

As sinners in a fallen world we encounter countless problems, often unexpected troubles, on our journey through life, and they continue to afflict us even into old age. We fail to appreciate the severity of many of them until it is too late, and in some cases, even if we recognize the difficulty beforehand, there may be little or nothing we can do to prevent it. There are two problems, however, which deserve more attention than they normally receive, but, if we come to see them for what they really are, there is something that can be done about both of them.

(1) The first problem, an obstacle to making any progress, is the false assurance of salvation that many an unbeliever has come to embrace. How often we hear it when an ungodly person dies that his unbelieving friends will say, “He has gone to a better place.” If he suffered for some time before death they will declare, “Now, at last, he can rest in peace.” If they grieve his loss they will boldly proclaim, “I will see him again in heaven.” These are all statements they have heard others say before them, and they repeat what they have heard, rather predictably to ease their own pain, but they say nothing else. They want the conversation to end right there. They take these announcements they have made for granted, you see, assuming that they are appropriate for the occasion – even hoping that they might bring some measure of relief to others standing by – yet those who say such things fail to research these matters in order to see if they are even true!

If it shocks you that anybody could ever be so overconfident about the afterlife, so presumptuous about the future which he has never bothered to look into, let alone verify, remember that such a person is blinded by Satan (2 Cor. 4:3,4), and that the way of the world, the broad path which leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13), is overwhelmingly more appealing to him than the message of the cross which, without even really knowing what it is, seems foolish to him and his social group. Indeed, this is precisely why we as Christians need to take the great commission seriously (Matt. 28:18-20), to take the message of Christ and Him crucified to all the world, to appreciate that this is what God uses to draw sinners to Himself (1 Cor. 1:18-25), and not wait for people to come to us or think that they will ever be able to find out such things left to their own devices.

(2) The second problem, another obstacle to progress, is the lack of any assurance of salvation, true assurance, that too many believers have. This lack of assurance is more detrimental than they may realize, leaving them anxious, worried and afraid in the face of every challenge – discouraged about their future, what even a single day may bring – and feeling unable to tell others about the hope that they have been told should be theirs to celebrate in Christ. Indeed, this is what inhibits a vast number of Christians from taking up the great commission: they are not sure that they themselves actually possess this saving interest in Christ that they are called to profess to others. Some even accept that they might never be sure, and some of them, in turn, have persuaded themselves that such assurance, at least for them, is impossible to attain and thus they never even try to do so.

It is this second problem that I want to address here. There may be any number of reasons why a believer is plagued with doubts about his salvation, but there are three outstanding causes for it which need to be carefully considered: (a) One cause of such doubting is a small and very weak faith. Salvation is by faith alone, but of course it must be a *true* faith to be a *saving* faith; it must be a *living, experiential* faith in Jesus Christ. Are you trusting in the Lord Jesus, relying on Him only to make you right with God? If so, it does not matter how small your faith is (Matt. 17:20), or how weak it is (Is. 42:3), because Christ is able to save and does save to the uttermost all who come unto God by Him (Heb. 7:25).

Oh, but how can weak faith, if it is true faith, fail to provide the bearer the assurance of salvation that he so desperately desires? Does not such assurance belong to the essence of faith? No, “assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be a partaker of it; yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given to him of God, he may without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto” (Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 18, paragraph 3).

(b) Another cause of doubting for many is the ongoing struggle they have with sin and overwhelming temptations. No one should ever think that the Christian life was intended to be easy. It is a battle in which we are called to fight the good fight of faith (2 Tim. 4:6-8). A Christian will never *continue* in any sin, that is true – that is, he will not allow it to take over in his life and become a habit, but will fight

against it tooth and nail. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that every child of God sins and needs to be corrected (Heb. 12:3-11). This is one of the reasons for which God has given His people the Holy Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16,17), as well as the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26). Let us then by such means take up the whole armour of God that we may be able to withstand the wiles of the devil, and, having done all, to keep standing (Eph. 6:10-20).

It is, rather, when someone *ceases* to fight against sin, and *chooses* instead those ways of the world over Christ, that we need to sound the alarm. Do you, out of love for Christ, continue the battle against your besetting sins? If so, you will be kept, along with all other believers – how? – by the power of God through faith to the end of your days (1 Pet. 1:3-5). If, however, you have stopped fighting against sin in your life, and perhaps have stopped pretending even to yourself that you ever really did fight it, this is the warning you need that you, unbeliever, were never truly converted in the first place! What can I say to you? Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near (Is. 55:6,7).

(c) One more common cause for doubting is simple carelessness, a failure to take steps to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ. This is easily rectified, but it calls for a commitment to make proper and regular use of all the means of grace.

The Word of God instructs believers to be diligent in making their calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10). This makes it clear that, as Christians, not only *can* we have such assurance – and what a blessing it is just to know that! – but that we are also given an active part in seeking to attain it and bear responsibility to lay hold of it earnestly. How then, even in the face of weak faith and the hardships of an ongoing battle against sin, shall the believer gain that so highly prized assurance of salvation which has already and for too long alluded him? Let us focus our attention, finally, on the answer to that question.

Peter wrote that, to believers, Christ is precious (1 Pet. 2:7,8); He is not regarded as precious to unbelievers. An older lady, a devout Christian for many years, was struggling with this matter of assurance, so I put it to her: “Is Christ precious to you?” She answered without hesitation, “Oh, He is more precious to me than my own life.” I knew that she meant it, and I told her that this was how she could know beyond all question that she had a saving interest in Christ, that loving the Lord as she did was the privilege of those who had been made alive in Christ, not

of those who were yet dead in sin. Are you someone who is struggling with this same matter of assurance? If so, I put it also to you: “Is Christ precious to you?” The testimony of your own heart will give you the answer you need!

There is another side to that which should also be examined. How does it affect you when an infidel blasphemes, when he curses and takes the name of the Lord in vain? If it hurts you to hear that, if it cuts you as a knife to your own heart, that, too, is confirming evidence of your love for the Lord, of His sanctifying grace working in you to will and to do of His good pleasure. The more your heart is conformed to the will of God, dear Christian, loving what He loves and hating what He hates, the more you will respond to the things of God and react to the ways of the world.

But let us now take this a step further. If we are careless about the faith, and never examine ourselves, we may wonder to the very day we die whether we really belong to the Lord. Yet, if we abide in Christ – look to Him, rely on Him and daily draw from Him what we need to serve Him faithfully – we will bear much fruit (John 15:1-8), what is called “the fruit of the Spirit,” namely, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-26), and it is by our fruitfulness, God working in us and through us, that we can be known to all, both to ourselves and others, that we belong to the Lord. Notice, this display of spiritual fruit does not appear in us naturally, but comes of our waiting actively and consciously upon the Lord, and learning in the process that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13).

Is this not a great incentive in itself, believer, to look unto Jesus and to draw what we need from Him? It not only makes us His faithful servants and effective witnesses, but it helps us to taste and see for ourselves His goodness, to experience the blessing of trusting in Him (Ps. 34:8) – and, not least of His mercies, to know with assurance that we belong to Him, and He to us, forever! To every believer who is careless in his walk with the Lord, and wonders whether or not he really belongs to Him, I implore you by the mercies of God to “keep your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace” (song by Helen H. Lemmel)!

