

It's Not About You

Dear friends and saints: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It may strike as an acute sort of thing brought on by one of life's sudden crises, or, perhaps, it may manifest itself as a persistent, low intensity, long term nagging doubt, but sooner or later every must Christian deal with it – and usually more than once: it's the question of the assurance of salvation. How do I *really* know that I am saved? What indicators or proofs should I be looking for? What concrete evidence can I point to as the indisputable guarantee that on the Last Day I will stand on the Lord's right hand and enter with him into the glory of his eternal kingdom and not be found instead on his left hand to be cast into the unquenchable flames of hell?

You've grappled with the question, I'm sure. With so much hanging on the answer, I can't imagine that there's anyone who hasn't. To ignore the issue you'd have to be either a fool or an atheist who didn't care because you didn't think it mattered – but scripturally speaking, that would make you a fool too. And you are not a fool. So you have dealt with it in the past. And since I've raised the subject, I hope you're dealing with it again now. The question I have for you is what answer do you give? To what do you look for the assurance of your salvation?

Let's examine some of the options. In last week's message, I had a few things to say about the way the idol worshipping pagans thought about things. Now to be accurate, most of them didn't have anywhere near the same concept of salvation that we do. The pagan religions tended to view the afterlife as sort of a shadowy underworld where the spirits of the dead lived on and pretty much everyone got the same treatment. With but few exceptions, they had no notion of the resurrection of the body, a judgment, and eternal rewards or punishments being meted out based upon the way a person lived on earth. No, the pagan religions were mostly about *this* life. The goal was to secure the favor of the gods who would reward you here and now with riches, health, and success; or conversely, if you failed to win their favor, they would punish you with poverty, disease, and disaster. So, if everything was coming up roses for you, it was evidence that the gods were happy with you. If not, it was proof that they were mad because you'd provoked or dishonored them in some way.

Oddly enough, many Christians hold to the same idea: they believe that their outward circumstances are a direct indication of how the Lord feels about them. There are whole church bodies that proclaim this message. We call it the health and welfare gospel. When times are good it's proof that God approves of you. When they're not, you must be on the naughty list. So, to know your status with respect to your eternal destiny, you only have to extrapolate that out. Live an incredibly long life all the while enjoying riches and success, and then when you're upwards of ninety and still in the prime of life pass away peacefully in your sleep, then you're a shoe-in for paradise. But if not, if you're poor, suffer misfortune, get some debilitating disease that causes your body to painfully waste away over a long time, well, better watch out. Your miserable life is just the prelude to an even more miserable eternity in hell.

There are three things to say about this idea. First, it's a pagan lie. Second, it's a terribly sad way to live if you actually believe it. And third, the Scriptures flatly contradict it. Scores of biblical saints lived in poverty and under oppression. Many were failures by the standards of the world. They died in horrible ways. Or take the case of Job, a faithful man whom the Lord thought highly of. His afflictions came as a direct result of his *faithfulness*. It was his worthless friends who tried to tell him otherwise; and the Lord rebuked them sharply for

it. The Bible teaches that the Lord often uses hardship and trouble to do good for his children: to discipline them, to increase their faith and hope, and to develop in them godly virtues. So let me state this as clearly as I can: you can't look to the outward circumstances of your life for assurance of salvation.

Okay, if that's out, where can you look? Let me tell you what is probably the most common thing to which Christians turn for proof of their salvation: it's the way they live their lives. The Bible teaches that those who have saving faith in Christ will repent, turn from sin, and produce good works in the service of the Lord and others. So, they say, the way to know if I'm saved for sure is to examine myself – my thoughts, my words, my actions – to see if they measure up. If so, if I'm winning the war against sin, the seductions of the world, and the temptations of the devil, *and* I'm doing all kinds of wonderful things that the Lord approves of, like helping the needy, giving to the poor, serving at church functions, and so on, then it must mean I'm safe. If not ... well, not so much.

Of course, this kind of approach raises the question: how much is enough? Even the godliest believer sins much daily. Oh, they might clean up their outward behavior and get rid of obvious vices; but the heart is still sinful beyond understanding. And when it comes to doing good works, no matter how hard you go at it, at the end of the day you have to admit that you could have done more and done better. This might lead you to compare your performance with others: as long as I'm sinning less and doing more than so-and-so I should be okay; but, how do you know if they're saved? How much is enough?

No, using the evidence of your life as proof of your salvation simply doesn't work. It leads either to self righteousness, like the Pharisee who prayed, "I thank you Lord that I'm better than other men. Just look at all the things I've done", and who went home steeped in his sin; or it leads to despair: "My ongoing love of sin and failure to do the good I ought to do is proof that I'm damned." Either way, it's a dead end. You lose.

Well, what then? Oh, I know. How about this? The Bible says we're saved by grace through *faith*. Maybe it's to my faith that I ought to look for proof of salvation. I can know for sure that I'm saved if I believe in the truths the Bible tells me I must believe to be saved. And there are a lot of people who think this is the answer. But it's an answer that fails to give assurance. Why? It's because everyone struggles with doubt from time to time. If I'm depending on faith and my faith is weak and sometimes fails ... where does that leave me? With more doubt, that's where. How much faith is enough? How strong does it have to be? It becomes a circular sort of thing because what I'm forced to believe in is the quality of my belief. My faith is in my faith. And that too is a dead end.

No, for assurance of your salvation you can't look to your outward circumstances, to the evidence of your life, or to your faith. Neither can you look to your inner feelings or to certain spiritual experiences you may have had. All these things will fail to give you the assurance you seek. And let me tell you why. They are all about *you*: your life, your behavior, your faith, your whatever. Listen: *it's not about you*. If you want to know for sure about your salvation, don't look at yourself. Rather, listen to what John says into today's Gospel: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." For assurance of your salvation, look only to *Jesus*. Look to the sinless life he lived *for you*. Look to look to the cross and passion that he suffered *for you*. Look to the life he took up again *for you*. Look to Jesus and not to yourself. It's not about you.

And consider what Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth. I'll get right to it; but first you need to know a little about the Corinthian congregation. They were one messed up group of

people. Most of them were recent converts to Christianity from paganism. And though they had been catechized by Paul, they still retained a lot of their pagan ideas and ways. Some of the members, for example, saw no problem at all with continuing to be regular customers at the whorehouses for which Corinth was so famous (or infamous). Beyond that, it was a church deeply divided. Various factions and individuals were competing for power, control, and above all, bragging rights as the most spiritually gifted. Their worship services were a total confusion: everyone trying to impress the others with what God was doing in their lives. When they had what they called the Lord's Supper, some folks gorged themselves and got drunk while others went hungry. It wasn't the Lord's Supper at all. Some of the members even went so far as to flatly deny the hinge pin on which all of Christianity turns: the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. They said, "Nah, no way. Jesus didn't rise from the dead!" The church at Corinth was a disaster. It's hard to imagine a worse group of Christians.

And yet look what Paul writes to them: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints ..." And unfortunately the English translation of what he writes, as powerful as it is, doesn't quite capture the full sense of it. Despite all their problems, Paul calls them the church of God, that is, those who have been called out by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and set aside as the Lord's own children. And when he says that they have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, it means they have been made saints, a holy people, washed in the blood of the Lamb. And the verbs that describe these things, like almost all of the verbs in this entire section, are passive. It means, it's not things you have done, but things that have been done to you by God. He's the one who called you by the Gospel. He's the one who gave you the faith to believe it. He's the one who forgave your sins, washed you, and made you his own. He's the one who made you a saint in Christ Jesus.

Paul continues, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking any spiritual gift ..." Do you hear that? Again, despite the confusion and turmoil in the congregation, Paul thanks God for them and the work that the Lord himself is doing among them: pouring out upon them his grace and mercy, filling them with divine knowledge and wisdom, and giving them all the spiritual gifts that will enable them to flourish as the faithful until the coming of the Lord.

Now, lest I be misunderstood, Paul is not saying that the problems with the Corinthian church are okay and should be allowed to continue. In fact, the reason he's writing is to help them correct their many errors and faulty practices. He's trying to fix what's broken there because the problems they have are ruinous to the church and can lead people astray and destroy their faith. They also make a terrible witness to the world. But the point is that in this age the church is always a work in progress: the Lord bringing people out of darkness into light by means of his powerful Word; the Lord bringing the spiritually dead to life by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the physical means by which people receive it: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Where the Lord is doing this work, there people are being saved, not by what they do; but by what the Lord is doing for them. He is the faithful one. He's the one who will sustain you to the end, faultless on the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ. He's the one to whom you must look for assurance of your salvation. It's all about him. It's not about you.

All right, hopefully I've made the case; but before I close I want to address the objection I often hear and that some of you are probably thinking. It's this: "So, what you're saying is that I've got no part in this at all. There's no response on my part, nothing the Lord wants to see in me, no change or improvement of any kind that I'm supposed to make. I just sit here like a lump and get worked on, and it's all up to the Lord to make me a Christian and keep me one until I

die. Is that it?" Answer: no. That is not it. There are all kinds of things you are supposed to do. You are to repent of your sins and turn from them. You are to avail yourself of the means of grace, delving deeply into God's Word and partaking of the Sacraments. You are to work toward Christian maturity, growing in faith, hope, and love. You are to serve others in the ways the Lord enables you. You have plenty to do. *But you are not to look to any of those things you do for assurance of salvation.* It's a different question entirely. And the truth is that only by being assured of your salvation in Jesus alone can you be free to serve the Lord as you ought: as his sanctified child for Christ's sake rather than as a slave always trying to gain the master's favor through your own efforts.

For salvation, it's not about you. It's about what Jesus has done and is even now doing for you. For other aspects of the Christian life, it's about what Jesus is working in and through you as he brings you to maturity, makes you fruitful for his kingdom, and keeps you guiltless until his coming. He is faithful. You can depend on him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!