

## **Christianity 101: The Basics of the Christian Faith**

### **#7 Assurance...The Foretaste of Glory Divine**

First John 4:13-16a, 5:11-13 and Second Timothy 1:11-12 (NRSV)

We have come a long way along our “Path of Salvation.” This, of course, has been the subject of our sermon series outlining the basics of the Christian faith. We began our faith-journey having owned up to our Original Sin. We then rejoiced at the news that God’s Prevenient Grace seeks us out and draws us to himself. We have Repented of our sinfulness, and have celebrated that we have been Justified before God, thanks to the cross of Jesus Christ. And, last Sunday, we were challenged that we need to be Born Again by the power of the Holy Spirit if we are to see the Kingdom of God.

This morning, we come to another milestone along our journey of faith, one that was very dear to the heart of John Wesley, our denomination’s founder. For today we are offered the blessing of **ASSURANCE**.

As has been true for each of the sermons in this series, before we can take the next step along our “Path of Salvation,” we first have to understand what that step means. What DO we mean by “assurance?”

Well, the meaning of the word “assurance” is different, depending on who you are talking to. Those in the secular world might describe “assurance” as “*peace of mind*.” Psychologists would define “assurance” as “*a personality free from frustration*” or ...“an emotional state of contentment.” But Christians see “assurance” from a Biblical perspective. The Bible presents “assurance” as “*a gift of the Holy Spirit, through faith in Jesus Christ*.” For the Christian, that gift of assurance is “*a certainty, a knowledge, a confidence concerning the believers’ personal relationship with God*.”

In our scripture passages that we read together a few moments ago, perhaps you picked up on that theme: Both lessons emphasized the fact that we can be CERTAIN, ...that we can KNOW in our hearts that we are saved.

Listen again to what the scriptures say: “*By this we KNOW that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit...God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God. So, we have KNOWN and believe the love that God has for us.*” And again: “*But I am not ashamed, for I KNOW the one in whom I have put my trust, and am SURE that He is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to Him.*”

In other words, it is the “blessed assurance” of KNOWING that Jesus is ours, and we are His.

John Wesley’s insistence that we can be certain of our salvation was no esoteric theological theory he dreamed up. It was born out of his own life and experience. You will recall how in previous sermons, I spoke of John Wesley’s struggle with a restless doubting in his heart. Sure, he “knew” Christ – in an intellectual sense...he had accepted Christ and surrendered to God’s will for his life.

But he lacked an inner peace. He longed for the “blessed assurance” in his heart – a certainty that he was INDEED saved.

That assurance came to Wesley at a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. The power of God washed over him, and took away the doubt and uncertainty that had been gnawing at his soul for years. For the first time in his life, John Wesley KNEW in his heart – without a shadow of a doubt – that salvation was his, and **that** assurance lit the fire of faith in Wesley’s bosom that still burns today in the hearts of more than 50,000,000 Christians around the world who trace their roots to John Wesley.

Listen to the exact words he wrote in his Journal on May 24, 1738: *“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I DID trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and AN ASSURANCE WAS GIVEN ME that He had taken away MY sins, even MINE, and saved ME from the law of sin and death.”*

Yes, along with Wesley, Methodists have always testified that a Christian can be CERTAIN in his or her heart that he or she is saved.

The late senator, Sam Ervin, used to tell about a religious discussion he had heard about that got a little out of hand. It seems there was a Presbyterian and a Methodist in North Carolina who got into an argument about the Presbyterian doctrine of predestination (the belief that everything that happens is pre-determined by God, even who will be saved and who will not). Like all religious arguments, the longer it lasted, the more heated the participants became. Finally, the Methodist said, *“Well, I will admit that there MAY be something to the doctrine of predestination. I think Presbyterians are predestined to go to hell!”* Not to be outdone, the Presbyterian said to the Methodist, *“Well, I would rather be a Presbyterian and KNOW I am going to hell, than a Methodist, and not know where-in-the-hell I am going!”*

Well, thanks to the Biblical doctrine of “assurance,” we Methodists CAN KNOW where we are going...and it’s NOT to hell!

As that wonderful hymn by that great Methodist laywoman, Fannie Crosby expresses it: *“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine; O what a foretaste of glory divine...”* When we have the assurance of God in our hearts, we begin to experience a little of the heavenly joy that will be ours in the life to come.

So, in Methodist teaching, “assurance” is a wonderful blessing of God that can FREE us from doubts about our salvation, and ENABLE us to live life to the fullest.

But not all Christians interpret “assurance” the way we do. There are some Christians who seem to believe that, unless you have the assurance of your salvation in your heart, that proves you are NOT saved. They teach that, if you have even momentary doubts about your salvation, then your faith is not strong enough, and your salvation is in jeopardy. Wade Burton poked fun at Methodists and

Baptists alike when he said, *“The difference between Baptists and Methodists is this: Methodists **have** salvation, but are afraid they might **lose** it. Baptist know they can’t lose it, but are afraid they may not have it!”*

I don’t believe that EITHER of those describes the way Wesley believed. And it’s not the way United Methodist’s believe, either. We do NOT believe that salvation is somehow based on our state-of-mind, NOR is it dependent on our lack of doubting. That is because, in our way of thinking, the gift of salvation and the gift of assurance are NOT one-and-the-same thing. Assurance **grows out of** our salvation, NOT the other way around!

Those who insist that we are NOT saved unless we have an “experience” of assurance are just plain wrong. They use circular logic, and if they would think about what they are saying, they would see the flaw in their reasoning. It is faulty-logic to insist that salvation is somehow based on OUR experience of “assurance” - It doesn’t make any sense to say: “You can’t have assurance, unless you are saved,” and at the same time, say: “You can’t be saved, unless you have assurance...” It doesn’t work!

Those of us followers of Christ who call ourselves “Wesleyans” insist that the gift of salvation COMES FIRST (it is a work of Christ!) – we are saved by grace through faith alone – ONLY THEN can come assurance.

Because of that, we would argue that “assurance” is NOT REQUIRED for salvation, only faith: (John Wesley was saved by his faith in Christ, long before his Aldersgate experience). No, salvation is NOT dependent on assurance. But, once saved, assurance CAN BE one of the greatest blessings that flow from salvation!

Assurance is like “icing on the cake” – a second blessing allowing you to experience the full joy of your salvation.

In the First Letter of John (5:12-13), we see this Biblical relationship between our salvation and the gift of assurance that I’ve been talking about. Listen carefully to what John says: *“Whoever has the Son HAS LIFE: whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life ... (in other words, we are saved by faith alone)... **I write these things to you who BELIEVE in the name of the Son of God SO THAT you may KNOW that you have eternal life.**”* (rpt.)

You see? Salvation by faith... does not necessarily automatically result in assurance. You CAN have doubts and still be saved. But assurance CAN BE a wonderful ‘second blessing’ of the Holy Spirit that allows us to know the JOY of our salvation.

Maybe an illustration might help. Imagine that one of the NASCAR drivers invited you to ride with him during the Daytona 500. You were afraid, but you had enough FAITH to finally get into the car. Whatever security the car offered was yours as well as his. As you rode along together, YOU trembled at every turn, but the DRIVER seemed relaxed and at ease. You see, HE had the understanding, knowledge, confidence, and experience needed in order to enjoy the ride. You both

rode in the same car, you both traveled around the same track, ...but HE had “assurance” ...YOU did not! Yet BOTH of you had the same security, and you BOTH arrived at the same destination.

Now do you understand? It is ONLY through faith in Jesus Christ that we are saved...We have to have faith enough to “get into the car.” But without assurance, we can’t “enjoy the ride.” We have to trust the Driver to get us to the finish line. Assurance is God’s gift that allows us to enjoy our salvation because we have confidence in its security and in the promises of God.

My friends, have you given your life to Christ? Have you confessed Him as your Lord and Savior? If so, the you have been saved... by faith “you’ve gotten into the car” – you’ve put your eternal life in the hands of the Driver. Now all that is left is to completely trust God (the one in the driver’s seat) that He will be faithful to His promises, so that you can enjoy the “blessed assurance” of KNOWING that your salvation is secure.

Dwight L. Moody told a story of how Assurance works: He said that the emperor Napoleon was on horseback was reviewing his troops one day when something frightened the horse and the Emperor lost hold of the reins. The horse set-off at a full gallop, out of control. A private in formation saw what was happening and sprang out of the ranks towards the horse, and was successful in getting hold of the horse's head at great peril to his own life. The Emperor was very impressed. He tipped his hat and said to the brave private, "I make you Captain of my Guard."

The soldier didn't return to his place in the ranks, but instead went to where Napoleon’s personal body guards were assembled. The captain of the body-guard ordered him back into the ranks, but he said "No! I won't go!" "Why not?" "Because I am Captain of the Guard." "You, Captain of the Guard?" "Yes," replied the soldier. "Who said it?" And the soldier, pointing to the Emperor, said, "He said it."

That was enough. Nothing more needed to be said.. nothing more could be said. That young soldier took the Emperor at his word.

Dwight L. Moody summed it up with these words: “My friends, if God says anything, let us take Him at His word.”

And what has God said? In Romans 10:9, this is what he declares: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Friends, why do you doubt the word of God? He has called you his own beloved child. He has claimed you as his own. That is enough. Nothing more can be said.

Do you want assurance? Take God at his word. Then you, too, can sing along with Fannie Crosby: “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is MINE... O what a foretaste of glory divine!”