

CAN WE KNOW FOR SURE?

by Pastor Bill Parker

The issue of assurance of salvation seems to be a very touchy one amongst those who profess to believe the Gospel. This is due to a misunderstanding of what real assurance is. Those who profess to believe the Gospel will readily admit that God has an elect people, that He sent Christ to die for them and secure their salvation and final glory, and that all the elect will be saved. But then the questions arise -- "How can I know if I am one of the elect? Can I know for sure? And can I know for sure concerning another person's election of God?" Before we consider these issues, we must first have some clear definitions in our minds.

FIRST, we must make sure we define the Gospel properly and begin there, because God's Word tells us --

- *Mark 16:15 -- And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. {16} He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.*
- *John 3:18 -- He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God . . . {36} He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.*
- *Romans 1:16 -- For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. {17} For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.*

- *1 John 5:13 -- 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, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.*

THE GOSPEL IS GOD'S PROMISE TO SAVE SINNERS, BLESS THEM, AND GIVE THEM THE WHOLE INHERITANCE OF ETERNAL LIFE AND GLORY BASED ON THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST.

SECONDLY, we must know the difference between Godly assurance of salvation and ungodly, self-righteous presumption. There are many ways to state this, but simply stated, GODLY ASSURANCE IS THE HOPE OF SALVATION AND ETERNAL LIFE BASED ON THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST. UNGODLY PRESUMPTION IS ANY HOPE OF SALVATION AND ETERNAL LIFE BASED ON ANYTHING ELSE. Some people believe that we cannot be sure because only God knows, but this is not the way of the Scriptures. Some people claim that real assurance is proud and presumptuous, but we must determine this in light of the Gospel. What is the ground of such assurance? Some people think it is a show of humility to be unsure. But according to the Scriptures, this is unbelief and sinful doubt. What causes us to doubt? Now consider this in light of the Gospel we claim to believe --

- Some say the greatness of their sin causes them to doubt. Well, are your sins too great for God's grace and power? Are your sins too great for Christ's blood to pay for them? *"Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Romans 5:20-21). So for those who claim to believe the Gospel, to trust Christ, their doubt is directed towards His love, power, and ability to save. This is unbelief, not humility.
- Some say they do not doubt Christ, they doubt themselves. To those who claim to believe the Gospel, I would say, "What part of the Gospel tells you to look to yourself? Where does it say that any part of salvation is conditioned on you? To whom are you looking for salvation?" The Gospel

tells us to look unto the God who will save sinners based on the righteousness of Christ (*Isa. 45:22*). Again, this is unbelief, not humility.

No true believer has perfect assurance to the point that he never doubts, but he needs to look upon such doubt in the same way as we would view any other sin. It is sin, not humility, and we should not promote it. We should discourage and seek relief from it by studying and applying God's Word to our lives.

THIRDLY, God not only tells us we can have assurance, He commands us to seek it --

- *2 Peter 1:10 -- Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: {11} For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.*

We are to seek it by faith as we see and understand God's truth. We are not to seek it anywhere else.

FOURTHLY, assurance of salvation based on the right ground is the only right motive for acceptable obedience, good works, fruit unto God. Without assurance of salvation based on the right ground, all obedience is legal and mercenary, dead works, fruit unto death.

- *Romans 6:11-- Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. {12} Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. {13} Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.*

To reckon ourselves as dead indeed unto sin and alive unto God is to have assurance of salvation.

- *Romans 12:1 -- I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. {2} And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

Now with this in mind, what are the criteria by which we can know and be assured of our own salvation, our own election? What are the evidences? Consider the following questions --

(1) DO I HAVE THE FAITH OF GOD'S ELECT?

A. The Bible says plainly --

- *Romans 10:9 -- That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. {10} For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. {11} For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. {12} For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. {13} For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

But the Bible also says plainly that there are counterfeit Christs (*Matt. 24:23-24; 2 Cor. 11:4*), other (false) gospels (*2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6-9*), other (lying) spirits (*2 Cor. 11:4*), and false prophets who disguise themselves with a lot of truth (*Matt. 7:15-16; 2 Cor. 11:13-15*). How then can we know for sure that we are believing in and calling upon the name of the true Christ, the one sent of God the Father? It is only by God's testimony of both the Person of Christ and the work of Christ on behalf of His people to save them and secure their salvation.

- *Romans 10:14 -- How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? {15} And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! {16} But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? {17} So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

There are many passages we could study to show the difference between the true Christ and counterfeits, but one of the best summaries of this is in *Romans 1 - 3*. The keys to it have to do with the fact that Christ is both God and man in one Person and that He was sent of the Father as the Representative and Substitute of a people to accomplish and secure the salvation of His Church by establishing a righteousness that would enable God to be just and yet save them and that would entitle them to the whole inheritance of eternal life.

The Gospel promise is a message of grace. It is God's promise to save sinners based on the blood and righteousness of Christ. It is God's promise to save sinners, bless them eternally, keep them, and entitle them to the whole inheritance of eternal life and final glory based on the righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel. Therefore, all who believe the Gospel, all who have the faith of God's elect, know and believe that Christ's righteousness alone makes the difference between heaven and hell. They know that His righteousness alone entitles them to the whole inheritance of grace and glory. They see a completeness in what Christ accomplished so that they know that His work, His merits, alone make the difference between saved and lost.

This means that all who have the faith of God's elect are submitted to the righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel. If a person is submitted to Christ's righteousness as the only ground of salvation, then he is convinced that Christ's righteousness alone entitles him to all of salvation, including the work of the Holy Spirit in him. He sees himself as justified, sanctified, qualified for heaven, permanently adopted into God's family, and certain for heaven's glory, all based on the righteousness of Christ. From this springs the next evidence --

(2) HAVE I REPENTED OF DEAD WORKS AND IDOLATRY?

After we come to see what the Bible tells us about the true Christ so as we can distinguish Him from counterfeits, then we must be assured that we personally believe in Him to the salvation of our souls. The first evidence of this Godly repentance. Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of life concerning our judgments, our values, our walk, etc. We may claim to believe that Christ's righteousness is the only ground of salvation, but true repentance is the first evidence that we have submitted to Him and His righteousness as the only ground of salvation.

- *Mark 1:15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.*
- *Acts 2:38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.*
- *Luke 5:32 I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*
- *2 Pet 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*

The repentance commanded here is a change of mind concerning God, who He is and what He requires. It is a change of mind concerning who we are as sinners and what we need and must have for salvation. It is a change of mind concerning Christ and the only ground of salvation. And in this repentance we come to a knowledge that before we heard and believed the Gospel wherein the righteousness of Christ is revealed as the only ground of salvation, we were lost in idolatry and dead works bringing forth fruit unto death. We become convinced that God will not save us or anyone else based on anything other than the imputed righteousness of Christ. Therefore, being convinced of this, we will not speak peace to ourselves or others while we or they are either ignorant of or not submitted to the righteousness of Christ as the only ground of salvation. We see a great example of this in the Apostle Paul concerning himself in *Philippians*

3:3-10 and concerning his attitude towards others in *Romans 10:1-4*.

This repentance is the product of the work of the Holy Spirit in us to convince us of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (*John 16:8-11*). He convinces us of sin which we did not recognize by nature, but sin that is exposed only in light of the Gospel (*John 3:19-20*). This is the sin of trying to establish a righteousness of our own before God. It is not sin because it is immoral or insincere, but it is sin because it is the product of self-righteousness, and, therefore, a denial of God's glory in the salvation of sinners based on the righteousness of Christ. He convinces us of righteousness in that we become dogmatic that God will save us and bless eternally based on the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. He convinces us of judgment in that He changes our standard of judging saved and lost. Whereas before we judged saved and lost based on Satan's lie (outward appearance, reputation, morality, etc.), we now judge saved and lost based on God's testimony --

- John 3:18 -- He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.***

These are the evidences of true justifying faith and Godly repentance. No one has any right to claim that he or anyone else is one of God's elect before this faith and repentance. These are the first evidences of one who is elect of God.

(3) DO I HAVE THE LOVE OF CHRIST IN MY HEART?

Love is probably the most misused and misunderstood word in the English language. Some think of it as an emotion of the "heart" that has nothing to do with the mind and understanding. Many people, without thinking, scale down the high standard of love and think they meet up to it. In the Bible, when we think of love, we must begin with the law of God because God's law is the standard of all love, and all love is guided by God's law. If this were not so, then we would be free to set our own standard, which, because of sin, self-love, and self-righteousness, would be much lower than God's standard. God's law says -- "Love God perfectly and love our neighbor as ourselves." In this area, we all fall short. In this area we can all see that we are sinners in need of a righteousness we cannot produce. The Lord Jesus Christ is certainly the embodiment of the

standard of love. He loved perfectly and unconditionally. He taught the high standard of God's love (ex., *Matt. 19:16ff.; Mark 12:28ff.; Luke 10:30ff.*). So when we think of love, we must measure our love by this standard and admit that we are sinners and in need of God's grace and mercy. If God were to judge us based on our best efforts to love Him and to love our neighbor, we would perish.

How, then, can we know if we have any love at all in our hearts? And, how can we know if we have the love of Christ in our hearts? First of all, this love of Christ which is an evidence of salvation is peculiar only to believers. Unbelievers do not have this love in any degree. This love comes to us in the new birth, and it is the product of God's grace -- shedding His love abroad in our hearts (*Rom. 5:5*). This love being shed abroad in our hearts is not mystical. It happens when we see and believe God's love towards us in sending Christ to pay for our sins and establish a righteousness that enables God to justify us and entitle us to the whole inheritance of eternal life and glory (*1 John 4:10*). The only way we can know for sure if we have this love in any degree at all is by the Scriptural evidences of this love --

(1) This love has a high regard for the honor of God's redemptive glory -- God's redemptive glory is the revelation and honor of all His attributes engaged to save us and bless us eternally based on the merits of the obedience and death of Christ. We give evidence that we have a high regard for the honor of God's redemptive glory when we seek Him and expect Him to save us and give us the whole inheritance of eternal life based on the righteousness of Christ. As long as a person insist on seeking or expecting salvation or any part of it based on anything else, that person has no real regard for the honor of God's glory --

- *John 5:42 -- But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. {43} I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. {44} How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?*

(2) This love will not speak peace where there is no peace -- Having a high regard for the honor of God's redemptive glory, and realizing that no person will be saved based on anything that does not honor and glorify God, this love motivates us to tell people the truth whenever we are given the opportunity. Having been brought to faith in Christ and to true repentance of dead works and former

idolatry, this love will motivate us to continue to make our judgments of saved and lost based on God's testimony rather than Satan's lie so that we would not speak peace to anyone based on things of which we have been convinced are dead works and idolatry, things of which we ourselves have repented. This love, then, is consistent with love for our neighbor because love for our neighbor desires to promote our neighbor's welfare, temporally and eternally. If we love our neighbor, we will not desire to promote their eternal damnation by speaking peace when they are either ignorant of or not submitted to the only ground of salvation that honors God and exalts Christ. Consider *John 15:18ff*. This love is enlightened love that motivates us to tell the truth, but the lost, religious world will not recognize this as love (*John 3:19-20; 7:7; 16:1-3*). This is the love that causes us to love our brethren in Christ and take sides with them against the world in not speaking peace where there is no peace (*1 John 3:10-14*). True believers will be tempted many times to compromise here, and many times we may give in, if only by keeping silent, but we must realize this and fight any temptation not to tell people the truth. We know that when we tell them the truth, we honor God and we seek their eternal good. We as believers need to realize that we need both skill in the word of righteousness and wisdom in dealing with people, and the more skill and wisdom we have, the bolder we will be in this (*Matt. 10:16ff*.)

(3) This love desires to worship and obey God -- Love begets love. When we see and experience the love of God towards us in saving us through Christ, we will in some degree return that love in acts of worship and obedience in the areas of loving God and loving our neighbor. None of us loves God or our neighbor, not even our brethren, perfectly. And we cannot and dare not seek to come before God pleading our best efforts to love in these areas. But if we have the love of Christ in our hearts, we will to some degree seek to worship and obey God, and we will to some degree seek to love our neighbor (*John 14:15; 1 John 2:3ff.; 3:22-24; 5:2-3*). Just as true saving faith is proved by works (*James 2:17*), Godly love is shown in actions and attitudes. It is useless for a person to say that he loves God and then not seek to worship and obey God. Again, we know we all fall short in these areas, but love with no activity that expresses that love is only a pretense. It is also useless for a person to say that he loves others and then not seek to do unto others as he would have them do unto him. And, again, we know we fall way short of the standard in this area, but, again, love with no activity that expresses that love is only pretense.

God the Holy Spirit by the Apostle Paul tells us not to be pretentious in our love -

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Romans 12:9 -- LET LOVE BE WITHOUT DISSIMULATION. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.

This means that believers are not to pretend to have more love than they actually have. We are never to think that our love is what it ought to be, and we are certainly never to be proud of our love and think that God could ever bless on the basis of our attempts to love. We are to love God because He first loved us. His love towards us is unconditional and perfect love that provided in Christ for us what His holiness demanded (*1 John 4:10*). His love for us in Christ never varies and could never cease (*Rom. 8:35-39*). His love for us insures that we will enter heaven's glory based on the righteousness of Christ. The knowledge and assurance of this is what produces our love for God in Christ and Godly love for our neighbor. Our love for Him, then, is not the basis, ground, or condition for His love to us or for His blessings to us, but it is the response and result of His love for us. Godly love, like every other work of the Holy Spirit in us, is the fruit and effect of Christ's righteousness.

All attempts at love, then, in all that we seek to do by way of worship and obedience, and by way of loving our neighbor, is to be motivated by the hope of the Gospel. This leads us to our fourth question --

(4) DO I HAVE THE HOPE OF THE GOSPEL?

The hope of the Gospel is the certain expectation of attaining final glory in heaven based on the righteousness of Christ. When many think of the word *hope*, they think of a wish or a strong desire. But many of our wishes and strong desires have no basis; i.e., we may have a wish or a strong desire for something without any reason to believe our wish and desire would be fulfilled. The *hope* of the Gospel revealed in the Bible is not a mere wish or even a strong desire without any basis. The *hope* of the Gospel, which identifies God's elect, is an assured expectation based on God's Word. God's Word says that God will save us, keep us, bless us, qualify us, and give us the whole inheritance of eternal life and final glory based on the righteousness of His Son -- the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the *hope* of the Gospel has a strong and firm basis --

- *1 Peter 3:15 -- But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:*

When someone asks us why we believe firmly that we are saved, that we are one of God's elect, the best answer we can give is -- "Because I am expecting God to bring me to heaven based solely upon the righteousness of His Son, according to His promise." The basis, or reason, for our hope is the power, the faithfulness, and the love of God revealed in His promise to save sinners in and by Christ. Many people have a hope of salvation, even an assurance of salvation, but if that hope and assurance is not based on God's Word, which means it is based on something other than the righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel, then it is presumption. Remember, this is the hope of the Gospel.

We see in the Bible that this hope, this assurance of salvation, is one of the main evidences of God's elect --

- *Hebrews 3:6 -- But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.*
- *Hebrews 3:14 -- For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end;*
- *Hebrews 10:19 -- Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, {20} By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; {21} And having an high priest over the house of God; {22} Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. {23} Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)*

This hope is also the basis and motivation for all acceptable obedience, godly living, good works, and all attempts at being conformed to the image of Christ --

- *Romans 6:8 -- Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: {9} Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. {10} For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. {11} Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. {12} Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. {13} Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. {14} For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.*
- *Colossians 1:21 -- And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled {22} In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight: {23} If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister;*

The "if" in verse 23 does not present a condition the believer must meet in order to attain sainthood or final glory, nor even to earn any supposed rewards in heaven. The "if" presents an evidence of being reconciled unto God and of being holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in His sight, all based on the righteousness of Christ. Notice, it says "*continue IN THE FAITH,*" which means continuing to believe that we are already justified, sanctified, qualified, and certain to be glorified based on the righteousness of Christ --

- *Colossians 2:9 -- For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. {10} And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:*

Sainthood and assurance of salvation is not something only certain more dedicated believers reach by their works and efforts to be holy. Every true believer begins the Christian life as a full-fledged saint, made such not by his works and efforts but by the work of Christ, and, therefore, should have assurance of salvation based on God's Word. Believers may and many times do have doubts, but these doubts are to be viewed as we would view any other sin, such as adultery or lying. These are things we should not promote, and doubts are not to be promoted as humility. We are to look upon such doubts as sinful unbelief, and we are to seek the remedy which is --

- *Hebrews 12:2 -- Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

In this way we to seek to have our hearts "*established with grace*" (Heb. 13:), which is the same thing as the hope of the Gospel.