

## Assurance

Since the fall into sin, the need for security gnaws at the heart of mankind. Communion with God has been broken by sin, leaving an awful emptiness. The devil and the world offer a security that is very appealing, but it is false; certain to come crashing down on the heads of those who trust in it.

Through the death of His Son, God has provided a way of salvation from sin. But how do we know that we are a recipient of this salvation? How do we know that we are not destined for the hell we deserve?

Ultimately, this assurance cannot be based on anything we do or have experienced in this life. It is based on the promises of God. God would have this assurance be based on a look outward to him and not inward to ourselves.

Assurance of salvation and that our sins are forgiven is necessary for communion with God. A fascinating event is described by Isaiah (chapter 6:1-9) when he met with God: "Woe is me!", I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty". Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it, he touched my mouth and said, "See this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for". (NIV) Without the assurance that our sins are forgiven, the revelation of the holiness of God will send us fleeing from Him. Any attempt to have fellowship with Him without this assurance will fail.

However, God has provided us with some external indications of salvation. These may be for the purpose of identifying other believers for the purpose of advancing the gospel. As with any truth in the Bible, these sources must be handled correctly. While this list is not comprehensive, it describes several of these evidences.

1. The fruit of the Spirit. These are characteristics that should develop in every believer. For example, I John 3:14 says, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death." (NIV)
2. The gifts of the Spirit. I Corinthians 12: 1,3 states: Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant ... no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. (NIV) The evidence of the power of God being poured out through a gift we are exercising is an indication that we are on God's side.
3. Signs from God. These may include: a time when God seemed to be speaking directly to you, an answered prayer, or a miracle.
4. The inner witness of the Spirit. Romans 8:16: The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (NIV)

One type that is heavily used by modern evangelicals is a conversion Experience. Some Christians have had a dramatic conversion experience where a life of selfishness or outright rebellion against God was transformed into a life that seeks to please God. The power of a changed life is evidence

of God working. Perhaps the most well-known conversion experience is Paul's. I Timothy 1:13-14 states: Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man ... the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly. (NIV)

However, even this passage does not indicate that a conversion experience is to be used as evidence of salvation, not to mention placing any weight upon it for assurance of salvation, which is what modern day evangelicals do continually.

People are caught in a web of sin and need a radical change to turn from sin and to God. However, the experience is not to replace the cross as the basis of our hope of eternal life.

Possibly one reason you are reading this article is because you lack assurance. Many of the people who struggle with assurance grew up in a Christian home and were talking with God as soon as they learned to talk. This training may have even prevented them from engaging in a life of open sin, so they don't have the drastic outward change that others had in conversion. This difference from those with dramatic conversions has caused doubt to enter their relationship with God. I have a friend that I have seen respond to an evangelistic invitation several times, reflecting the problem he is having finding assurance of salvation. By having to look at your own life for assurance, who would not doubt their salvation? Can you really believe that you have been converted when you see the wretchedness of pride and self-will in your life?

A relationship with God that starts at a very early age can produce a tender heart so troubled by daily sins that it can't imagine how anyone could be a Christian and still sin against God. Even Luther struggled with this, until he discovered that his only assurance must rest on the forgiving nature of God alone. But, he found the foundation of all assurance before God.

Outward indications of salvation have their place in the purpose of the church. But, the assurance that we are just before God is different in this way: we cannot see that we are just from an examination of our daily life. When we really understand the holiness of God and what He demands, we will have to admit that our life, whether Christian or not, does not meet the demands of a just God. The fact that I will stand before God one day to give an account of my life would be terrifying if Christ had not promised that His life would take the place of mine. When I look at my own life, I don't see the holiness, the unselfishness, the zeal for God, and the peace when facing difficult situations that should be there. I know I should face judgment and I know I am not just in my own self. That is why justification is by faith. It is just declared to us and we believe it. A just life is not something we experience in our bodies and are able to feel here on earth. All the indicators in our life indicate we are falling woefully short of the demands of a holy God. We don't awake and say "I feel justified today". Justification is not by feeling. It is by faith.

Outward indicators of salvation alone can be obscured by sin in our life. Struggling with sin in our life can leave us with doubts about our conversion, especially if the conversion happened many years ago. What if our memory is incorrect? The fruit of the Spirit can be rationalized to come from natural sources at work. Satan can mimic some of God's gifts and signs, so we need to be careful about putting our full trust in these without discernment. But a simple trust in the forgiveness of God makes us look only to Him, trusting that He can forgive anything. God works in the lives of His children, but this work will always be ongoing and incomplete as long as we are

here on earth. The work that Christ did for us in justification is complete and finished.

Are you having problems with assurance of salvation? Begin by building on the promises from God that tell you that even though you don't deserve it, Christ has justified you. 2 Corinthians 5:21: God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. (NIV) With this truth as your foundation, like Isaiah, you will be able to stand in the presence of God. Then God will send other forms of assurance to build on this foundation and encourage you as you serve Him.

The Lutheran church is one of the few where this truth is emphasized, by the message of forgiveness that is preached and by the forgiveness offered in baptism and communion. The truth that all people need daily forgiveness and that our foundational security is found in this forgiveness is presented over and over in the Bible, but is not present in the theology of many present day Christians. If you have difficulty with assurance, you need to cling to this truth and don't let Christians with a differing theology rob you of your assurance of forgiveness. You may even be able to help them. Isaiah told of the forgiveness he received to help you.

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