

True Assurance Is Possible in This Life

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Date: 14 June 2026

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[0 : 00] So this morning we continue our study of the doctrine of assurance as it is presented in the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith.

! This is chapter 18 of the Confession. So if you have a copy you are welcome to turn there, but I also, thanks to Ollie, have it up on the screen behind me. So let's begin by reading it. 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. So this first paragraph presents us with a very careful balance.

[1 : 04] It begins with a concession followed by a positive assertion. The concession is that first sentence. There are temporary believers and other unregenerate people who may presume to have assurance when they should not.

But this warning to false believers is balanced by encouragement and comfort to sincere believers. And it's really important that we not neglect either side of this or get them too far out of balance. If for no other reason, the Bible teaches both. But even from a practical standpoint, there are people who need to be warned, and there are people who need to be reassured. And in both cases, the confession really approaches this subject in a very loving, pastoral way. It says to one group, do not presume. And it says to the other group, do not despair. Well, we've looked at the first group, so now let's look at the second. So this is how the confession identifies the person who can be assured.

[2 : 15] It says, 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.

Now, the first thing we want to notice is that the confession does state plainly that assurance is possible. And I like the way Jeffrey Smith breaks this down in a new exposition of the London Baptist Confession.

He explains how the confession first speaks of proper subjects of assurance. Then it speaks of the present and eternal scope of this assurance.

In other words, the confession first gives us the marks of those to whom assurance belongs, who should have this assurance in this life. Then it clarifies that this assurance relates to two things. First, it reveals that we are currently in a state of God's grace. And second, it gives us confidence that we can never fall out of that state of grace. In other words, assurance helps us to know that we are saved and will always be saved.

[3 : 30] Now, before we look at who can and should have assurance, let's just take a moment to establish from the Bible that assurance is, in fact, possible. After all, that's the primary claim of this chapter, and it was one of the great theological controversies when the confession was written and prior to it, you'll remember that Rome said any claim to an assurance of salvation was anathema.

If any believer said, I am saved, I know I am saved, I know I will be in heaven one day, Rome said, let that man be cursed. They claimed it was self-righteous arrogance to presume you had God's favor.

But, of course, the reformers came along and said, well, wait just a minute. Scripture is our authority here. What does the Bible say? Well, let me show you just a sample of what the Bible says.

And I'll begin with Job. So, in Job chapter 19, starting at verse 23, Job says, Oh, that my words were written.

Oh, that they were inscribed in a book. Oh, that with an iron pen and lead, that they were engraved in the rock forever. What exactly does he want written with such permanence?

[4 : 52] For I know that my Redeemer lives. And at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

So, even after everything Job has been through, he remains confident that his Redeemer lives, and that he will personally see him in the flesh.

That is, even after he has died, and his body has returned to the dust. In other words, he is confident that the Redeemer will redeem him at the end.

His body will be raised, restored, and he will see the Lord face to face. And keep in mind that he retains this confidence, despite the fact that his friends are all telling him that he's essentially a hypocrite.

He must be harboring some secret sin, or else the Lord would not bring this calamity upon him. And Job says, No, I will see my Redeemer. Despite everything that's happened, I will be saved in the end.

[6 : 04] That's assurance. How about David? David was far from a perfect man. And yet, in Psalm 32, 5, he writes, I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity.

I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Jumping back in verse 1, he says, Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Well, that reads as though David believes we can know our sins are forgiven. He doesn't say, I confessed, and maybe one day I will know that I have been forgiven.

No, he says, I confessed, and the Lord forgave. I know he did. And blessed is anyone who knows their sins are forgiven. Or consider the Apostle Paul.

Did Paul have personal assurance? Well, let's read what he wrote to Timothy as he was nearing the end of his life. This is found in 2 Timothy chapter 4.

[7 : 20] For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Now you tell me, do you hear any trace of doubt in Paul's words? I don't hear any at all. He says very plainly, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness.

And this was not some special revelation given to Paul simply because he was an apostle. He says this is true for all who have loved his appearing. Every believer can share in this exact same confidence.

In the first chapter, he says, I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.

[8 : 30] That's 2 Timothy 1.12. He tells the Philippians in Philippians 1.6, I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Now, who would like to be the one to tell Paul that he has committed a deadly sin by presuming to be assured of his salvation?

Not to mention the salvation of all sincere believers. Rome said, if anyone saith that every true and justified Christian ought to believe for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate, let him be anathema.

Clearly, that view stands in direct opposition to the Apostle Paul, not to mention the whole of the Bible. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

The doctrine of assurance is everywhere. But let me give you just one more example. So, last time, I quoted from 1 John 5, where the Apostle John writes, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

[9 : 52] And John repeats this over and over again throughout the epistle. This is the primary reason he's writing this letter. He wants believers to know that they do, in fact, have eternal life.

And more to the point, they can know. It is possible for you to know. As the Confession goes on to say, they may attain this assurance using ordinary means appropriately without any extraordinary revelation.

Assurance is not some special gift given only to elite Christians. assurance is possible for every last one of us. And more than that, John says, I want you to have it.

Every true Christian should have assurance. I would argue we need it. So, John writes his first epistle with the express purpose of showing these believers the ordinary means, if you will, by which they can gain confidence in their salvation.

And just listen as I read a handful of these verses. 1 John 2, 3, and by this we know that we have come to know him if we keep his commandments.

[11:07] Chapter 3, verse 14, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers. Then chapter 5, verse 19, we know that we are from God.

So, if we take this letter as a whole, John essentially gives us three tests for self-examination, if you will.

You might ask yourself these three questions. First, do you love the Lord Jesus Christ? Second, do you love his people, the church?

And third, do you love his word? Do you love his commandments? And if you can answer yes to these three questions, then John says you can know that you have God's favor now and will be saved in the end.

You can have assurance. Now, not only do we have all of these passages that would indicate that assurance is possible, but we also have explicit commands to get this assurance.

[12:16] Perhaps most notably, Hebrews chapter 6, verse 11. It says, we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness, to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

And let me actually quote J.B. Phillips' paraphrase of the Fuller passage. He says, although we give these words of warning, we feel sure that you, whom we love, are capable of better things and will enjoy the full experience of salvation.

God is not unfair. He will not lose sight of all that you have done, nor of the loving labor which you have shown for His sake in looking after fellow Christians as you are still doing.

It is our earnest wish that every one of you should show a similar keenness in fully grasping the hope that is within you. We do not want any of you to grow slack but to follow the example of those who through sheer patient faith came to possess the promises.

Of course, Peter tells us, this is 2 Peter 1 verses 10 and 11, Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election.

[13:42] For if you practice these qualities, you will never fall for in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So, what is the author of Hebrews and Peter telling us? They're telling us that not only is assurance possible but that we should be striving for it. So, assurance is on the opposite end of the spectrum from sinful presumption, assuming we're talking about sincere Christians.

Rather, God's word presents assurance as good and necessary and something we should even strive for. Now, the confession clarifies who can rightfully have this assurance.

It's not temporary believers and it's not other unregenerate people, so who is it? Again, the confession says, those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus and love Him sincerely, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him.

So, there are three marks or three qualifications, but please note that these three things are not unrelated. They are united in God's pattern of saving grace.

[15:04] Faith receives Christ, love clings to Christ, and obedience follows Christ. So, assurance belongs to those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus, love Him sincerely, and endeavor to walk in all good conscience before Him.

Faith, love, and obedience, and we'll consider these one at a time. So, faith comes first. Now, when I have spoken with people who struggle with assurance, they will often ask themselves questions like, have I repented enough?

Have I loved enough? Have I changed enough? And those questions, they're not irrelevant, but they're not the first things we should be asking ourselves.

For starters, they tend to be very self-focused questions. That's part of the problem. But more than that, we want to gain assurance of our salvation, right? Well, how is it that a sinner is saved in the first place?

How is it that we are joined to Christ and reconciled to God? Well, it's through faith. So, let's start there. Faith comes first. Now, you might remember this from our overview of the chapter, but it's very helpful to remember that the confession essentially builds upon itself.

[16:27] Yes, you can take one chapter and study that one chapter in isolation, but keep in mind that it is closely tied in with all of the other chapters. You can hardly have a doctrine of assurance without the doctrine of perseverance.

And you can't really have a doctrine of perseverance unless you have a doctrine of God's decree and God's providence and Christ the mediator and so on. So, let's briefly go back and see what the confession says about saving faith.

Let's have the next slide, Ali, if you can. This is the second paragraph of chapter 14. By this faith, we're told, Christians believed to be true everything revealed in the word, recognizing it as the authority of God himself.

They also perceived that the word is more excellent than every other writing and everything else in the world because it displays the glory of God in his attributes, the excellence of Christ in his nature and offices, and the power and fullness of the Holy Spirit in his activities and operations.

So, they are enabled to entrust their souls to the truth believed. They respond differently according to the content of each particular passage, obeying the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and the one to come.

[17:50] But the principal acts of saving faith, notice this, focus directly on Christ, accepting, receiving, and resting upon him alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life by virtue of the covenant of grace.

salvation. So, you'll notice that saving faith is not merely verbal or mental assent. It is not merely reciting a prayer or making a public profession.

It's not merely someone who affirms orthodoxy or knows the Bible, and it's certainly not someone who trusts in themselves for salvation, their morality, their righteousness, usually compared with other people, their cultural identity, or even their religious activities.

Saving faith simply accepts, receives, and rests upon Christ alone for justification, for sanctification, and for eternal life.

And I'll clarify this even further with six points and six verses, and I'll give these in no particular order. I'll say, first of all, that faith looks to Christ as Lord.

[19:13] Romans 10, 9 says, If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. So, saving faith has a concrete object.

And that object is Jesus Christ, the Lord, the one whom God raised from the dead. And saving faith does not divide the Savior from the one with all authority and power, the Lord.

It doesn't say, I want Christ's pardon, but I really don't want him to rule over me. No, true saving faith has an object.

That object is none other than the Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Second, faith looks to Christ as Savior.

Matthew 1, 21, he will save his people from their sins. So, we don't want to make the mistake of trusting in our faith for salvation as if faith were the Savior.

[20:17] No, we trust in Christ who saves his people from their sins. And this is relevant because if we become so inwardly focused trying to maybe evaluate the strength of our faith, well, assurance becomes pretty unstable at that point, doesn't it?

If not impossible, we have to keep going back to the cross and reminding ourselves that it's Jesus who saves. Third, faith looks to Christ as mediator.

1 Timothy 2, 5 says, For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ. There is no other way to God except through Jesus Christ.

He is our prophet, our priest, our king as prophet. He reveals the Father. He shows the way of salvation as priest. He offers himself. He intercedes for his people.

And as king, he rules. He protects. He subdues. He preserves his people. And our assurance relies on knowing that we do not stand before God alone.

[21:27] We stand before God in Christ. Fourth, faith looks to Christ as righteousness.

In Philippians 3, verses 8 and 9, Paul writes, Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

faith. Chapter 11 of the confession says, Faith that receives and rests on Christ and his righteousness is the only instrument of our justification.

Now, our ongoing sanctification, our good works, they certainly provide evidence of God's grace, but we are not accepted by God on the grounds of our obedience or our good works.

[22 : 34] The only righteousness that can justify us is the righteousness of Christ. Fifth, faith looks to Christ as life.

In John 11, Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

In other words, we trust him to not only pardon the past, but to give life now and forevermore. And last but not least, faith looks to Christ as hope.

Colossians 1:27, Christ in you is the hope of glory. So notice again how concrete and objective this is. It's not some vain optimism.

It's not wishful thinking. It's recognizing by faith that Christ is in us. And if Christ is in us, we can certainly trust that he will bring us home to glory. No one will perish.

[23 : 39] Not one will be lost. So that's faith. That's the first mark of someone to whom assurance belongs. Those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus.

Now the second mark is sincere love for Jesus. Jesus. In Galatians chapter 5, Paul addresses the value of circumcision.

Basically, some argued in order to be a Christian, you must first become a Jew. There must be a measure of law keeping in order to be saved. And Paul argues, no, that's not the case because justification comes only through faith.

But notice how he expresses this in verse 6. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Now, Paul could have easily left it at faith and not mention love at all. But faith in Christ, without affection for Christ, is hardly biblical faith.

[24 : 59] When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he says, if anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Let him be anathema.

Why? Because true faith is never without love. Now, going back to John's first epistle and his threefold test, while he does point to faith as evidence of salvation, he speaks far more about love. Love for Christ. Love for God's people. Love for God's commandments. In fact, at the start of chapter 5, he rolls all of these three things together in one passage. He says, everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, there's faith, has been born of God.

And everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this, we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.

So there you have all three or four, if you include faith. He mentions faith in Christ, love for God, love for God's people, and love for God's commandments. And of course, John's emphasis on love is something that he learned directly from Jesus.

[26 : 14] Go back and read John's gospel about their last evening together with Jesus before he was arrested and crucified. Jesus repeatedly emphasized love.

And I think this emphasis on love is necessary because we can love many aspects of Christianity without loving Christ himself or his people or his word.

For example, many people love the idea of heaven, but they do not love Christ. Many people love the benefits of a Christian identity, sometimes even with associating with the church, but they do not love Christ himself.

So the confession speaks of those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus and love him sincerely. Now, what does it mean to love him sincerely?

Obviously, this excludes hypocrisy. It excludes pretending to love Christ for maybe personal gain or some selfish reason. But it may include various degrees of love.

[27 : 31] Sometimes our love may grow weak. Sometimes it may grow cold, yet it can still be sincere love. So much like faith, let me give you four points and four verses to clarify this love even further.

We've seen some of this already. First, I would say sincere love loves Christ's person. What did Jesus ask Peter after his resurrection?

Simon, son of John, do you love me? Second, sincere love loves Christ's word. Jesus said it plainly enough in John 14, 23, if anyone loves me, he will keep my word.

No, he won't keep it perfectly, but he's going to recognize the voice of his shepherd and he will strive to follow the shepherd. You have to understand that the unregenerate heart could very well desire a Savior, a Christ who removes the consequences of sin while simultaneously leaving their sin undisturbed in this life.

But a genuine believer cannot be content with such an imagined Christ. He loves the Holy One. He may still feel the pull of sin, but he cannot ultimately make peace with that sin.

[28 : 55] He wants to be conformed to the Lord by obeying the Lord he loves. And third, sincere love loves Christ's people. Again, 1 John 3, 14 says, we know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

Whoever does not love abides in death. So not only will sincere Christians love Jesus and love his word, but they'll also come to love what Jesus himself loves.

And what, or whom, I should say, does Jesus love more than the very people he gave his life for? Now, think about this in contrast to so many people in our world who claim to be Christians but want nothing to do with God's people, nothing to do with the church.

Or maybe we could think about those who sit in the church on Sunday morning, but they have very little interest in the people who make up the church. If we don't have love for God's people, that is cause for serious self-examination.

So that covers John's threefold tests for assurance, but let me add one more. Fourth, I will say that sincere love loves Christ's glory.

[30 : 17] You see, it's one thing to pursue Christ and to keep his commandments and maybe even invest in the church to some degree because, you know, we want to make it into heaven, right?

We want to be saved. But if we really want to test our sincerity, maybe we should ask ourselves whether we want Christ to be honored, whether we want his name to be treasured, whether we want his gospel to be believed by as many as possible, that we want his kingdom to be advanced in this world.

In other words, is our primary concern his glory? Now, for the sake of time, I'll give you just one biblical example of this.

Listen to what Paul says in Philippians 1.20. It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now, as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

So Paul essentially says, I don't care what happens to me as long as Christ is glorified through what I've done or what has been done to me.

[31 : 35] That is sincere love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, the third mark is described in the confession as endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him.

And I really appreciate that word, endeavoring. The authors of the confession are not suggesting that we must be perfectly obedient. There is a pretty big difference between sincerity and sinlessness.

And all the confession is trying to say is that those to whom assurance belongs are those who strive, who endeavor to obey the Lord, not those who do it perfectly.

But at the same time, they are endeavoring. This is not someone who says, yes, I believe in Jesus, but there's no fruit of it.

There's no evidence of that in the way that they live their lives. In fact, let's go briefly back to chapter 15 of the confession. This is the chapter on repentance.

[32 : 46] And here's what we read in paragraph three. This saving repentance is a gospel grace in which those who are made aware by the Holy Spirit of the many evils of their sin by faith in Christ humble themselves for it with godly sorrow, hatred of it, and self-loathing.

They pray for pardon and strength of grace and determine and endeavor by provisions from the Spirit to live before God in a well-pleasing way in everything.

So, before a person is born again and saved, they could very well go through many of the motions of Christianity. That's possible. But the conscience will not be engaged like it is after their conversion.

Read Romans chapter 7. Look at the way Paul wrestles with his sin. That's a struggle that only the believer truly knows.

Paul confesses, I delight in the law of God in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind. Paul later tells Timothy, 1 Timothy 1.5, the aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience in a sincere faith.

[34 : 07] Notice, that's not a perfect heart. That's not a perfectly clean conscience. It is, though, pure, good, sincere. So, out of that true faith and sincere love that we see in the confession, the believer strives to obey God and to walk in all good conscience before Him.

So, when you bring these three marks together, faith, love, and obedience, we essentially see a couple of guardrails put in place.

The first guards against legalism by showing that faith comes first and that Christ remains the foundation, not our works, not our righteousness, and so on.

But it also guards against antinomianism because the faith that receives Christ is never alone. We can never throw up our hands and say, well, I'm saved by grace, that's it, end of story, I can do whatever I want with the remainder of my life.

No, saving faith is accompanied by love and good works. Let's go back, let's go to the next slide, Ollie, if we can. Go back to the confession.

[35 : 18] Well, as the confession says, 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.

In other words, assurance is possible. However, let me point out a couple of words in that last sentence. The authors of the confession were very intentional in the way they framed this.

A believer may be certainly assured, which is to say a believer can have assurance, but it's not guaranteed. Always, in every season, a sincere believer can lack assurance at times.

Even so, a believer can be certainly assured, which is to say that while assurance isn't guaranteed in all seasons, it is possible for us to have very real confidence that we are in fact saved and in a state of grace.

and note that this confidence comes in this life. We can know now that we will be with the Lord in heaven one day.

[36 : 32] And we'll cover all of this in more detail as we continue in this chapter of the confession. But lastly, this paragraph says, they may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and this hope will never make them ashamed.

And here, I don't have the footnotes up on the screen, but the confession here cites Romans chapter 5. So let me read it to you. Paul writes, starting with verse 1, therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through Him, we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

So assurance includes not only past forgiveness, not only our present standing before God, but also hope for future glory.

In fact, this is what Paul says carries us through the difficulties and the sufferings of this life. We can not only survive them, but rejoice in them because of this hope that we have and because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

[38 : 09] Clearly, Paul is not talking about mere wishful thinking here. This is sheer confidence. This is assurance.

And I'll say once again, thanks be to God we can have this kind of assurance. Let's pray. Father, we do thank you that you have not left your people to uncertainty but have given us your promises, your spirit, your word so that we might know that we have eternal life.

We pray that you would strengthen those with weak faith and deepen our love for the Lord Jesus and help us to walk before you with sincere and tender consciences.

Guard us, Lord, from false presumption on the one hand, but also keep us from needless despair on the other. Help us to rejoice in the hope of your glory knowing that the hope founded upon Christ will never be put to shame.

And we ask all of these things in his name. Amen. Amen.