

Introduction to the Doctrine of Assurance

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[0 : 00] Now, many, if not most, if not all of you, are familiar with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Of course, that's the story of a man named Christian who leaves the city of destruction and travels the pilgrim's pathway to the celestial city.

And, of course, the entire story is designed to allegorize the Christian life. So, in the story, Christian passes through the narrow gate and he comes to the cross.

And it's there that the burden that he's been carrying on his back suddenly falls off. And immediately, the shining ones appear and they give him brand new clothes and a scroll.

Now, Christian, if I remember correctly, is not immediately told what is in that scroll. It's actually sealed. But the shining ones tell him to hold on to it, to look to it as he's traveling the pilgrim's pathway.

And then he will give it to someone when he reaches the celestial city. The implication is that he will need this scroll to get in. Now, it becomes very clear shortly after that Christian understands that this scroll is to be his comfort on the journey.

[1 : 15] When he looks at the scroll in his hand, he has this personal assurance that when he gets to the end of the road, he will be allowed entrance into the celestial city.

However, there's a crucial moment in the story when Christian loses that scroll. And I'd like to read a couple of pages of this. We're coming into the part of the story when Christian is climbing the hill of difficulty.

I then looked at Christian going up the hill, where, because of the steepness of the hill, I saw he went from running to walking and from walking to crawling on his hands and knees.

Now, about midway to the top of the hill was a pleasant arbor made by the Lord of the hill for the refreshment of weary travelers. When Christian arrived there, he sat down to rest.

He then pulled the scroll out of his bosom and read to his comfort. He also began to examine the garment that was given him while at the cross. Thus, refreshing himself for a while, he at last fell into a slumber and thence into a sound sleep, which delayed him there until it was almost night.

[2 : 28] While asleep, his scroll fell out of his hand. Now, as he was sleeping, one came and awakened him, saying, Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise.

With that, Christian suddenly jumped up and hurried on his way until he came to the top of the hill. Now, when he reached the top of the hill, two men came running to meet him.

The name of one was Timorous and the other, Mistrust. Christian inquired of them, Sirs, what is the matter? You are running the wrong way. Timorous answered, We were going to the celestial city, but the further we go, the more dangers we meet with.

Therefore, we have turned around and are going back. Yes, said Mistrust, for there were lions just ahead of us on the path, and we did not know if they were asleep or awake.

We were terrified that they would tear us to pieces. Then Christian said, You frightened me, but where shall I flee to be safe?

[3 : 29] If I go back to my own country, which shall be destroyed by fire and brimstone, I will certainly perish there. I shall only be safe if I can reach the celestial city.

I must venture onward. To go back is nothing but death. To go forward is fear of death, and everlasting life beyond it. Therefore, I must surely go forward.

So Mistrust and Timorous ran down the hill, and Christian continued on the difficult way. Thinking of what he heard from the men, he felt in his bosom for his scroll, that he might read from it and be comforted, but he could not find it.

Christian was then in great distress, and he did not know what to do, for the scroll was his path into the celestial city. Therefore, he was fearful and bewildered, and not knowing what to do.

At last he remembered that he had slept at the arbor on the side of the steep hill. Falling down upon his knees, he asked God's forgiveness for his foolish act, and then he went back to look for his scroll.

[4 : 37] Who can sufficiently set forth the sorrow of Christian's heart as he went back? Sometimes he sighed, sometimes he wept, and often he rebuked himself for being so foolish as to fall asleep in that arbor, which was only erected for a little refreshment for weary pilgrims.

Thus he went back, carefully looking on this side and on that side all the way as he went, hoping perhaps that he might find his scroll, which had been his comfort so many times on his journey. So he went on until he again came within sight of the arbor where he had rested and slept. But that sight only increased his sorrow by bringing his folly of sleeping once again into his mind. Thus he bemoaned, Oh, what a wretched man I am, that I should sleep in the daytime and in the midst of difficulty, that I should so indulge my flesh, for the Lord of the hill has built this arbor only for the refreshment of pilgrims.

How many steps have I taken in vain? Thus it happened to Israel for their sin. They were sent back again by the way of the Red Sea. Just so I am made to retrace those steps with sorrow, which I might have trod with delight had it not been for my folly of sleeping.

[5 : 53] How much further along my way might have been by this time? But I had to tread these steps three times, which I only needed to have trod but once. Yes, now I must journey in the dark of night, for the daylight is almost gone.

Oh, that I had not slept. Reaching the arbor, he sat down and wept. Then looking around sorrowfully under the bench, he spotted his scroll.

With trembling and haste, he snatched it up and put it into his bosom. None can tell how joyful he then was, for this scroll was the assurance of his salvation and his pass to the celestial city.

Therefore he secured it in his bosom, gave thanks to God for directing his eye to the place where he had fallen, and with joy and tears resumed his journey. Oh, how carefully now did he go up the rest of the hill.

Bunyan so beautifully illustrates the doctrine of assurance in that passage. When a Christian has assurance of their salvation, they walk even the most difficult parts of the path with great joy, great anticipation.

[7 : 12] But when we lose it, we can experience much sorrow and much dread. Well, over the course of the next few weeks, I will attempt to expound upon chapter 18 of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith.

This is the chapter titled Of Assurance of Grace and Salvation. You might remember that in, I think it was August of last year, we worked our way through chapter 17 on the perseverance of the saints.

Well, as you might expect, these chapters go very much hand in hand. You cannot have a doctrine of assurance without the doctrine of perseverance.

And if you have the doctrine of perseverance, you will inevitably have a doctrine of assurance. Now today we will spend most of our time on an introduction, an overview of the chapter, and I want to do it this way because frankly, I'm very prone to starting a new series with a long introduction and then I'm trying to squeeze that first lesson in at the same time and I very quickly run out of time.

So today I'm going to limit myself to just the introduction and we'll look at the chapter in detail starting next week. Let me begin by reading the full chapter and I'll read this out of the modern English version published by Founders.

[8 : 40] And I'm going to put it up on the screen as well as I go along because I did not tell you in advance to bring a copy of the confession. This is chapter 18.

Temporary believers and other unregenerate men may deceive themselves in vain with false hopes and fleshly presumptions that they have God's favor and salvation, but their hope will perish.

Yet those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus and love Him sincerely, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may be certainly assured in this life that they are in a state of grace. They may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and this hope will never make them ashamed. This certainty is not merely an inclusive or likely persuasion based on, inconclusive, excuse me, or likely persuasion based on a fallible hope.

It is an infallible assurance of faith founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the gospel. It is also built on the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit about which promises are

made.

[10:00] It is further based on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God. As a fruit of this assurance, our hearts are kept both humble and holy.

This infallible assurance is not such an essential part of faith that it is always fully experienced alongside faith, but true believers may wait a long time and struggle with many difficulties before obtaining it.

Yet with the enabling of the Spirit to know the things freely given to them by God, they may attain this assurance using ordinary means appropriately without any extraordinary revelation.

Therefore, it is the duty of all to be as diligent as possible to make their calling and election sure. In this way, their hearts 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.

These effects are the natural fruits of this assurance. Thus, it does not at all encourage believers to be negligent. True believers may in various ways have the assurance of their salvation shaken, decreased, or temporarily lost.

[11:26] This may happen because they neglect to preserve it or fall into some specific sin that wounds their conscience and grieves the Spirit. It may happen through some unexpected or forceful temptation or when God withdraws the light of His face and allows even those who fear Him to walk in darkness and to have no light.

Yet, they are never completely lacking the seed of God, the life of faith, love of Christ, and the brethren, sincerity of heart, or conscience concerning their duty.

Out of these graces, through the work of the Spirit, this assurance may at the proper time be revived. In the meantime, they are kept from utter despair through them.

So, if I were to summarize this chapter, here's what I would say. First and foremost, I would say that true assurance is possible for believers.

And by assurance, I do not mean presumption or mere optimism. I would also be clear to distinguish between assurance and saving faith itself.

[12:42] As this chapter states, you can have saving faith without assurance, at least for a time. I would also add that assurance does not come through extraordinary revelation.

We do not need to hear the voice of God speak from heaven or have some sort of burning bush encounter or anything like that, yet we can still have real assurance that we are saved.

As the confession says, true assurance is a spirit-wrought certainty grounded in Christ, confirmed by graces, and ordinarily attained through what we might call biblical means.

But let me back up and ask a fairly fundamental question. Why was this chapter written in the first place? It's interesting.

Earlier this week, I started flipping through some of the systematic theology books I have and just looking through the table of contents. The vast majority of them do not devote an entire chapter to the subject of assurance.

[13:51] Now, once you dig into them, most of them will cover that topic, but they do not devote an entire chapter to it. But here, in our Baptist confession, we do have an entire chapter.

And I think the simplest explanation is that the writers of the confession did not forget for whom they were writing. They didn't write this confession for theologians debating Bible doctrines in the abstract.

No, they wrote this for real Christians. Sitting in the pews, Sunday after Sunday, they wrote this for the believer who might ask, can a true Christian know that he is saved?

They wrote this for the person who asks, can someone think he is saved and still be deceived?

They wrote this for the person with maybe a tender conscience that asks, why do sincere believers sometimes lack assurance?

They wrote this for the wounded believer who asks, can assurance be lost? Can it be weakened? If so, can it be recovered? Can it be revived? They even wrote this for the pastors and the counselors and the parents and the fellow church members who ask, what do I say to maybe a presumptuous nominal Christian?

[15:18] Or what do I say to the doubting believer or to the believer who is walking through darkness for a time? What kind of assurance should I give them? You see, this is a doctrine that the entire church needs.

This is not a subject limited to, say, anxious Christians. It's not exclusively for the introverts or the people who are perpetually introspective or always inclined to self-examination.

No, every last believer needs to understand the doctrine of assurance according to the Bible. Just ask Christian in the Pilgrim's Progress. Look how desperately he needed that scroll of assurance. This is a doctrine that protects the church in a couple of ways. On the one hand, it protects against false peace.

We see that in the very first sentence of the chapter. Temporary believers and other unregenerate men may deceive themselves in vain with false hopes and fleshly presumptions that they have God's favor and salvation.

[16:29] Now, on the other hand, the doctrine of assurance protects against unnecessary despair at the same time. You see, it warns the false professor, but it does so without crushing the sincere believer if we understand it fully, completely.

It comforts the weak, but it doesn't flatter the spiritually careless, if you will. It teaches us to make several important distinctions, such as the difference between salvation itself and the assurance of that salvation, or the evidences of salvation versus the ground of salvation.

So, within the doctrine of assurance, there's really this crucial balance to find. The confession and the Bible that it's teaching from would not have us to believe that everyone who makes a profession of faith is guaranteed salvation and should have assurance of that salvation.

In fact, the nominal Christian should be warned, not assured, of their salvation. If, for instance, someone made a profession of faith 20 years ago, but they haven't stepped foot in a church since then, they're not reading their Bible, they have no interest in prayer, the Bible does not offer them assurance, and neither does the confession.

But on the other side of this are sincere believers who are struggling with doubts, a weak faith. They lack a sense of assurance.

[18:11] Or we have those either through a sense of humility or perhaps even a false understanding of eternal security who think that assurance is an impossibility.

If you don't believe God preserves His people, you can't really have assurance, can you? And if you're one who thinks it's just too audacious to think, I will be saved in the end, then how can you have assurance?

Well, both the Bible and the confession have good news. Assurance is possible and frankly, a good thing. We'll see that. Now, we do want to make a distinction between perseverance and assurance. Perseverance is ultimately God's preservation of His redeemed people. Assurance, on the other hand, is the believer's spirit-given knowledge and confidence concerning that preservation or perseverance.

Obviously, the two are related, but they're not identical. It's possible for a person to claim assurance while lacking true perseverance. It's also possible for a person who is persevering to lack assurance.

[19:29] And this chapter of the confession addresses both sides of this. There's a reason the chapter on assurance comes immediately after the chapter on perseverance.

These two subjects are distinct, but they belong together. Now, you may remember that chapter 17 says, Those God has accepted in the Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, and given the precious faith of His elect, can neither totally nor finally fall from a state of grace.

They will certainly persevere in grace to the end and be eternally saved because the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable. The same chapter goes on to say, The felt sight of the light and love of God may be clouded and obscured from them for a time through their unbelief and the temptations of Satan.

Yet God is still the same. They will certainly be kept by the power of God for salvation where they will enjoy their purchased possession. So there's the foundation for chapter 18.

And the question that chapter 18 then takes up is more experiential. Can believers be assured that all that was said in chapter 17 is true of them?

[20:56] And the answer is yes. We can in fact know that we are the children of God being kept by His power. And we really have to keep these two chapters together as distinct as they are.

If assurance is detached from perseverance it becomes completely unstable. How can we have assurance without perseverance? And if perseverance is detached from assurance all hope and comfort become unstable.

Hope ceases to be joyful expectation and becomes little more than wishful thinking. And there's hardly any comfort in that. But chapter 17 is not the only part of the foundation for chapter 18. It takes more than one brick to build a foundation right? In a sense the chapter on assurance draws from every other chapter of the confession that came before it.

But let me give you just a few examples of this. In chapter 3 on God's decree we're told the doctrine of the high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care so that those heeding the will of God revealed in His word and obeying Him may be assured of their eternal election by the certainty of their effectual calling.

[22 : 24] Well already in chapter 3 we see the language of assurance. It is teaching us that assurance is not gained by a prying into God's secret decrees which we really can't know anyhow but by obeying His revealed will.

Now let's jump over to chapter 8 of the confession on Christ the mediator. It says God was pleased in His eternal purpose to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus His only begotten Son according to the covenant made between them to be the mediator between God and man.

God chose Him to be prophet, priest, and king and to be head and savior of the church the heir of all things and judge of the world. From all eternity God gave to the Son a people to be His offspring. In time this people would be redeemed called justified sanctified and glorified by Him. So what we see here is the ground of our assurance.

On the one hand we gain assurance through obedience to God's revealed will but our fluctuating performance of that obedience is not the ground for our assurance.

[23 : 45] Our assurance rests entirely on Christ's obedience His blood His righteousness His intercession His saving work. So when the Christian asks how can I be sure that I am saved the first answer is not well look deeply into yourself.

What does your heart say? No, the first answer is look to Christ as He is revealed in the gospel.

Next let's jump over to chapter 10 on effectual calling.

The last paragraph says those who are not elected will not and cannot truly come to Christ and therefore cannot be saved because they are not effectually drawn by the Father.

They may even be called by the ministry of the Word and may receive some ordinary working of the Spirit without being saved. Much less can any be saved who do not receive the Christian religion no matter how diligently they live their lives according to the light of nature and the teachings of the religion they profess.

So here we are given a distinction between true saving work and mere external religion or profession. And that's really where chapter 18 on assurance begins.

[25 : 08] Not every profession is genuine union with Christ. Someone may be called externally by the ministry of the Word but that doesn't mean they are effectually called by God.

And if someone has not been effectually called by God obviously assurance does not belong to them. Next we can move over to chapter 11 on justification.

In paragraph 2 it simply says faith that receives and rests on Christ and His righteousness is the only instrument of justification.

You see this takes us right back to the ground of our assurance. We're not justified before God by anything we've done. Christ and His righteousness are the only instruments of our justification.

So our assurance of that justification must be what? it's not ultimately what we do. It can't be.

[26 : 18] For assurance we must continually look at what Christ has done. Next we have that one paragraph chapter on adoption.

Chapter 12 God has granted that all those who are justified would receive the grace of adoption in and for the sake of His only Son Jesus Christ.

By this they are counted among the children of God and enjoy the freedom and privileges of that relationship. They inherit His name receive the spirit of adoption have access to the throne of grace with boldness and are unable to cry Abba Father.

They are given compassion protected provided for and chastened by Him as a father yet they are never cast off but are sealed for the day of redemption and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation.

The children of God are pitied they're protected they're provided for they are never cast off they are sealed for the day of redemption. salvation.

[27 : 31] How can we know that's true for us on a personal level? Well we know in part because we receive the spirit of adoption. The spirit of God bears witness within us that we are the children of God and as we'll see in chapter 18 that is one of the ways we have assurance in this life.

next we can turn over to chapter 13 on sanctification. The first paragraph says those who are united to Christ and have effectually called and regenerated have a new heart and a new spirit created in them through the power of Christ's death and resurrection.

They are also further sanctified really and personally through the same power by his word and spirit dwelling in them. The dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed and the various evil desires that arise from it are more and more weakened and put to death.

At the same time those called and regenerated are more and more enlivened and strengthened in all saving graces so that they practice true holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Here we see how God's graces in our lives serve as evidence to us that we are in fact saved. Those united to Christ are further sanctified by his word and spirit.

[29 : 04] The dominion of sin is destroyed. Saving graces are strengthened and believers are brought to the practice of true holiness all of which lend themselves to assurance.

God's grace is chapter 16 on good works says that good works are the fruits and evidences of a true and living faith and by them believers have their assurance strengthened.

Jumping back to chapter 14 on saving faith. We're told that saving faith may be weak it may be strong but it can always grow to a fuller assurance.

chapter 15 teaches that fallen believers are restored through repentance. God will not abandon us. And again chapter 17 teaches that perseverance depends not on our own strength not on our own goodness but on God's preserving grace. And when you stack all of these bricks together you put all of these together you get chapter 18 which essentially says that Christians can have assurance of their salvation for the many reasons stated throughout the confession.

[30 : 22] So we might summarize the confession's logic this way God saves God preserves God gives grounds for our assurance God commands believers to pursue assurance God may allow assurance to be shaken but God revives that assurance in due time.

Now let me give you a sense of where we're going in this study. Pastor Sam Waldron who wrote a modern exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith years ago offers a very helpful way to think about these four paragraphs of chapter 18 and here it is for the sake of you taking notes.

in paragraph one we see that assurance is in fact possible. Yes there are temporary believers and other unregenerate people who may deceive themselves with false assurance but for those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ who love him sincerely who endeavor to walk in all good conscience before him may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace.

In the second paragraph we see that assurance is infallible. Now how can assurance be infallible? After all I've already said that true believers can lack assurance it can grow weak.

Well it's infallible because it rests on infallible grounds. Now when we come to paragraph two I will spend some time on each of these three grounds of assurance named in the confession.

[32 : 09] The first is the objective foundation that is the blood and righteousness of Christ. The second is the inward evidence of those graces of the spirit.

And the third is the testimony of the spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are in fact the children of God and we'll look at each of those one at a time.

Now the third paragraph shows us that assurance is attainable. I just said that Christian assurance is infallible but not everyone experiences the same degree of assurance.

Yet the confession says with the enabling of the spirit to know the things freely given to them by God they may attain this assurance using ordinary means appropriately.

In other words it should never be said to a believer that because you lack assurance you must lack faith. As the confession says true believers may wait a long time and struggle with many difficulties before obtaining assurance.

[33 : 22] So for one who lacks assurance the answer is not to condemn them. it's to point them to the right use of means and careful examination and repentance where needed and always always a renewed looking to Christ and what he has done.

As for the fourth paragraph assurance is variable. Again the confession says true believers may in various ways have the assurance of their salvation shaken decreased or temporarily lost.

Why? Well it goes on to say that it could be negligence in preserving it or falling into some specific sin that wounds the conscience and grieves the spirit or it could be strong temptations or it could be that a God has withdrawn the light of his countenance for one reason or another.

And yet there's this beautiful consolation in the final paragraph. True believers are never utterly destitute of the seed of God or the life of faith or the love of Christ or the sincerity of the heart or the conscience of duty.

In short assurance can be revived. It's never utterly lost. Now in the few minutes we have remaining I want to draw your attention to four distinct errors chapters that this chapter of the confession confronts.

[34 : 56] And you'll see what I mean as we move along in this study. Some of these I've already alluded to but here they are. So the first is the Roman Catholic denial of assurance.

According to Catholic doctrine one cannot have assurance ordinarily. Perhaps some select saints will be given assurance through some sort of special revelation but the vast majority of believers cannot have assurance and should not presume to have assurance.

To them this would be sinful. It's proud. The second is Arminian instability.

Again if one does not believe in the perseverance or preservation of the saints and that salvation could be lost how can anyone have assurance?

Assurance would be temporary at best and ultimately meaningless. The third error is antinomian presumption.

[36 : 11] Now in simple terms antinomianism means without law. This is the belief that because Christians are saved by grace God's moral law no longer matters for how they live.

So we see this sort of thing in many Baptist circles when they promote the idea of once saved always saved but are very weak on the biblical truth that God sanctifies his people that he grows them in holiness and that God's people will persevere to the end.

So what I mean by antinomian presumption is that people who may lack holiness all together in their lives have no evidence of grace in their lives.

No fruit of the spirit may cling to this idea that they can have assurance of their salvation. I made a profession. I said the prayer and so on. And the confession says no that's not the case.

Lastly there is the error of an overly cautious denial of assurance. false assurance that they would discourage true assurance.

[37 : 27] So this is the last error in reverse. One gives assurance where it's not merited and the other refuses to give assurance where it should be given. And the authors of our confession seem to have all of these errors in mind.

they are aware of these things and they confront each of them in this chapter. So next time we'll start with the first paragraph and we'll look at the subject of false assurance.

For now let's pray. Father we thank you for the great salvation that is ours in Christ. Thank you that our hope does not rest on the shifting sands of our feelings or our performance but entirely on the finished work of Jesus Christ.

His blood. His righteousness. His intercession. Your unfailing promises. Lord guard us from both false assurance and from needless despair.

Keep us from careless presumption on the one hand and crippling doubt on the other. By your spirit I pray that you would teach us to look continually to Christ.

[38 : 39] to walk in repentance and obedience and to make diligent use of the means you have given us for our growth and comfort and assurance. Help us as we continue this study in the coming weeks.

Be with us as we worship together this morning. And it's in Christ's name I pray. Amen.