

WORRYING ABOUT YOUR ETERNAL FUTURE?

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Are you troubled about your acceptance with God? If you knew that He is pleased with you, that He smiles at you approvingly, would you be happy? I am always happy if someone I respect smiles at me with warm acceptance as though he/she really likes me and wants me to be nearby. It gives such a good feeling inside to know that you are chosen, to be appreciated for what you are.

Now, my question is: do you have the assurance that God feels that way about you? Or are you afraid that He frowns at you?

When you feel that way, everything seems to go wrong. The Psalmist prays to God saying, "We are consumed by Thine anger, and by Thy wrath are we troubled. Thou has set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance" (Ps. 90:7, 8). That is a statement of universal human feelings. So much so that most people simply banish from their minds any thoughts of God at all. They want to avoid Him like you would avoid a cantankerous neighbor.

How can we get God to smile at us? The pagan says, "Offer Him sacrifices! That will make Him pleased with you." In fact, ancient Israel thought the same way, because Amos tried to straighten them out, telling them in the name of the Lord, "Though ye offer Me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them" (5:22). Not far away from the

pagans is our hope that all our righteous works will get Him to smile at us.

For God to smile at us with approval is the same as for Him to justify us, for that is its meaning. If your friend smiles at you with approval, it simply means that he/she justifies you. Now the question is: Are we justified in God's sight by our good works, or by grace through faith? We find the beginning of the answer in Mt. 3:17: when Jesus was baptized, the Father said, "'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,' embraces humanity." If you find that hard to believe, read what the author of *Desire of Ages* says, it's true!

"God spoke to Jesus as our representative. With all our sins and weaknesses, we are not cast aside as worthless. 'He hath made us accepted in the Beloved.' Eph. 1:6. The glory that rested upon Christ is a pledge of the love of God for us."¹ That's what we want! When the Father said that, He included you! He accepted the human race, "in Christ."

Personal assurance of salvation is a topic widely discussed. *How* can one have it? Or, *can* one really have it? It's serious, because you can waste a lot of psychic energy worrying about your eternal future. All kinds of personality disorders can develop because of this deep anxiety, making not only yourself miserable, but others closest to you.

What's the difference between a sober "assurance of salvation" and a "cocksureness of salvation"?

¹ *The Desire of Ages*, p. 113.

Webster's *New World* defines the latter as "self-confident in a stubborn or overbearing way".

Matthew reports Jesus at least twice warning us against "cocksureness of salvation"; "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not . . . done many wonderful works? and then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me" (Mt. 7:22, 23). Those on His "left hand" will protest at last, "Lord, when . . . did [we] not minister unto thee? . . . These shall go away into everlasting punishment" (Mt. 25:41-46). They were self-confident, self-deceived up until the tragic last moment! So, should we forever be worrying about our personal eternal destiny?

On the other hand, John says, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life. . . We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 Jn. 5:13, 19). On the surface, seems contradictory, doesn't it? Is God's grace "irresistible"? In some Christian churches, Calvinism is taught—a venerable Protestant doctrine, good people. They say that God predestinates some to be saved, others to be lost—once saved, always saved. Its logic requires the idea of "irresistible grace." If God wills something to happen, nothing in heaven or hell can make it not happen. So, if God gives His grace to someone, that grace will propel that person to heaven. One may resist it and for years succeed, but in the end the grace will win out and he will be saved. So, if

anyone at last is lost it will be because God has not given him His grace.

Many tell us that you can't be a happy Christian unless you have the "assurance of salvation." Yet Jesus Himself warns us, Don't be stubbornly self-confident, "cocksure." The stakes are high; Jesus is right. "Many," even multitudes, who profess to be His followers will end up bitterly disappointed when it's too late to change their self-confident "cocksureness" into a rock-solid, genuine "assurance of salvation."

Jesus tells us, "Abide in Me . . ." (Jn. 15:4). He put us "in Himself" by virtue of His identity with us, His sacrifice. Now stay where I put you, He says. I put you in the Father's hand, He says, and "no man is able to pluck [you] out of My Father's hand" (Jn. 10:29). But be warned: the Calvinist idea of "once saved always saved" is a distortion of the truth. "No man" can pluck you out of that Hand, but you can jump out on your own! "Esau" enjoys the possession of a priceless "birthright," but at any time he can sell it for "a mess of pottage."

Simple common sense would suggest that while we must have a sober confidence without which happiness is impossible, we must also "give diligence to make our calling and election sure" (see 2 Pet. 1:10). To look both ways before you cross a busy city street is not being fear-ridden; it's healthy. Can we have a "healthy" assurance? Is Bible teaching self-consistent? Where is sanctified spiritual common sense?

The apostle John says, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the

Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). Is that like knowing you have a certain amount of money in the bank? You feel better if you know it’s there in your name. Obviously, God does not want us to fret and worry.

Some Christian missionaries had saved up \$300 to buy a kerosene refrigerator to take back where they had no electricity. But they lent the money to a church friend at home so he could recover his pickup which had been foreclosed for lack of payments. He was an old friend; so the Christian was sure he would re-pay the loan.

Meanwhile they went to college during their vacation time. Week after week, month after month, he waited to receive a check from him by mail; but nothing came. Time got short; he worried. Was his friend unfaithful?

All this while he had been receiving bank statements from his inactive account in my little hometown bank. He tossed them all unopened in a drawer, for he wasn’t using the account.

Finally, he looked at them. There, months before, was a mysterious deposit to his account of \$300. All this while he had been doubting his friend, while he had been faithful.

By virtue of His great sacrifice on His cross, your Savior deposited to your personal account the gift of justification, forgiveness of sin, eternal life. He details all the items of this Grand Deposit in Romans and Ephesians. You knew nothing of it. You did nothing to merit it or to effect it. It was yours all this while, while your human heart was in alienation from Him. You needed to learn what is

the true Good News of what He has already done for you.

Then when you learned the Good News of the gospel, and you believed, you *experienced* justification by faith, you rejoiced in sins forgiven, you began to know the new quality of life that is 'eternal life." But it was all purchased for you at the cross of Christ, and deposited to your account "by grace." Totally undeserved.

God also wants us to exercise common sense. The Bible does not teach the heresy of Universalism. Clearly, some people, "the number . . . as the sand of the sea" (Rev. 20:8) at the end of the 1,000 years, will not enter into eternal life. Christ will be forced to tell "many," Sorry, "I never knew you" (Matt. 7:23).

So, how do we walk this fine hairline? Several Bible principles may help us:

The only Person in the Bible who has ever been guaranteed eternal life is Christ Himself. God says of Him, "Behold My servant, . . . Mine elect, in whom My soul delighteth" (Isa. 42:1).

All the rest of us are "chosen . . . in Him" (Eph. 1:4), because His new role is that of "last Adam," or second Adam. He is the new Head of the human race; and just as the human race is naturally "in Adam" by birth, so now by faith we can individually ratify His election of us "in Him."

He wills that "all men" should be saved (1 Tim. 2:3, 4); you waste your time if you worry about whether He wants you to be saved.

His love is so strong, His persistence is so great as “Good Shepherd,” that He will continue to assure you of His search for you as His lost sheep.

He claims you as His purchased possession, purchased with His blood.

He says that He has you in His hand. “My sheep hear My voice . . . and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any one pluck them out of My hand” (John 10:27, 28). “Assurance”? You bet!

But let the common sense kick in right here: if you cling stubbornly to unbelief, if you deliberately choose to rebel, you yourself can jump out of His hand. So He says, “Abide in Me,” stay where I have put you by means of My great sacrifice for you (John 15:4).

The apostle John likes to nail things down, to “know” this or that for sure. Some two dozen times in his First Letter he says we can “know” that we “know” the truth. Half of those times he uses the word *ginosko*, which means to be informed, to gain the knowledge of. The other half he uses the word *eido* which means to know by perception of truth, or shall we say, by common sense. He has “written unto you . . . that ye may know (*eido*) that ye have eternal life” (5:13).

How can spiritual common sense give us this “assurance”? The answer is in verse 11: “God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.” “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (Jn. 3:16), not merely offered to give Him.

Some five or six times in Romans 5 Paul emphasizes that God has given us the “free gift” that has reversed the “condemnation” that came upon the human race “in Adam,” and as John says, that gift is “in Christ.” The Father gave Christ to the world, that He might already be “the Saviour of the world,” “the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe” (Jn. 4:42; 1 Tim. 4:10).

What it boils down to is this: salvation is due to God’s initiative; damnation can be due only to our own initiative in choosing not to “believe” the truth. As surely as Esau had the birthright, so surely you have eternal life in Christ. He gave Himself for you and to you. He not only offered to give you the gift of eternal life so that your salvation would depend on your own initiative; He actually gave you the gift so that in eternity you would never have any reason to “boast” that you took the initiative. It’s 100% “by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God [there’s that word again!]: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9).

Although Esau had the birthright, he chose to “despise” it and “sold” it for a trifle of worldly pleasure (Gen. 25:34; Heb. 12:16). “He that believeth not” takes the initiative in his being lost at last (Jn. 3:18, 19), “despises” what God has given him “in Christ.” Cherish your assurance in Christ, but don’t be cocksure in yourself. You can trust Him but you can’t trust yourself. You can very easily do something stupid. Look both ways before you cross the street.

Should one be worried about whether he is “born again”? The answer is No. But should one be seriously concerned about whether he is truly converted? The answer is Yes. Right up to the moment when the Sanhedrim condemned Jesus to death, the apostle Peter was dead sure he was well converted. When Jesus told him Thursday night that he was not, he became upset, and loudly protested his being thoroughly “born again.” In his conscious understanding, he sincerely believed he was already “converted,” but when a mere lass (probably an attractive one) challenged his identity with Christ, his unconscious motivations took over and he denied Christ with vile cursing and swearing (Mt. 26:74). Peter did not know himself! One can be very highly educated and know a lot of things—yet not know that.

And who is “Peter”? Anyone who belongs to the seventh church of world history, “the church of the Laodiceans” (Rev. 3:14-21; well, more particularly, anyone who is part of “the angel of the church,” its leadership). Jesus tells us frankly that “Peter” is indeed our patron “saint”: “You say, “I am rich, have become wealthy [by some assumed historical enrichment!]. and have need of nothing,”—and do not know that you are [the one of all the seven, Greek, *ho*] wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked,” strutting around on the stage of the universe and of the world—“naked.”

Poor Peter made a fool of himself, thinking he was “rich” in his born-again experience and knowledge. He even argued with the all-knowing Lord, contradicting Him as if to say, “Lord, You don’t

know me! Give me a chance, and I'll prove to You that I am the most devoted follower You have! I've been (a) baptized, (b) ordained to the ministry, (c) have cast out devils in Your name, (d) finished my 3 1/2 years Seminary training with cum laude under You as Teacher, (d) have my doctoral diploma, (e) I really understand Your gospel and I teach it powerfully. Lord, do You think I need to go back to the spiritual kindergarten and start over and get 'born again' again! You're wrong, Lord!" Sadly, the Lord had to tell him honestly, "When you are converted, strengthen your brethren" (Lk.22:32).

Why should we be "concerned" about our true conversion? Not because of craven fear lest we won't make it into the kingdom, but for a more important reason: lest in our unconscious selfishness we bring shame on Him in these closing hours of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The best Laodicean in the world can well pray that prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Lk. 18:13). Edward R. Sill probably had an even better idea in his heart-wrenching poem: "O Lord, be merciful to me, a fool!"

Someone says, "Yes, I know that Jesus died for the world; He tasted our second death; He redeemed us by His sacrifice; but I don't feel worthy because I have sinned. How do I know that I am included in His sacrifice? I don't *feel* like He accepts me!"

Let's look at an example of a man who knew he was a sinner, for he was doubly one—an adulterer and a murderer at the same time: David. Yes, he came within a hair's breadth of committing the

unpardonable sin, for he prays in Psalm 51:11, “Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.” He had gone a whole year in impenitence after committing the foul deeds. Could he ever find acceptance with God?

(1) He confessed his sin openly, fully, honestly (vs. 3).

(2) He realized that his sin was a re-crucifixion of the Lamb of God (vs. 4), thus delivering him from the whimpering, selfish fear of getting AIDS or Herpes, or losing his job, or embarrassment, etc. as the result of his sin. In the light of the cross, he learned to *abhor* his sin! (vs. 17).

(3) He saw that sin permeated every cell of his being and of his soul (vs. 5, 6). He pleaded no “but” to excuse it even 1%.

(4) He took the absolutely necessary step of believing that God forgave his heinous sin—at the cost of the shed blood of the Son of God (vss. 7-10). You can’t truly believe in the forgiveness of sins unless your soul is humbled in the dust by realizing the enormity of sin itself.

(5) David pleaded, begged, for cleansing of soul, not just legal “pardon” (vs. 10).

(6) He realized that the “bloodguiltiness” of his soul included guilt of the blood of the Son of God (vs. 14, 4; compare Acts 2:36; 4:14, 15).

(7) David consecrated the rest of his life to missionary, soul-saving work, a new career (Ps. 51:12, 13). Did he know that God had “accepted” him? Yes; he realized that no Band-aid could help him; he had been saved from the deepest hell itself.

Have you ever woke up at night from a bad dream in which you felt lonely, rootless, not knowing who you were or where? Then in a few moments as your mental faculties were re-activated, you began to remember all the good news about yourself. It was like turning your cold computer on, and in a few moments the software in the “lifeless” machine restores itself to what your computer was when you went to sleep that night. It regains its identity.

The Holy Spirit permits us to have these fleeting moments of being “orphans,” a taste of what it means to “perish.” Then He reminds us of John 3:16: the heavenly Father loves you so much that He gave His only Son for you. He did it; it’s been done, “that whosoever [that’s you] believes should not perish, but have everlasting life.” He has redeemed you from being an orphan; by election you are a member of His family, a child of God. As you recover from your bad dream, all this glorious Reality is conveyed to you by the renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8 was being demonstrated before your eyes: “Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit [Himself] beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ. . .”

The Holy Spirit convicts you that you can call the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ your Father! You can pray the 23rd Psalm—He is your Shepherd.

If you had a loving father you may remember when you were a child how secure you felt if your father

was with you? He never threatened to disown you with curses if you should make a mistake! You never got the idea he was planning for you to fail. You never had a sense that he had you on probation, that you were always almost on the skids with him. No, you were his beloved child. That's how Abraham "believed in the Lord" when his faith was counted for righteousness. God had no plans for him to fail! That's why He never threatened him with curses, never asked him to promise anything. It was Father-Son business, "heart-religion," not "under law."