

Lesson 80: 1689: Chapter 18: Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation

OUTLINE

The possibility of assurance
The grounds of assurance
The means of assurance
The changes of assurance

INTRODUCTION

The great question that the Christian spends time struggling over is not, Can God save? No, the question we spend endless time pondering is, Am I saved? How can I as a believer know that I am saved and going to heaven? God in His mercy knows our angst over this question and makes provision for us. Rom. 8:15-16, 'For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.' God as a good Father wants His children to know that He loves them, will protect them and always have a home with Him. At the time of the writing of the 1689 this was a matter of great contention and a major difference between Catholics and the Reformed. Session 6 canon 16 of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent says, 'If any one saith, that he will for certain, of an absolute and infallible certainty, have that great gift of perseverance unto the end, unless he have learned this by special revelation; let him be anathema.' The Roman Catholic Church with its doctrine of justification resting on Spirit wrought works, denied that you can have the certainty of knowing you are going to heaven unless you have a miraculous revelation that you are going there. A revelation that is excluded to saints and very few other people. Since in the RCC you are able to lose your justification, because it ultimately rests on your cooperating with the Holy Spirit, in producing the acts of love that justify you; and because the possibility of mortal sins still lies open to you, it was the mind of RCC that the Reformers were sinfully confident in thinking that the Christian could have confidence that their sins were fully dealt with and that they could have certainty of their adoption and eternal destiny. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine claimed that '...the greatest of all Protestant heresies is assurance.' Others today would echo this thought, but for different reasons, not thinking that we can save ourselves, but rather because if you take away the fear of hell, you remove the impetus for holiness. On the other hand there were those who were glad to hear of assurance and used it as license to go off and carelessly live in sin thinking that because they were Christians, and no longer under law but grace, that they could live any way they pleased, assured of their eternal destiny. The confession, in seeking to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture, and give an answer to these wrong perspectives has put these 4 paragraphs together. We will be looking at them under four points, The possibility of assurance; The grounds of assurance; The means of assurance; The changes of assurance.

The possibility of assurance

'Although temporary believers, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God and state of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish; yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in

the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.' Paragraph 1 talks about the possibility of having assurance, but before it talks about the true it first talks about the counterfeit. It acknowledges the category of temporary believers like those in the parable of the sower, the seed that fell on rocky or thorny ground, who did not endure but even experienced joy for a period. Another are unregenerate person who deceive themselves with false hopes. This would be like someone who confesses faith at an altar call, does not repent of their sins and is given false assurance by a well-meaning counsellor because they have 'prayed the prayer.' Various verses are given to show that we are very capable at deceiving ourselves. Jer. 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

Matt 7:21-23: ""Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Luke 18:10-14: ""Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

The confession also talks about those who deceive themselves with carnal presumptions of being in God's favour, this is speaking about people who may be rich or experiencing success or good health or victory in battle or winning an election who deceive themselves thinking external blessing equals God's favour and therefore salvation.

Paragraph 1 talks about three things that can lead a believer to a true assurance. A true belief in Jesus, in other words an informed faith, that acknowledges and repents of sin, sees no hope in self-righteousness and depends solely upon Christ. Secondly, a sincere love of Christ, not merely for what He gives, or in the hope of some blessing. And thirdly, those who walk with a clean conscience. Those who truly believe, truly love, and truly seek holiness can live with the certainty of God's smile upon them.

The confession lists several verses that speak of the believer's certainty that they are children of God, and saved. Rom 8:16: "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,"

1 John 2:3, 18-21, 5:13. "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments."

"Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that

they all are not of us. 20 But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. 21 I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.”

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.”

The grounds of assurance

2. ‘This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the Gospel; and also upon the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit unto which promises are made, and on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; and, as a fruit thereof, keeping the heart both humble and holy.’ The second paragraph comes out swinging against the Catholic view stating that the Christian’s assurance is not merely a guess/bare conjecture or optimistic possibility based on something fallible, but is an infallible assurance of faith grounded in three things. Now the WCF has the promises of God; evidence of inward graces; and the testimony of the Spirit, the Savoy and 1689 changed the first to ‘the blood and righteousness of Christ.’ This is not a denial of the promises of God being the grounds of our assurance but rather an opening up of what the promises are built upon. The promise that God will give eternal life to those who believe is true, because Jesus Christ is our perfect representative who paid the sufficient price for our salvation. The 1689 and Savoy are putting a Christocentric emphasis on the promises.

What we see here are three grounds for our assurance, one objective and two subjective. We have discussed this recently when looking at one of the prooftexts, Heb. 6:17-18, ‘So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.’ God does not lie, nor change, and when He promises, His word is sure, there is no firmer ground to stand on. This is more certain than the other two grounds which are subjective. This then is the primary grounds for our assurance. If He promises that all those who believe in His Son receive eternal life, and you have believed, then you can know you are saved. The Puritans used a simple syllogism:

Premise 1: God promises eternal life to those who believe in Jesus.

Premise 2: I believe.

Necessary conclusion: I have eternal life.

Let’s consider the 1689 change, that my infallible assurance rests on Jesus blood and righteousness. I think an example from John Bunyan’s experience will be sufficient. You will remember that he was converted and struggled with assurance, how did he gain it? ‘One day, as I was passing in the field, and that too with some dashes of my conscience, fearing lest yet all was not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, “Thy righteousness is in heaven”; and methought withal, I saw, with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God’s right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness. . . . I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, the same yesterday, to-day and for ever.’ There is indeed endless comfort in the promisekeeping nature of God and the sufficiency of Christ.

Evidence of inward graces is talking about those things that result from the Spirit working in our hearts like saving faith; repentance; hatred of sin; sorrow over sin; hungering and thirsting after righteousness; delight in God's word; prayer; delight in the saints; obedience from a love for God and desire for His glory, etc. The Epistle of 1 John highlights the obedience to God's commandments, the love for the saints, and the believing of the truth as signs of true new life in Christ.

The witness of the Spirit with our Spirit as taught in Rom. 8:15-16 is the third grounds of our assurance, and again a subjective grounds that ebbs and flows with our walks unlike the promises of God which are always true. This includes those direct and supernatural moments when the Spirit miraculously overwhelms your heart. And it includes the more indirect use of ordinary means by which we experience an assurance of our salvation.

The means of assurance

3. '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.' Paragraph 3 begins with a debate that went on at the time. Does saving faith include assurance as part of its definition? Faith we know includes, knowledge, assent and trust, but does it also necessarily involve assurance? The confession sides with the view that says that someone can have true faith, even a weak faith that does not have a firm grasp of how secure their salvation is, and still be saved. We are not saved because we 'feel' it, we are saved by His power and grace. There will be times when the truths of our salvation do not move us to assurance; and there will be times when due to sin or some other factor our emotions feel the opposite of assurance, faith the size of a mustard seed is saving faith. For this reason the confession recognises that there can be those who are truly saved but who struggle with assurance, that it can be years before they experience it. This was my experience, and the experience of John Bunyan and Charles Spurgeon, read their biographies if this is something you are struggling with.

This paragraph stresses how every believer, without a miraculous communication from God using the ordinary means can attain to an assurance of their salvation. What does this look like? It looks like the Christian doing the normal commanded things of God like prayer; sitting under the preached word, worshipping with the saints, pursuing holiness, putting sin to death, growing in knowledge. All of these are used by God to confirm your salvation as you grow in your walk with God. 2 Pet. 1:3-10 begins talking about the promises of God, v3-5; but then calls for a diligent use of means to make our calling and election sure, 'His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and

virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.'

The confession talks about our duty to establish our assurance because of its benefits in that it enlarges our heart in peace, joy, love, thankfulness, adds strength and cheerfulness to all our duties, and contrary to criticism it does not tend one to license but to holiness. Let me say a few words here about emotion. It is clear that we are saved despite what we feel however God has made us to be creatures of emotion, and He condescends that we feel these helpful emotions as aids to our obedience. Notice the place of emotion, the joy of the Lord is our strength, the joy of our salvation is our fuel; the peace of God guards our hearts and minds, it is armour; hope causes endurance making Spirit enabled emotion in response to biblical truth a strengthening agent. This is why the Bible calls for us to guard not only our steps but our hearts. This is why God frames our obedience to His law in terms of Loving God and neighbour. Emotion lies at the core of who we are and assurance plays an important part in our sanctification. A real enemy to a properly calibrated emotional life is the modern world with all of its digital overstimulation and distractions. These feelings of assurance are slow brewed rather than downloaded like you would with any info you search for with AI. Nurturing your inner life is a lost art and your assurance ebbs and flows with your prayer life, your meditation and contemplation upon the word, and to the extent you reflect in a concentrated way upon God and the gospel without giving in to the withdrawal temptations to distract yourself again.

The changes of assurance

4. 'True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light, yet are they never destitute of the seed of God and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the meantime, they are preserved from utter despair.' This last chapter talks about the reality of changes to our assurance and the things that cause it. It can be strong but also grow weaker; you can be strong one day and it feel weak the next; in fact you can lose it altogether. You can go from knowing yourself loved and accepted by God to seriously doubting how God could love by several paths. The first cause of losing our assurance is neglect. Not adding virtue to faith, and knowledge to virtue, and self-control to knowledge but cruising instead of striving. The second cause mentioned is by falling into sin which both wounds your conscience and grieves the Spirit who ministers our assurance to us. Thirdly, we can be shaken through violent temptation, when our souls feel assaulted by demonic temptation, and the strength of the sin in us feels like we have never been born again, and we are confronted with a deep desire to sin in our own hearts. Fourthly, by a sovereign action of God to withdraw a sense of His favour, what the Puritans called a dark

night of the soul. These God uses to reveal the sin in our heart, humble our pride and cause us to lean more strongly into Him.

But even if we lose our assurance for whatever reason, the true believer at their lowest places will still have the confession tells us these six things: the Seed of God, this is the Spirit and His work within us. We may lose His ministrations can we cannot lose Him as a seal of our inheritance. The life of faith: this is a true and saving faith. Love of Christ: a real love for Christ as Peter did even after denying Him. Love for the brethren: 1 John notes this as a sign of true life, that there is a real charity and concern towards our brethren. Sincerity of heart instead of hypocrisy and religious role playing but a genuine desire to please God despite failing Him. And a conscience of duty, even though they may have recently failed they know the good and desire to do it. These are signs of life, and the confession says that from these one can renew their assurance.

So can you know you are saved? Yes, although a false assurance is possible for false believers a true assurance that flows from a true faith; sincere love and obedient walk is possible. The grounds of our assurance are 3fold, the promises of God realized through the blood and righteousness of Christ; the evidence of inward graces and the witness of the Spirit. a true and saving faith can struggle to reach assurance and is still a saving faith without it, but through the use of ordinary means every believer can be assured. Things like sin, difficulty, temptation and neglect harm our assurance and it can wane and even be lost but the true believer is never forsaken and it can be restored.