

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Mark Perry | GMSA 2015

An oft-repeated refrain in salvation testimonies, repeated by thousands of Christian young people who have grown up in Christian homes, attended good churches, and gone to Christian schools, is “I struggled with assurance of salvation for years.” Why are these young people, who enjoy every conceivable spiritual benefit and should be growing spiritually like weeds, still struggling with whether or not they are saved? What is the problem and how can it be corrected?

HOW IS ONE SAVED?

Getting to the heart of this problem, many lack assurance of their salvation because they have been poorly, incompletely, or incorrectly taught regarding the nature of salvation. Salvation according to the Scripture is always by faith alone in Jesus Christ.

Keeping the Law Does Not Save

The Bible is clear that keeping the Law will not justify a person (Gal 2:16). While this passage deals specifically with the Mosaic Law, salvation never relies on a person keeping a code of behavior. Trying to obey God’s commands cannot save; in fact, it is entirely futile, because the unregenerate person is unable and unwilling to submit himself to God (Rom 8:7–8).

Many a young person has struggled with assurance of his salvation because of sin in his life, thinking that he must remove all sin from his life in order to be saved or to remain saved. While ongoing, habitual sin should cause one to legitimately question his salvation, the regular, daily struggle with sin indicates the indwelling Spirit of God opposing the sinful desires that went unchecked prior to salvation (Rom 7:13–25).

Human Effort Does Not Save

Man can *do* nothing to effect his salvation (Eph 2:8–9). Salvation is entirely by God’s grace and for His glory, and man cannot contribute savingly in any way to his redemption. Along these same lines, many young people have been taught, whether explicitly or implicitly, that salvation must be accompanied by certain emotions in order to be genuine. How many times have we heard that someone came to Christ “with tears streaming down his face” as proof of that profession’s genuineness? The young person who hears this and similar statements begins to doubt his salvation since he doesn’t remember tears streaming down his face when he professed Christ.

Praying a Prayer Does Not Save

Indeed, praying a prayer cannot save a person. The reciting of words, even if heartfelt, does not save anyone. Many Christian young people are staking their eternal destiny on a prayer they allegedly prayed as a young child. Many a tortured young person struggles with assurance of his salvation, wondering if he “did it right” or “prayed the right thing.” Oftentimes the venerable “sinner’s prayer” is presented as a magical incantation or “Christian rosary” that must be recited just so in order to be effective. Many young people will testify that they have prayed for salvation over and over at the counsel of a well-meaning Christian worker, who encouraged them to pray again just to “make sure.”

These misunderstandings, whether accidental or not, can spiritually paralyze, if not inoculate, a young person. If he thinks he must be a “good kid,” do the right things the right way, or pray the “proper” prayer in order to become or remain saved, he does not understand the salvation that God’s Word offers.

HOW DOES ONE KNOW HE IS SAVED?

Scripture is abundantly clear that those whom God saves are His forever (John 10:27–29). Those whom God has predestined, he has effectively called, justified, and will one day glorify (Rom 8:30). Jesus said he would not lose any of those whom the Father gave to him (John 6:39). Since we believe that those whom God saves he will keep, then the real question of assurance is this: How do I know I am one of those whom God has saved?

The book of 1 John addresses this question head-on. John says his purpose in writing the book was “that ye may know that ye have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). In his short epistle, he presents three tests of eternal life,

each containing demands in belief and demands in behavior. John maintains that a genuine Christian will manifest both right belief and right behavior.

ETERNAL LIFE BELONGS TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST.

As stated previously, the New Testament is abundantly clear that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 4:23–5:2). Christians are described in the New Testament as “believers” (Acts 5:14; 1 Tim 4:12). The epistle of 1 John clearly outlines the content of that faith: the person and work of Jesus Christ.

A Christian Believes in the Person of Jesus Christ

A genuine Christian, according to John, is one who confesses the Father and the Son (1 John 2:22–23). By this, I understand to mean that he believes in the Person of Christ and his full deity as God’s Son. Apart from this belief and confession, there is no salvation. If Jesus is not God as he claimed, he is a liar. Furthermore, if Jesus is not God, he must suffer for his own sin in Adam and cannot die in another’s place. Finally, if Jesus is not God, he could at best pay the penalty for one other human being’s sin (a one-for-one sacrifice), but not die for the sins of the world. Eternal life belongs only to those who confess the Person of Jesus Christ.

A Christian Believes in the Work of Jesus Christ

A genuine Christian, according to John, also believes in the saving work of Jesus Christ (1 John 4:1–3). A Christian believes that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:3). By this is not meant simply affirming that Jesus lived on earth 2,000 years ago. Rather, it is a summary statement of the ministry of Jesus Christ. God the Son humbled himself and took on flesh, coming to earth as a man (Phil 2:5–8; John 1:11, 14; Heb 2:5–18). As a man, he lived a perfect life, obeying God’s law completely (John 6:38; Rom 5:19). He was arrested unjustly by sinful men and crucified, dying not for his own sin (he had none), but justly punished by God for our sins (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 4:24–25; Isa 53:4–6).

ETERNAL LIFE BELONGS TO THOSE WHO OBEY GOD’S WORD.

While salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone, a genuine faith will always produce good works. This is James’ contention (Jas 2:14–26), supported by the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:20, “By their fruits you shall know them.”

A Believer’s Life is Marked by Righteousness

The epistle of 1 John resounds with this refrain: eternal life belongs to those whose lives are consistent with the holiness of the God in whom they believe (1 John 1:6, 8; 2:4–5, 15, 29; 3:3, 6, 7–8, 10, 24; 5:18).

A Believer’s Life is Marked by Love for Other Believers

Not only do believers love God and demonstrate that love by living holy lives, they also love God’s children. If God loved someone and gave His Son for that person, a genuine believer loves that child of God as well, and demonstrates it by his actions (1 John 2:9; 3:14, 18–19; 4:7–8; 5:2).

IN CONCLUSION

To summarize, salvation according to the Bible is not about what man does but about God’s grace. Salvation is by faith alone in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It involves understanding who Jesus Christ is and what he has accomplished on the cross. It involves turning from sin and placing faith in him alone.

This genuine faith demonstrates itself in a changed life. Good works flow out of saving faith; they do not produce saving faith. In fact, an unbeliever will ultimately become frustrated at his inability to do good; he is by nature unable to please God (Rom 8:7–8). As a believer strives to “work out his salvation,” he finds that God is at work in him, giving him the desire and the ability to do the things that please Him (Phil 2:12–13). As he does, he will find assurance not only in what he has believed, but also through the daily change that takes place as he becomes more like Jesus Christ.

If you are struggling with assurance of your salvation, ask yourself this question: Does my life demonstrate evidence of saving faith? If it does not, you have good reason to doubt your profession. The question you should ask yourself then is this: Is my faith in Jesus Christ alone for my salvation? Eternal life belongs to those whose faith is in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and that faith will evidence itself in a holy life.