

## **“Assurance of Salvation”**

**1 John 5:6-21**

**August 24, 2014**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Verse 13 of our text is commonly understood to state the theme of John’s entire letter. He is writing so that Christians might have an assurance that they have eternal life. **“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.”** He is writing to those who believe, not to those who only think they believe. Jesus taught that Satan is a liar, and John has been attempting throughout this letter to counter two of his common lies. He lies to those who think they are Christians but are not, to the end that they remain comfortably confident of their salvation as they travel the road that leads to hell. At the same time, he wants those who do have a genuine faith not to be troubled by doubts. Such doubts were threatening John’s original readers because of the false teachers who had been present in the congregation but had now left, resulting in something of a church split.

Satan has not changed his tactics. He is still attempting to disrupt the assurance of God’s children, because he knows how damaging it is when a Christian lacks assurance. The lack of assurance brings a deep insecurity that one will try to address in many harmful ways. Perhaps it will be an attempt to feel superior to others because of one’s possessions, looks or accomplishments. Every person will be seen as a potential rival instead of someone God has placed in my life to love. Every threatened setback in life, such as health or financial challenges, will fill the heart with anxiety because it will be seen as a further threat to our security. Lack of assurance prevents us from spiritual rest, and it is analogous to the harm done to our bodies by a lack of sleep. I was reading an article this week about ten effects of sleep loss. Sleep loss and the ensuing sleepiness when you’re supposed to be awake has been the cause of several famous accidents, including the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island and the Exxon Valdez oil spill. It impairs thinking and learning, leads to depression and weight gain. Lack of sleep ages your skin and makes you forgetful. It seems that your mother, who told you that you need your sleep, knew what she was talking about. John tells us that we need our spiritual rest, the kind that comes from having a security and assurance of our salvation. Let’s pay attention to what he tells us about that.

### **I. The Possibility of Assurance**

John wants us to know that we have eternal life. The most basic thing we learn from that statement is that it is possible to know this for certain. That

needs saying in our day, when people who claim to know things for certain are seen as either naïve or arrogant. Our skeptical culture may lead some to object by saying that the claim to such certainty will make us like the Pharisee who prayed saying, **“God I thank you that I am not like other men”** (Luke 18:11). It’s true that he had certainty. It’s also true that Jesus didn’t fault him for his certainty, but for his self-righteous moral superiority.

Assurance is not only possible. It is also necessary. We have already mentioned that assurance is analogous to sleep, providing the deep security that gives rest and renewal. Another way assurance is needed in our lives is to provide the security that allows us to lay down our lives for the gospel. We’ve previously noted how John taught that the heart of love is death. **“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers”** (3:16). But no one would be willing to lay down his life without having the assurance of possessing eternal life. Would you rather walk on a two by four placed on the floor, or one at sixty feet in the air? We would all prefer the one on the floor. Why? It’s the same size whether it’s on the floor or suspended sixty feet from the ground. The difference is in this area of security. There is security when it’s on the floor because you know that if you fall off, the floor is only inches away. You are more free when there is security, and John wants us to live and love with freedom. As we lay down our lives to love others, God fills us with his fullness of life.

One of the most important words in verse 13 is the word “believe.” John wants those who believe to have assurance. One of the biggest reasons Christians lack assurance is that they forget the central importance of faith and replace it with either experience or feelings. For example, someone gives a testimony of how they came to faith in Christ that features a great deal of drama. Maybe they were in the throes of some Technicolor sin like a drug addiction or some criminal activity, and God saved them from their desperate situation. Such stories are wonderful testimonies to the power and grace of God, and they should be celebrated. But it is possible to hear a testimony like that and regard our own testimony as quite boring by comparison. We may even conclude that since our experience doesn’t match that experience, that maybe we are not even a Christian. That is basing one’s assurance on experience rather than on faith. The important thing is not what experience you may have had, but if you believe and trust in Jesus now. Imagine two people who stand before you soaking wet. You ask them when and how they got soaked. The first person says that he was walking along the bank of a river when he slipped and fell into the water. The second person tells you that he was out for a long walk without an umbrella, and it started to drizzle. Eventually, he got soaking wet, though he couldn’t tell you the precise moment he passed from a little wet to soaking wet. But both of them stand before you soaking wet. It doesn’t matter how you came to believe, only that you believe.

Others base their assurance on feelings. They will question their salvation if they don't feel some type of spiritual euphoria. But the Bible doesn't say, "Whoever *feels* shall be saved," but "whoever *believes* shall be saved." Assurance comes to those who believe, and to believe means simply to come empty-handed to God through Jesus. It means to leave behind all those things you think of as your best features, your good works or achievements, and simply come. It means that you come as you are, not after a course of self-improvement. The hymnwriter says it well: "If you tarry 'til you're better, you will never come at all." You don't get clean in order to take a shower; you take a shower in order to get clean. You don't clean up your act in order to come to Jesus; you come to Jesus in order to let him clean up your act.

## II. The Path to Assurance

If assurance comes by belief, how can you know that what we are called upon to believe is true? Or is the Christian faith just a leap in the dark? Is it a reasonable faith based in truth or an unreasonable faith in which truth is irrelevant? John answers these questions in what is easily the most difficult passage in the whole letter. In verses 6-12, he talks about the testimony provided by the water, the blood and the Spirit. He says that Jesus came by water and blood and the Spirit testifies. **"For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree"** (v. 7). The Spirit is clearly the Holy Spirit. But what about the water and the blood? It's likely that John used these words as shorthand for something he had taught this congregation and with which they were quite familiar. We do the same. Will someone two thousand years from now who reads the words "Roll Tide" or "War Eagle" know what that's talking about? But we are all quite familiar with those words. It's the same with water and blood.

There are several options that have been proposed for what John might be referring to here. Let me just give you my conclusion. I think it's simply John's shorthand for the baptism of Jesus (water) and the death of Jesus (blood). So how do the baptism and death of Jesus testify to the truth of the gospel? Think about what happened at those two events. At his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus identified with our sin. At his death, he took care of sin by paying its penalty. At his baptism, the voice came from heaven saying, **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"** (Matt. 3:17). At his death, God's voice spoke loudly by raising Jesus from the dead. So John makes this point that there are three witnesses to the truth of the gospel—the water, the blood and the Spirit—and all three constitute the testimony of God. In the Old Testament, truth was established by two witnesses, and God has supplied us with three. We believe human witnesses. All of us believe that there have been riots over the last week or so in Ferguson, Missouri, though probably none of us have witnessed those ourselves. We believe it because we believe the

witnesses, the reporters who see it and write of it. John reminds us that the testimony of God is even greater, and we ought to believe it.

“But,” you may ask, “how do we really know there was a voice from heaven at Jesus’ baptism and a resurrection from the dead after he had been in the grave three days?” We know it because the Bible says so. Again someone might object, “But isn’t that circular reasoning? I have to believe the Bible is true in order to accept its testimony that the Bible is true.” Yes, it is circular reasoning. I would contend that circular reasoning is unavoidable. The only way you can know anything is true is to engage in circular reasoning. Someone might say, “I only believe what makes sense.” But don’t you see that you can only say that by trusting in your own reasoning ability? You must first make a commitment before you can conclude anything, and that commitment is either to yourself and your own reason or to God and his testimony. Notice how John speaks of that in verse 10. **“Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself.”** Notice the order. First you believe and then you have the testimony convincing you that it is true. The psalmist said the same thing when he said **“Taste and see that the Lord is good”** (Ps. 34:8). First you taste and then you see that the Lord is good. So many today want to see first, to have God show them and convince them on their terms, and only then will they agree to come to God and believe in him. Don’t you see the pride of that? It is putting ourselves above God and telling him that he has to come to us on our terms. God’s terms are first to believe in Jesus, and then experience the eternal life that begins even now in knowing the love of God and the joy of walking with him. Then we know the truth.

### **III. The Product of Assurance**

For the second time in this letter, John makes an application of our assurance to the area of prayer. **“If we ask anything according to his will he hears us”** (v. 14). When it says that God hears us, it means that he grants our request. When someone says, “He has the boss’s ear,” we know exactly what they mean. Whatever request they make of the boss will be granted, within reason. John says that we have God’s ear. But this is not to be used, as so many attempt, to impose our will upon God. God’s condition to this is that we ask according to his will. What does that mean? I believe it means two things. First, since the will of God is expressed most clearly in the Bible, it means that we are to ask for things that are revealed in the Bible as God’s will. It is God’s will that you grow in Christlikeness. So it is good to ask God to help you behave more like Christ. It is God’s will that you learn to love others rather than living a self-centered life. So it is good to pray for that. Secondly, this means that God reserves the right to say “No” to our prayers when our requests are contrary to his secret will. The Bible contains God’s revealed will, but there is another sense of the will of God that he doesn’t reveal to us until it happens.

We should feel the freedom to pray for these things that are not revealed, but even in this we can pray with confidence that God's will is far better than our own. There is great mercy when he answers our prayer with a "No."

John makes this promise of answered prayer more striking by the way he speaks of it in verse 15. He says that **"we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him."** Note the tense of that verb. We *have* the request now, in the present, even though in many cases the actual fulfillment of the request may take years to accomplish. Our prayers make a difference. This is such a needful promise today, when so many think that one person can make very little difference. The truth is that one praying person can make a huge difference in the world for the simple reason that God answers prayer.

John gives an example of answered prayer in the second most perplexing passage in the letter. He says that, in answer to prayer, God will give life to a **"brother committing a sin not leading to death"** (v. 16). The big question here is the nature of the sin leading to death and the sin not leading to death. One answer given to that question is to divide sin into the categories of deadly or mortal sins on the one hand and what is called venial sins on the other hand. The deadly sins are so called because they are the root of other sins. The classic list of the seven deadly sins includes anger, greed, laziness, pride, lust, envy and gluttony. I don't think that's what John has in mind here. I believe he is talking about the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which Jesus said was the sin that would not be forgiven. It was a sin committed by the Pharisees in which they deliberately rejected Jesus even though they knew the truth. So I believe what John is talking about here is the prayer of believers for the salvation of unbelievers. That means that John is using the word "brother" not to describe a Christian, but perhaps someone who has had some association with Christians, but who is not truly saved. The promise is that God will give that person life in answer to the faithful prayers of a Christian.

Just on Thursday of this week, I heard two stories of answered prayer in this very area. One brother in our church had been praying for a coworker to come to Christ, and recently he did so, after several years of praying. Another member of our church mentioned a Christian he knew from Liberia, where the Ebola plague has been so severe. His friend reported her mother had been saved, for which, in part at least, God used that plague. Parents, never give up praying for the salvation of your children. Children, never give up praying for the salvation of your parents.

## **CONCLUSION:**

May God grant an assurance of salvation as you believe in Jesus!