

15: Assurance – what do I do when I lack assurance?**Introduction**

Bible reading and opening prayer – 2 Peter 1:1-15.

Before we begin turn to a neighbour and discuss this question:

- **Discuss: What do you do when you feel far away from the Lord?**

We've been thinking in this course about God's Great Salvation – his powerful and loving plan to rescue people like us from hell to become dearly loved children of his.

Last week we began thinking about assurance: "am I really saved?"

Assurance is the subjective confidence that I really am a Christian. *Knowing* that I'm a Christian is a different thing to really *being* a Christian. That's a key distinction we saw last time.

And we saw that for various reasons every real Christian will struggle with assurance for different reasons and at different times.

Our theme today builds on that: "How do I deal with a lack of assurance?"

There's an old Wesley hymn that goes like this:

O for a heart to praise my God
A heart from sin set free;
A heart that always feels thy blood
So freely shed for me

What does it mean to "feel" the blood of Christ? Some of us (rightly) have been taught to be suspicious of our feelings. But we are creatures who feel things. So, what does it mean to have a subjective and felt experience that I belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to me?

And what do I do when that experience is lacking? How do I help a Christian friend or spouse who is battling with a lack of assurance? That's a very practical subject...

1. Look to Christ – and not at yourself

Here's a little **illustration** – try to picture this scene...

We're on a bridge which is crossing a deep and dangerous chasm (you're 500 feet above jagged rocks, there are crocodiles, terrorists, a volcano as well probably). And you ask me a question: "But do you really trust the bridge?"

I have a choice. I could talk about my trust in the bridge – but "trust" is quite a hard thing to catch and put under a microscope. Or, I could talk about the bridge. And what I say about the bridge will be more helpful: "there are dozens of 40-ton lorries passing over it; and thousands of people are walking over it; and it's stood here for centuries; and I've seen it in a storm and it stood strong and firm then; and it's made of the hardest rock and toughest steel I've ever seen; and ... and ... and ..."

So you ask this question: "But do I really trust Jesus?" And we have a choice. I could talk about my trust or I could talk about Jesus. And when we're facing a lack of trust we need to begin by talking about Jesus!

Turn to a neighbour and discuss this:

- **Discuss: What are the top 5 best things about who Jesus is and what he's done? (And where do you get that from in the Bible?)**

Let's feedback for a few minutes – the things we most love about Jesus, and some Bible verses that tell us about him.

It's such a good thing just to talk about Jesus! (His birth and life. His saving death and Cross and blood. The glorious salvation that he has worked. Christ Jesus died to save sinners. He shed his blood for sinners. He loves you.) In fact we need to...

- **Preach the Gospel of Jesus – to yourself and to others**

We're all called to be preachers! Firstly, we need to talk to ourselves about what Jesus has done for us. Preaching to ourselves about the saving work of Jesus – that's meditation.

And we can share with others what about Jesus has most encouraged us lately or what we know will encourage one of our brethren. (For example: out with a friend the other night I was greatly heartened when we got talking about that passage in Zechariah 3 where Satan accuses Joshua the high priest and the Lord responds by taking off Joshua's filthy robes and clothing him in the clothes of perfect righteousness).

- **Why begin here?**

When you're assailed by doubts, why begin here? Why not start by examining your life to see if you're showing the fruits of someone who has truly been born again?

Here's the reason. It's because Jesus is the totally sufficient saviour.

It might be you're concerned that you're not elect – you're not predestined for salvation? People who have a big view of the sovereignty of God sometimes fear that.

It might be you're concerned that you'll stop believing and fall away – I won't persevere. People who are a bit more Arminian sometimes fear that.

What do you do? You consciously look to Jesus. After all, the Christian is predestined "in Him." And the Christian will be kept until glory by Him. We look at Jesus.

The great American theologian Gresham Machen wrote about his own battles with assurance – in which he was helped by his mother.

"My mother [spoke to me] in those dark hours when the lamp burned dim, when I thought that faith was gone and shipwreck had been made of my soul. "Christ," she used to say, "keeps firmer hold on us than we keep on him."

My mother's word meant...that salvation by faith does not mean that we are saved because we keep ourselves at every moment in an ideally perfect attitude of confidence in Christ. No, we are saved because having once been united to Christ by faith, we are his forever. Calvinism is a very comforting doctrine indeed. Without its comfort, I think I should have perished long ago in the castle of Giant Despair." (J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings, 561)

Here's a similar encouragement from John Piper:

"Your best moments of assurance are not the moments when you're thinking about your assurance. Because the very moment that you're thinking about your assurance, you have the capacity at that moment to doubt your assurance."

Instead we need to look to Christ. And we remind ourselves and others of all He is. And of all He has done.

2. Trust in Christ – and not in yourself

Salvation and all the benefits of Christ are obtained by faith – not by works. They're not earned. Not worked for. They're gifts of grace. They are held out to people who come to the Lord with empty hands.

Salvation and Christ are obtained by faith. Not by the assurance of faith. Assurance even in real Christians goes up and down. But we're saved by Jesus – and we take hold of that salvation simply by trusting in him and in his finished work.

So, hear the Gospel in John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

So, the question for the struggling Christian is this:

- Do you trust Jesus rather than yourself?

Sometimes that's hard to answer. It's not the same sort of question as "Are you wearing blue trousers?" That's a question easily answered by observation. But you can't see into your own soul in the same way.

And for someone struggling with assurance the answer to the question "Do you trust Jesus" might be "I think so..." or "I'm not sure.." or "No, because it just doesn't *feel* like I believe."

With that in mind we might need to ask ourselves – or others – the same question in a slightly different way. Here's how I sometimes put it when I'm talking with myself or a friend:

- "When you're in your right mind what do you feel about Jesus?"

When you're in your right mind do you think that's God's holy Son, the friend of sinners, the great Lord and the gracious saviour?

Here's another way of thinking about it:

- "When you're in your right mind how do you feel about your sin?"

Does your sin bother you? If you don't really know what sin is, and it doesn't particularly bother you then you're probably not a Christian. But if your sin really bothers you then that's a good sign that you trust in Christ.

Hear the good news of the Gospel again: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Here's the next question:

How do I grow my trust in Christ? And how do I grow my confidence or assurance that I do indeed belong to Jesus?

3. Use those tools which God uses to work in us

Older Christians used to speak a lot about "the means of grace." It's a helpful phrase. We should probably use it a bit more. It's a way of speaking about those tools through which God usually likes to work. Of course, he can directly and graciously work in our hearts to do things; he's not bound to use particularly tools or means. But he likes to. Ordinarily, he works for our good through these tools or "means." Christian growth comes through these means...

(a) Through the Bible

Look at 2 Peter 1:3-4. We have "great and precious promises" given to us. Those are the promises of God in Scripture. Through them, v4, we can become like God – be shaped to be like Him. In the Scriptures (v3) we have everything we need for life and godliness" as we get to know God in the Bible.

So we're encouraged to be Bible readers. Why read the word – at home as well as at church? Because through it God works.

And down in vv12-15 Peter's clear that we need constant "reminder" of these things – our souls are so very forgetful. He says the same in 3:1-2 – we desperately need to remember and recall the words of the prophets and the commands of Jesus. In the last verse of his letter (3:18) we're told to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ."

So forget about assurance for a minute. God wants us to grow. To get to know Him better – which means spending time in His Word. And as we do that He'll work in us, to make us grow.

A question for each of us: what will it mean for us to grow in our knowledge of Christ?

(b) Through praying

We can pray for assurance – after all it's God's gift:

Romans 8:15-16, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

We're to pray for mercy and help for every situation:

Hebrews 4:15-16, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

1 Peter 5:6-7, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

We're to be regular in confession of sin:

Psalm 32:3-5, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

Confessing our sins to the Lord is such a good thing. It helps us to trust Christ and not our own innate goodness. And Psalm 32 reminds us that when we don't confess our sins we ought to feel like we're wasting away.

(c) Through other Christians

Christians aren't meant to live the Christian life solo. The Lone Ranger is usually a dead ranger. That's certainly true of Christians.

Briefly discuss some of the following verses – they are all "one another" texts, verses that describe our common life together. How are we to help one another?

Hebrews 3:13, "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

Hebrews 10:24, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

1 Thessalonians 4:18, "Therefore encourage each other with these words."

1 Thessalonians 5:11, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."

One reason we've structured new fellowship groups into the life of the church is to help this sort of "one anothering" to happen. It won't happen automatically. It won't only happen through the vehicle of a fellowship group. But if we're to grow – and to help others grow – we all need to be in the kind of relationships whereby we can "one another" each other. (A personal testimony: I am loving being in a fellowship group – it's going to be very good for me... but I also hope that I can be a blessing to other people in our group).

(d) Through the Church gathering

In points (a)-(c) we haven't yet even got to church on Sunday. None of those verses are restricted to what we might call the Sunday Church gathering.

However, congregating or "churching" together is crucial to our Christian growth. Hearing the preached word together. Giving ourselves to sung praise and prayer. Feeding on the Lord's Supper together. These are tools or means of grace that God has given us to enjoy and use when we gather together.

The preached word:

1 Peter 1:23-25, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, ²⁵ but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you."

The Lord's Supper:

1 Corinthians 10:16, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?"

Sung praise and prayer:

Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

Do you see, we need to be in church – we need to be in the gathering. For the sake of one another. So that together we may enjoy the means of grace that God has particularly given to the church when she meets together.

Let me make a special mention of singing. Praising God – in the car, in the shower, but particularly together in church – is a wonderful means of grace. When we sing God-centred, Christ-centred, Cross-centred songs and hymns we take Bible truth and ram it into our affections. Singing God's praises from a true heart helps us feel the gospel. So, give yourself to singing God's praises!

So...

Here are the means of grace which the Lord likes to use to help us grow... in our knowledge of Him, and in our felt experience of him.

Consider the flip side: a Christian who never reads the Bible, never prays, and never gets stuck into loving relationships and the life of the church will be most unlikely to have assurance of salvation. They certainly shouldn't do.

In our quest for assurance Look to Christ... Trust in Christ... Use God's means of grace... Lastly...

4. Examine your life

In seeking assurance, the Bible does teach that there's a place for looking at our lives and asking: "Is this the life of a Christian?"

(a) What? The Bible commands that we examine ourselves

For example, 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you-- unless, of course, you fail the test?"

So, we're to examine ourselves.

For example, Hebrews 3:12, "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God."

So, the question we're to ask ourselves is this: do you have a sinful, unbelieving, turning heart? Check it out!

(b) Why? Our works are an indicator

Because our works are an indicator. If you're still in 2 Peter 1 we can see this. Look at the logic of vv5-10.

- to your faith "make every effort to add" goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, love."
- on to v10, "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,"

What's the point? A godly life "makes sure" – confirms TO YOU – your identity in Christ.

We can see the same in different points in 1 John. Let's see that together. Skim through these verses:

- 1 John 2:3-6, 3:14 (and 3:23), 4:13-15 (v15 explains the indwelling of v13), 5:13

If you put all that together and ask "what sort of works should give us assurance?" here's the Bible's answer:

- general obedience
- loving other Christians
- confessing that Jesus is the Son of God

Or to use the language of other Scriptures we're to love God and love our neighbour. Those works are an indicator about the state of our souls.

But how do you assess your works?

(c) How? Looking for progress (not perfection)

How do you measure works? NOT on a scale of 1-10 where X is good enough to put me among the elect. The key thing to look for is progress not perfection.

For some, that examination might reveal a life that bears very little imprint of the Lord Jesus Christ. Little love for him, little tangible love of other Christians. And that does beg a question. Sometimes it's right to ask a big question.

For all, our works and our obedience is patchy and bumpy. But these are sorts of questions to which a Christian (possibly with the help of a friend) can answer "yes":

Am I different now that I'm a Christian? Do other people observe in me growing Christ-likeness? Am I different to the unregenerate state as described in the Bible?

Conclusion and summary

In our search for assurance we've tackled four subjects: Christ, faith, means, and our works. The order in which we've approached those subjects is not accidental. It's really important. We need to **get the order right**: Christ → faith → means → works

Because if we get it wrong no Christian would ever have assurance. If you start off with good works then NO-ONE could have confidence about their salvation.

What do we mean by that? Suppose a Christian friend says to you: "I'm just not sure I'm saved." The first thing you say in response ISN'T "Right then, tell me about your quiet times, your thought life, your attitude to possessions and money."

Rather we start thinking about and talking together about CHRIST and FAITH. In other words we start off talking about "saving faith" or "direct certainty." And then we move on to talking about other stuff, including the shape and direction of your life.

Lastly, and **in summary**:

God gives assurance. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit, who grants us a felt confidence that we are children of God. It's a gift. It's not necessary for salvation. But it is to be pursued.

At the bottom of assurance is nothing inside of us. It's Jesus. So we're encouraged first and foremost and always to look to Jesus... to trust Jesus and His Cross and not ourselves. For our part we're to use those means of grace that God gives to grow us as Christians, and to examine our lives (which will never be perfect). And as we do that we'll be the kind of person to whom God likes to give that gift of assurance.

Wrapping up:

- Q&A, pray, sing.
- Next week: we're giving our whole session over to Q&A.

A hymn:

I will glory in my Redeemer

Whose priceless blood has ransomed me
Mine was the sin that drove the bitter nails
And hung Him on that judgment tree
I will glory in my Redeemer
Who crushed the power of sin and death
My only Savior before the Holy Judge
The Lamb Who is my righteousness
The Lamb Who is my righteousness

I will glory in my Redeemer
My life He bought, my love He owns
I have no longings for another
I'm satisfied in Him alone
I will glory in my Redeemer
His faithfulness my standing place
Though foes are mighty and rush upon me
My feet are firm, held by His grace
My feet are firm, held by His grace

I will glory in my Redeemer
Who carries me on eagle's wings
He crowns my life with lovingkindness
His triumph song I'll ever sing
I will glory in my Redeemer
Who waits for me at gates of gold
And when He calls me it will be paradise
His face forever to behold
His face forever to behold
Words and music by Steve and Vikki Cook