between an abiding sense of his utter weakness and unworthiness on the one hand, and being strong in the Lord and accepted in his love on the other. What he fails to perceive is the connection between self-distrust and rejoicing confidence in the Lord. Let the Apostle Paul be our example, who boldly proclaimed his own personal assurance but was nevertheless clear in the acknowledgment of his weakness and liability to fall unless the Lord kept him humble, diligent, and persevering.

On the whole, then, it appears that all should be exhorted to assurance. The Christian who is young in faith should not be satisfied without it. There are many who do embrace it at a very early stage in their Christian life. When others fail to do so, it is not because they lack the biblical authority for assurance or a personal desire for it. The problem lies

somewhere in the middle, that is, with the obstacles given above. Assurance is offered to all. All are invited to embrace it. Were it not for these obstacles, most would attain it in greater degree and at an earlier period. But too often the Word of God--*which is the sole ground of the privilege of assurance*--is not received and appropriated with that simplicity which brings joy and peace in believing.

On the other hand, if, as some incorrectly contend, assurance is the essential principle of faith, then faith can never exist in an imperfect state or exhibit any growth in spiritual maturity. All that are destitute of assurance must also be in a state of unbelief. But if this be true, how do we account for that strange anomaly of "unbelievers" who recognize the plague of their own heart, hate sin, separate themselves from the world, and are renewed in heart, temper, life, and conduct? They are in bondage to doubts and fears without a conscious assurance of salvation, and yet we find them bringing forth the fruits of faith upon the root of unbelief! This, of course, is impossible. Would it not be a stumblingblock to the unconverted to claim otherwise? Is it not despising rather than cherishing "the day of small things?" Is it not breaking rather than binding up the bruised reed? Let us, indeed, pray for faith to receive and to exhibit "the fulness of the blessing," "the high calling," and consequent responsibilities; but let us not shut out the "little ones" from the camp. Like Jacob of old, and also after the pattern of that more wise and tender shepherd Jesus, we must "gently lead those that are with young."

The Scripture seems, therefore, to fully justify the distinction prevalent among the Puritan divines--that assurance is necessary to the Christian for his well-being, but not for his being; for his consolation and establishment, but not for his salvation. Speaking for ourselves, although we would have no scruples in saying that he who does not believe shall be damned, we dare not say that he who is not assured shall be damned. What we *can* say, however, is that there will be no peace without the conscious liberty to call God our own, and that to be satisfied without the exercise of this freedom robs both God and ourselves.

Nevertheless, let not the trembling believer too hastily condemn himself for the lack of this assurance. Diligence and dependence will secure this blessing. Let him remember that when he prays for stronger faith, he must also act upon the faith already given and expect the strength to be granted. With this practical "obedience of faith," before long he will proclaim his confidence--"*I know whom I have believed.*"