

GOSPEL ASSURANCE

Maturing into full assurance of faith

2 Timothy 1:12-14

Pastor Danny Lee

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A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY

He was born near Bedford, England to poor parents whose father was a "tinker" metalworker who traveled mending pots and pans. He had no formal education nor grew up in a spiritual home. Described himself as someone given to "cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the holy name of God" (*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*). Lost his mother and sister at age 16 and was recruited into the Parliamentary Army during the English Civil War. A fellow soldier was killed during a battle, who had previously requested to go forward in his place. He believed God had spared his life for some eventual purpose. He served for three years and continued indulging in all ungodly behavior.

He first married a poor girl who came from a godly family in 1648. She owned two religious books that influenced him to some affect. His wife had an impact on him so that he began to attend church regularly and gave up his sinful lifestyle. He studied the Scriptures and became convicted of his sinful condition, repenting and becoming of follower of Jesus Christ. Shortly after he joined a Baptist society and became a popular lay preacher around his hometown of Bedford.

He and his wife had four children with their firstborn daughter being born blind. His wife died in 1658 and he was remarried a year later to an 18 year old young woman, Elizabeth. In 1660 King Charles II ordered all preachers not belonging to the Church of England be put in prison. He was put in prison on several different occasions, totaling 12 years in the Bedford County Jail. Elizabeth cared for the children, made attempts for his release, and had two children with her husband while he was in and out of prison. During his final three months of prison in 1672, he began work on his most influential book in English history, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The last 15 years of John Bunyan's life was spent preaching throughout England, publishing writings, sermons and books. Bunyan died in 1688 at the age of 60 after returning from seeking to reconcile a father-son quarrel. He was caught in a rainstorm and became sick with a fever. He died at the house of a friend and is buried in Bunhill Fields.

Next to the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is the 2nd bestselling book in continuous publication. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, "*Next to the Bible, the book I value most is John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. I believe I have read it through at least a hundred times. It is a volume of which I never seem to tire; and the secret of its freshness is that it is so largely compiled from the Scriptures.*" It is a timeless allegory narrating the adventure of a man named Christian who flees from his hometown, the City of Destruction, for the Celestial City. Along the way he encounters interesting people, faces difficult obstacles and travels the King's Highway toward his final destination. Christian's journey of faith partially reflects Bunyan's own salvation story, while at the same time depicting broader principles of faithful living that every believer can identify with at some level.

As an imprisoned pastor, Bunyan's greatest concern was for the health and maturity of his congregation. Like the Apostle Paul, he wrote while imprisoned to encourage and equip his people in the Scriptures to live faithfully to God. One of his main themes throughout *Pilgrim's Progress* is that of PERSEVERANCE. Several times Christian is faced with individuals and trials that either hinder, question or beckon him to abandon his faith. Through this narrative Bunyan weaves sound biblical teaching and theological thinking to affirm and confirm his flock's trust in the Gospel in order to assure them their faith in Jesus Christ is not vain. Just as the assurance of Christian's faith grows as he perseveres on his journey, so the assurance of your faith will deepen as you continue to hold securely to Jesus Christ.

My purpose today is to build you up in GOSPEL ASSURANCE so that you will mature into the full assurance of your faith (Heb.10:22). Like many of the characters represented in *Pilgrim's Progress*, our church body is made up of individuals at varying stages of the Christian journey. Like many who have walked before us, we are at different degrees of maturity in the assurance of faith. Yet our goal is the same as described by Paul (2 Tim.1:12-14), to grow in confident belief and deeper conviction that Jesus Christ is your assured hope in this life and the life to come. I want to address three types of individuals regarding your assurance of faith:

ENCOURAGE THOSE STRUGGLING WITH YOUR ASSURANCE
EXHORT THOSE WHO ARE SELF-ASSURED
COMMEND THOSE PERSEVERING IN YOUR ASSURANCE

I. ENCOURAGING THOSE STRUGGLING WITH ASSURANCE

^{ESV} **HEBREWS 10:19-23** "*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*"

AM I TRULY SAVED?

The starting point for anyone sincerely struggling with faith is to answer the question, *Am I truly saved?* You cannot have any hope of assurance if there is no saving faith to begin with. Many people often cross paths with faith and even, for a time, walk parallel to those who are saved in faith. You could journey for a long time along a path that seems to be the way of faith. At one time you may have been confronted with the gospel, convicted of your sin, held spiritual conversations, and received blessings from the church community.

Bunyan begins his story with Christian reading the Bible and feeling the weight of his sin grow like a burden on his back. After being warned by a man named Evangelist to flee his hometown for the Celestial City, he is directed to a Wicket Gate where he must enter to travel onto the Narrow Way which will lead him to the cross where his burden will be relieved. Christian warns and begs others to flee with him, but no one believes him except for one neighbor who joins only to quickly abandon the journey at their first difficult obstacle.

Soon after Christian meets Worldly Wise-man and is easily persuaded to leave the path to find Mr. Legality, whom he is told can relieve his burden an easier way. This only made Christian more fearful and burdened until Evangelist chastises him, setting him back on the right path. This time Christian heads straight for the Wicket Gate where he enters the Narrow Way and eventually arrives at the cross. *"Just as he approached the cross, his burden fell off his back and tumbled down the hill until it rolled into the opening of the tomb and was never seen again."*¹

No matter at what stage of the journey of faith you're on, no matter how you believe God is intervening in your life, all points of true saving faith must lead you to the foot of the cross and the empty tomb. At the cross is where you repent of your sinfulness, where you cry out for His mercy and forgiveness, and where you humbly receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. The tomb is empty because Christ is risen, His power over sin and death is what enables and secures your forgiveness and adoption into God's family. Unless your faith has led you to true salvation in Jesus Christ, your assurance of faith cannot exist. *You can have assurance of faith if you have and are actively placing your trust in the saving work of Jesus Christ as Lord.*

WHAT IF I STILL STRUGGLE FEELING ASSURED IN MY FAITH?

Placing your trust in Jesus Christ for salvation doesn't necessarily mean you won't struggle with feeling assured in your faith. Since Gospel assurance is a fruit of salvation, it must be cultivated as you persevere in the Christian life. There is a difference between asking the question, *"How can I be sure that Christ is able to save me?"* versus, *"How can I be sure that I have believe Christ saved me?"* The first question can be answered objectively from Scripture since salvation is embedded in the sovereign plan of God and made secure by the finished work of Christ. Ephesians 1-3 lays the bedrock foundation that before the foundation of the world God chose, predestined, adopted and redeemed His own according to His purposeful will (Eph.1:3-7). This was accomplished not on the basis of your work or worth, but solely by God's grace alone through Christ alone by faith alone (2:1-10). Your salvation is secure in Jesus Christ and protected by the power of God.

JOHN 10:27-30 *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."*

Assurance cannot be separated from faith, and your faith must be rooted in Jesus Christ. Sinclair Ferguson comments about Christ and faith in this way:

*"Assurance of salvation is the fruit of faith in Christ. Christ is able to and does, in fact, save all those who come to him through faith...The act of faith, therefore, contains within it the seed of assurance. Indeed, faith in its first exercise is an assurance about Christ."*²

¹ John Bunyan [rev. by Alan Vermilye], *The Pilgrim's Progress*, p.56

² Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, p.197

Objectively you can know that your salvation is secure and no one is able to separate you from God's love (Rom.8:31-39). However, assurance can feel subjective and less secure than these absolute truths. Answering the question, "How do I know that I am a believer?" is a matter of self-awareness in the context of faith. There are many obstacles and hindrances that can affect your assurance of faith.

- 1) INCONSISTENT OBEDIENCE - *"And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected"* (1 Jn.2:3-5). John echoes the command of Jesus (Jn.14:15) by emphasizing the importance of obedience. A hindrance to your assurance might be linked to a failure to obey Jesus consistently in your daily life. Shame, guilt, little confession, remaining sin can keep you from obeying. They act as excuses but do not dismiss your responsibility to obey. The ability to obey Jesus comes from a spiritually transformed life that is motivated by a heart's desire to love and please Him. *Little obedience equals low assurance; consistent obedience leads to greater fellowship.*
- 2) NEGLECTING MEANS OF GRACE - *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near"* (Heb.10:23-25). God has designed your primary means of growth into assurance will come through His Word, your prayers, participation in His ordinances (Baptism and Communion), and your relationships with other believers. Actively pursuing these graces will deepen your assurance. *Assurance withers in isolation and neglect, but thrives in spiritual propagation.*
- 3) AFFLICTION, TRIALS, SPIRITUAL WARFARE - *"Do not despise the LORD 's instruction, my son, and do not loathe his discipline; for the LORD disciplines the one he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights"* (CSBProv.3:11-12). *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing"* (ESVJas.1:2-4). Misinterpretation of spiritual realities can affect your assurance. Jesus forewarned we will face sufferings and tribulations in this life, yet we often act surprised when it happens. If you don't feel your life is as "blessed" as it should be, you might question God's methods, His reasons, even the quality of His character. You must remember that we live in both spiritual and physical realities which require faith to endure. *Assurance is deepened through these channels, not around them.*
- 4) PERSONAL DISPOSITION, TEMPERAMENT - *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest"* (Ps.22:1-2). *"And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all"* (1 Thess. 5:14). People are complex, sin makes everything complicated, nothing will be perfect this side of heaven. Everyone of you has your own history, your own walk of faith, your own life situation and your own physiological make up.

All these factors make each one of us unique and distinct. You might be more prone to fear, anxiety, discouragement, depression, often feeling more abandoned than assured. Yet you can have great hope in two truths: "*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you*" (Jas.4:8); "*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God*" (Rom.8:16). God is your God of comfort and is always near to those who are lowly in spirit (Psa.51:17; Isa.57:15). He has given you His Holy Spirit as your Comforter assure that you are His child. *Assurance is confirmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit within you.*

CAN I LOSE MY ASSURANCE?

This is a fearful question someone struggling with assurance can ask. It can be confused with the idea of losing your salvation. As we know from our study in Ephesians, along with Jesus' promises in John 10 and 17, your salvation is eternally secure in Him. Your assurance of faith can wax and wane for the reasons stated earlier. Believers should not remain in a state of lost assurance, but can experience periods of insecurity and prolonged absences of being assured.

Bunyan depicts a vivid scene in *Pilgrim's Progress* where Christian loses his assurance for a time. After his salvation at the cross, Christian received gifts from three shining angels: *1) peace and assurance his sins were forgiven, 2) new clothes, 3) seal on his forehead and a sealed certificate to be delivered at the gate of the Celestial City.* Christian continued his journey, eventually climbing the Hill of Difficulty where rested halfway to the top at a shady arbor. Here he read from his certificate and fell asleep. Waking up much later than he ought, he quickly raced to the top of the hill leaving his certificate behind. Meeting two men who were running in the opposite direction out of fear, Christian became afraid and realized his certificate was lost. "*Feeling like a lazy fool, he fell to his knees and prayed that God would forgive him. He then got up and raced back down the hill to find it... Then, looking around, he spotted his certificate under the seat! Christian's spirit erupted with cries of joyful praise to God for the certificate was his assurance of salvation and acceptance at the Celestial City.*"³

Like Christian, you may lose your assurance for a time due to laziness, forgetfulness, hasty decision-making, or fearful encounters. But like Christian, you can regain your assurance by going back to matters of first importance in the Gospel (1 Cor.15:1-10). It will cost you time and progress, but the reward is peace and assurance. The struggles you have with assurance may seem like lions ready to devour your faith. But as the Watchman told Christian, "*Don't be afraid of the lions, because they are chained. They are placed there on your journey as a trial of faith to reveal those that have no faith. Just stay in the middle of the Way, and you will not be harmed.*"⁴

³ Bunyan, p.66-67

⁴ Bunyan, p.69

II. EXHORTING THE SELF-ASSURED

^{NET} **2 CORINTHIANS 13:5** *Put yourselves to the test to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize regarding yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you— unless, indeed, you fail the test!"*

DECEIT OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

A less recognized enemy of assurance is over-confidence and self assurance. Such sinful attitudes are devoid of humility, a tendency to flaunt their knowledge and commend themselves by comparing to one another. In 2 Corinthians, Paul confronted so-called "super apostles" by exposing their faulty evaluations. *"Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding... For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."* (2 Cor.10:12, 18) Self-commendation, self-confidence and self-assurance are the opposite of GOSPEL ASSURANCE. Instead, it is confidence in God the Father, trust in Christ as Savior and assurance by the Holy Spirit that you are a grace-saved, inheritance-waiting son and daughter of God.

Paul's exhortation to the self-assured is for self-examination to see if Jesus Christ is really in you! Your measuring line is only and always Jesus Christ. The sinfully self-assured can be intimidating to someone who is less assured; but place them next to Jesus and they should feel sinfully ashamed. If your heart's answer to the question, *"What must I do to gain eternal life?"* is similar to the rich young man who replied with his self-righteous achievements, then you too will fail the test of selling everything for the sake of having Jesus (Mk.10:17-22). *Gospel assurance strives to rid itself of all self-confidence relying completely on Christ's life in you* (Gal.2:20).

DANGERS OF FALSE ASSURANCE

Along with self-deceit can come false assurance of faith. If you barely examined your faith, if you have rarely produced spiritual fruit, if you are not growing in grace, or if you are resting on past spiritual experiences, then you are in danger of having false assurance. False assurance is worse than no assurance because its foundation is faulty.

It is empty of any real power of faith because the Holy Spirit is not presently active. Galatians 5:16-26 and Ephesians 5:18-21 reveal the evidences of Gospel assured living - *the power of the Holy Spirit*. It is by the Holy Spirit we abide in Christ (Jn.15:4-10), we can understand truth (16:13), we can confess Jesus Christ is God (1 Jn.4:2), and confirms our adoption and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom.8:15-17).

Later in Christian's journey he is joined by a companion named Faithful. They meet up with a Mr. Talkative who is from their home town. Mr. Talkative is eager to talk about spiritual matters on any topic for the pleasure of conversation. It is quickly revealed that Mr. Talkative is a hypocrite because all he does is *talk* about spiritual things, yet he does not live up to his words. Christian and Faithful decide to discuss the power of true faith. As Talkative eagerly answers their questions, Faithful patiently exposes what is lacking in Talkative's responses. When finally confronted with a personal question about experiencing a true work of grace in his heart, Talkative accuses Faithful of entrapment and

blames him for judging himself with such questions. Talkative leaves their company instead of changing his life. Faithful's final comment is, *"How Talkative showed off everything he knew at first! How bravely he spoke! How he presumed to drive down all before him! But no sooner that I started talking about the workings of grace in the heart, he walked off in the sunset. It will be the same for everyone except those that understand how the heart works."*⁵

III. COMMENDING THOSE PERSEVERING IN ASSURANCE

ESV **2 TIMOTHY 1:12-14** *"But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. ¹³ Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you."*

GROWING INTO FULL ASSURANCE

Gospel assurance is one facet of the jewel that is salvation. Salvation is more than something that is done to you, it is the total transformative process of changing you into Christ-likeness. *"It is Ephesians 1:3-14, Christ-centered, Trinity-honoring, eternity-rooted, redemption providing, adoption-experiencing, holiness-producing, assurance-effecting, God-glorifying salvation."*⁶ Growing in your salvation means growing in your assurance. The consistent charge in the New Testament is to *"work out your own salvation in fear and trembling"* (Phil.2:12), *"to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ,"* (Col.2:2), *"show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end,"* (Heb.6:11), *"grow up into salvation"* (1 Pet.2:2), and *"be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election,"* (2 Pet.1:10).

Those who understand this know that assurance comes through PERSEVERANCE. Assurance increases over time as you grow in the qualities of faith. *"For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (2 Pet.1:5-8). Peter understood what it meant fail and fear, but he also experienced life-altering faith that came from knowing Jesus. He witnessed the revealed glory of Jesus, but his assurance came through the certainty of God's Word (1:19). The same means that convinced the Apostles faith is the same means by which your faith is confirmed.

CONVICTION BY ASSURANCE

At the end of his life, Paul was able to confidently tell Timothy that he had no shame or unwavering hesitation in Whom he believed. Like Christian's certificate of assurance, Paul knew the Gospel is the "good deposit" entrusted to him which he diligently guarded in life and was guarded for him by Christ until his final day. Paul's assurance of faith came

⁵ Bunyan, p.121

⁶ Ferguson, p.228-229

through unwavering belief and confident conviction that the Gospel is your greatest treasure, because it is Jesus Christ Himself!

Gospel assurance produces joy that comes through fellowship with Jesus. It cultivates humility that is empathetic and compassionate towards those who lack assurance. It deepens belief and conviction that motivates you to show yourself as an approved workman (2 Tim.2:15), an honorable and useful vessel (2:21), effective and fruitful in Jesus Christ (2 Pet.1:8). Gospel assurance fixes your hope on Jesus, the source and perfecter of your faith (Heb.12:2).

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.*

*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior, all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior, all the day long.*