

Sermon 17: Hebrews 6:9-12: 'Full Assurance of Hope'

OUTLINE

Grounding our assurance
Strengthening our assurance

INTRODUCTION

God desires that every believer experience the assurance of their salvation. God as a Father has made it so that every believer can know their adoption. Being the best Father He does not want His children to wonder whether they are His children; whether He loves them; will provide for them; protect them; and hear them when they ask. This does not mean that assurance is an easy thing, in fact it is a constant fight to return to the peace of knowing ourselves as God's children. Great suffering can cast a cloud over our assurance; distraction draws us away from those things that aid our assurance; and of course, sin grieves the Spirit who ministers our adoption to us. Immature believers who are not grounded in the truths of scripture can be deeply unsettled by all of the above. In fact, they can sit under a sermon that strongly condemns a certain sin and find themselves again in a place of uncertainty knowing their sinfulness more than they know the grace of God in Christ. The letter to the Hebrews is written to Jewish believers who are struggling with their assurance. They are struggling because of persecution, and how being put under pressure has made them question whether they are in the truth; they have entertained doubts; they have taken their eyes off of the glory of Christ; and some among them may have already apostatized. Now on top of that the author writes in the strongest of terms about the guilt of turning away from Christ. Having opened up the glories of Christ, and emphasized how much more serious it is to turn from Christ than any other sin. You can only imagine the uncertainty that this congregation feels. Some will rightly feel accused because they are guilty of turning away; others will feel ashamed because they entertained the idea; some will be immature and caught in the crosshairs of this sin being addressed and their overly tender conscience will be bruised even though they are not guilty. What we have before us as we look at Hebrews 6:9-12 is a pastoral encouragement given after one of the strongest warnings passages in the bible. The author has strongly applied the stick now he brings the carrot.

In our last section we dealt with the unforgivable sin, what it is; who commits it; and why it cannot be repented of. To talk about a sin you cannot come back from is frightful. The author as a good pastor does not leave them thinking that they have done it but rushes to add some importance qualifications and assurances. The author speaks not only to comfort but also to exhort because the ongoing effort of assuring ourselves of our salvation will fuel the ongoing effort of our perseverance. We will look at this section in two parts, grounding our assurance and strengthening our assurance.

Grounding our assurance

V9, 'Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.' You can hear the pastoral heart of the author. He is aware that what he has said in describing visible saints as those who fall away and cannot repent is a terrifying thought for any believer. To have an authority, whose writings are literally scripture, tell you that there are

those in your midst who look like and act like and speak like Christians who have participated in all the benefits of being a part of the church and then fall way. To have this authority speak about these apostates in terms that you would use to describe yourselves. The amount of self-doubt would be immense. And then the fear that maybe you are one of these, that you cant repent, it would be very disturbing for some. This pastor knows that the true believer is often conflicted and is easy prey for those who want to inflict false conviction. So he adds his assurances. You know what this is like. Your child has to be disciplined for their bad behavior. Lets say it is not just a 'stop fighting with you siblings' issue; or a minor 'be fair and share' situation. No, your child has been found out for doing something very serious. For being a constant bully of someone younger and weaker for a long time; or for repeatedly stealing money out of your wallet; or you catch in a dark hidden lifestyle lived out on their phone or computer. As you talk to your child about their sin, you do not merely address the action, you have to talk about their hearts that have lived in hardness, and lovelessness, and a shameful condition. You have to talk about how they don't just do bad things, but are actually bad in their hearts. Your goal is like a surgeon to get to the cancer, and you have to cut deep with knife to help them see their helpless condition. Their young hearts are mortified; they feel the shame of their sins; they feel like they are open and exposed; they feel your disappointment. And even though you were pulling your punches as it were and seeking to be gentle recognizing that you too are a sinner, the truth of your words hits hard. And then you have to administer physical discipline. Imagine the state of your child's heart. You have not done wrong in exposing and punishing sin, but they are now standing there not knowing the assurances of your love. What do you do? You put your arm around them; you tell them that you love them; you pray with them weaving words of forgiveness and encouragement into your prayer; you speak hopefully of their future changes; you talk about how God accepts as all as sinners because of Christ. There was a point at which you might have left them feeling like they are nothing but a failure and a disappointment but your parenting instincts kicked in and you sensed their alienation and insecurity, their shame and having no confidence to know your unconditional love, so you assured them. There was that moment where you could imitate the parenting you received where in anger your parents might have said to you, 'cannot believe that you would do something like this, get out of my sight' but instead your reached out to them. It is these instincts that this pastor is showing. We see firstly, that he gives assurances that he is not so disappointed in them that he is thinking they are those who are going to be cursed, no he assures them that he feels they are not failures but will be saved. Secondly, we see the only use of the word beloved in the letter, and this is to assure them of his personal love and concern. He has spoken in strong terms against sin, but this does not mean that he does not love them.

V10, 'For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.' The author now gives his reasons for why he is sure they are those who will go on to salvation not cursing. And here we get to explore the biblical grounds for our assurance. Firstly, lets be very clear this text is not a proof text that we save ourselves through our Christian works. At the time of the Reformation this was a debated text between the RCC and the Reformers. For example, the Council of Trent, Canon 32 says, 'Canon 32. "If any one saith, that the good works of one that is justified are in such manner the gifts of God, as that they are not also the good merits of him that is justified; or, that the said justified, by the good works which he performs through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living

member he is, does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life, ...and also an increase of glory; let him be anathema." The Catholics insisted that our good works are not only fruit but also meritorious of eternal life. This is clearly denied by the NT. Eph. 2:8-9, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.' We do not contribute to our own merit by our own good works; it is the good works of Christ, by His life and death, that we are saved from condemnation and made righteous by imputation in God's sight. Good works are a fruit always accompanying this work of salvation. In fact we can even go so far as to say that if good works do not accompany salvation then it is not a true salvation. Good works are a necessary fruit attesting to the truth of Salvation. No fruit not root of salvation. But stressing the necessity of good works in this way is very different to saying that our good works are meritorious and add to our eternal life.

What is v10 saying then when it says that God is not unjust and takes account of our good works? Several things can be said here. Firstly, God noticing our good deeds does not equal God saving us by those deeds. Rev. 2:2-4 where Jesus knows and even commends the works of the Ephesian church is a common idea that does not infer salvation by works, 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.' And just as Jesus encourages this church by mentioning their works lest they be overly discouraged with His strong rebuke, Hebrews has a similar mix of recognition and rebuke. Secondly, the goal of the author is to show why he is confident that things accompanying salvation are true of them not condemnation. The NT teaches that God finishes the good work that He starts in us, that He is the author and finisher of our faith. In truth these good works are due to God's working and willing within us. They should not be seen as merit but the beginning of a true work that God will complete. And God does not despise the works of His own hands. Because of His justice He does not forgive your sins in Christ, manifest His work of salvation in good works and then change His mind. The hard tone of the author must not be taken to indicate that God changes His mind, or that He gets angry and abandons His work, or that He forsakes those who are truly saved on account of some apostates among them.

Historically the Reformed see three grounds for our assurance. The promises of God; the testimony of the Spirit and from the inward work of grace. There is a logic in the order here. Firstly, the unassailable ground of our confidence is in nothing in ourselves, either our experiences or our works, but is built upon the truth of God's character who keeps His promises, and the sufficient nature of the work He has done for our salvation in Christ. God is our first and unassailable grounds of assurance. God has promised that those who come to Him, He will not cast out; those who believe will receive eternal life, He cannot lie, and His character is unchanging. No sin, suffering, or temptation changes this fact of God. Secondly, there other grounds of our assurance are lesser grounds. One is based on the internal witness of the Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God. The Spirit of adoption ministers the truth of our adoption to us, giving us the assurance and peace of our salvation as He impresses upon us the wonder and truthfulness of our salvation. This is not a first order ground of assurance because God sometimes withdraws His ministrations; sin can also

grieve the Spirit; we may not be attending the means of grace by which we can strengthen this aspect of the ministry of the Spirit. This is more of an experiential basis, where the promises of God are objective not subjective. Then the third ground of our assurance is proof of inward grace. As we look into our own hearts we see evidence of a work of God's grace. We see believing faith; attended with repentance, we see a broken and contrite heart, a hunger after righteousness, a hatred of sin, a delight in the bible and prayer. These manifest in a changed life as we see the fruits of the Spirit, good works, our perseverance and progressive sanctification. This pastor is pointing to the works of service and love that these believers have shown as a grounds of his certainty that they are truly saved. Again these are not as certain as God's promises because we sin, we backslide, we do not always improve our spiritual condition but grow lax. Under fresh conviction of sin we are subjectively more aware of our failure than our progress. Sometimes this affirmation of our fruit has to come from outsiders as we see here. This pastor is giving affirmation of a credible confession of faith evident in a lifestyle change.

What fruit do we see? V10b, 'your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.' Heb. 10:32-34 expands on this, 'But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.' These believers were full of good works towards their brethren. Notice that it was not only works, but love with the works, there was heart and there was action. The author is saying that love one another in these tangible, practical, and sacrificial ways is a sign of life. Are you serving the saints? Are you cheerful in your exchanges with them; are you concerned about their pain and needs; do you go out of your way to help those with physical and emotional needs; what was the last practical thing you did to help someone else in the church; are you aware of those in need and strategizing to help them. These believers were serving in profound ways; they were risking persecution and ostracism to show love; they were going to risky places like prison; they were throwing their reputation away to show love; they were willing to see the plundering of their goods. The author of Hebrews is in agreement with John who sees a rich life of good deeds towards one another as a proof of salvation, 1 John 3:17-18, 'But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.'

Strengthening our assurance

V11-12, 'And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.' Having shared his confidence in their salvation, he now calls them to action to strengthen their own assurance so that they might persevere. Please notice the causal connections. He says that he has a desire for them to have the same earnest desire they have demonstrated in serving the saints to pursue a full assurance of faith, and this all the way to the end. Why does he want them to earnestly seek a full assurance of hope throughout their pilgrimage here? Because this will keep them from being sluggish, remember it is this wavering, this not going on to maturity that runs the risk of them moving towards terrible

sin. And he tells them that one of the ways they can do this is by imitating other models of patient faith who endured to the end. There are several points that we can highlight that relate to us strengthening our assurance.

Firstly, please notice that he has a desire for every believer to earnestly apply themselves to seeking this full assurance and expects that they can have it. Every true believer should come to an assurance of their salvation. It is true that not everyone who is saved is automatically assured, this can be because of ignorance, confusing errors in the background, false teaching, not getting rid of besetting sins, a lack of studying the word, going to church and fellowshiping with the saints, too much isolation, etc. chapter 18 of the 1689 on assurance paragraph 3 says as much, 'This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it; yet being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of means, attain thereunto: and therefore it is the duty of every one to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.' But through applying ourselves to the ordinary means of grace, that is the reading and preaching of the word we can come to a true understanding of our salvation be have the joy and peace of believing.

Secondly, earnestly seeking a full assurance of our salvation is something we do until the end. In other words you don't get saved, feel yourself saved and then don't seek to further appreciate your salvation. Many things in the Christian life will impact your sense of assurance, it like any aspect of your salvation needs constant maintenance. Although the state of your justification is static and unchanging, your emotional engagement with that fact ebbs and flows. It is important that we protect our hearts by constantly seeking to know how well saved we are. This is vital for a vitality in our prayer life, strength against temptation, joy in hard service, peace during trials and every part of the Christian life.

Thirdly, the certainty of our hope is a vital motivating part of our obedience. Rom. 8:23-25 says, 'And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.' Because our hope, that is the future of the new creation which is guaranteed to us by God's promise, the Son's resurrection and the Spirit's presence as a seal of our inheritance is secure and no one can touch it. There is no doubt as to how history and our lives will end. Death itself does not have the power to bring the hope we have to an end. Our confidence in this hope enables us to rejoice in hope and endure with patience.

Fourthly, knowing our hope and having a firm assurance that nothing will snatch us out of His hand and He will raise us up at the last day, this will help us to not be sluggish/slothful. Many believe that the teaching of our salvation being secure will lead to sluggishness, the author here believes the opposite. To know that your salvation cannot be lost will not result in antinomianism and laziness in the one who is truly saved, no it will fill the heart with a desire to serve, to hold fast, to suffer with patience.

Fifthly, having a certainty of our hope will make us willing to walk like those others who because of their hope lived by faith believing the promises of God, and walked with patience enduring their difficulties. Abraham is the example mentioned in the next section, but the whole of chapter 11 with the many witnesses who have gone before us are some of the examples that the author has in his mind.

But what I want you to see is that we should be earnest in seeking a full assurance of faith, making our calling and election sure. Do you want to be able to endure? Do you want a joy that can prosper even in your deepest griefs? Do you want a peace that no earthly war can shake? Do you want a heart of love that will love the unlovely, even your enemies? The book of Hebrews is telling us how. Look upon Christ, look at the salvation He has wrought, look at how sufficient a Saviour He is; look how much He loves us, how willing He is to save; look at how certain the salvation He has wrought is; see how much superior it is to any other sacrifice or savior. See how every sin is paid for and all enemies defeated. Search these things, look into them. Allow the Spirit who has revealed these things to impress them upon you glorifying Christ before you. This is how we grow in the certainty of our hope, and the full assurance will help you overcome the fear, the sluggishness, and the lovelessness.