

Lacking Assurance of Salvation

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[0:00] Last month I began a new series in these afternoon services called Why So Downcast?! And the title is taken from Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 where three times the psalmist asks himself, Why are you so downcast, O my soul?

And like I said last time, the inspiration, so to speak, for these sermons comes in part from William Bridge, an old Puritan, and his sermons. You can read them in a book called A Lifting Up of the Downcast. So downcast, discouraged, the psalms are no stranger to that. And I'm not either. And I'm sure you aren't either. Last time we looked at this case of the weak Christian. He's not as strong as he wants to be. And we saw that even for the weak, who has a hard time, who feels himself weak and not strong, that even for him there's not a reason, not a final reason to be downcast. But today we're going to be looking at a different case. And it's the case of the Christian or the, at least the professing Christian who lacks assurance, who lacks assurance. And assurance is a word that just means that he's confident in his spiritual condition, that he knows that the Lord is his and he is the Lord. His sins are forgiven.

And it's the Christian that's enjoying this full friendship. And he sees that he's in friendship with God and he has a great confidence in that. But one way that Christians can be downcast or discouraged is that they lack that assurance. But it's not settled. It's they don't have great confidence. Another Puritan wrote a book entitled Heaven on Earth. And it's a book all about assurance.

And that title is telling Heaven on Earth. So where does heaven touch down on earth? Where is the greatest, the flowers of heaven begin to bloom here on earth? Well, it touches down in the soul of a man that knows that knows that heaven is his, that God is his, that his sins are forgiven. And so this great matter of the great matter between God and himself, his soul is settled. And now this believer, this man, this woman, she enjoys great confidence, great assurance, great, a certain hope. And it's a certain hope that weathers every storm. When her boat is tossed. She's not saying, I wonder if God hates me. I don't know if God's wrath is upon me. But even in that, that difficult storm, whatever that trial is, there's that settled assurance deep in the, in that person's heart. That God loves me. That's heaven on earth.

That's joy. That's joy. Unspeakable. That's life as we were meant to live it. But not all Christians have that. Not all Christians enjoy such certainty. And that can be so discouraging. Maybe that is you.

[3:46] And you say, I'm not sure. I think I might be saved. I think I'm saved. But there are times that I just don't know. There are times that I wonder if I die, will I go to heaven?

Will I go to hell? What will become of me? Is God for me? Is his wrath still chasing me? Or perhaps you wrestle with doubt saying, is this all real? Or is this just sort of like a game that my friends and family play along with me? Something I've, I've convinced myself to believe. Well, those are questions in my mind, you say. And you might say, if I only knew I wouldn't be so discouraged, wouldn't be so downcast. Isn't that a good reason to be discouraged? And my answer, just like last time, is no. That's no final, ultimate good reason to be just downcast and discouraged yet. Because remember buried inside that question of why are you downcast on my soul is the answer that really there's no final good reason yet. That yes, that's how you feel now, but you're going to praise God still. There's no ultimate good reason yet. There might be certain reasons to be discouraged. And so I say to you, if that is you, if you lack that confidence, that security, and you struggle with doubt,

I can say, I see your predicament. I can see why you're so discouraged. Assurance is better than lacking it. And just like that Puritan said, assurance is heaven on earth. And you're missing that.

But even then, there are good reasons to lift up your head, to not be downcast. And so let me just give you some. And the first reason, and it's not that you can lift up your head, is just this. Assurance, confidence in your situation, confident in that your faith is real, that God is there, that you are saved. Assurance, settled assurance is not the same thing as saving faith. Possessing assurance and possessing saving faith are not necessarily the same thing.

And what I'm saying this feeling, what I'm saying is feeling yourself saved and being saved are two different things. They can be two different things. There are very, there are many people who are very assured of their salvation. Very assured. They have great confidence.

[6 : 41] They're convinced in their own mind and in their own hearts that they're saved. They're sure they're on their way to heaven, but they don't have good grounds for that assurance. And yet when they die, they're going to be in for a terrible surprise.

In Pilgrim's Progress, there's a man named Ignorance, and he comes from the country of conceit. And the way he's portrayed, the way John Bunyan portrays him, he's a pretty likable person.

He thinks too highly of himself. That's what it means. He comes from the country of conceit. He walks with Christian, and he walks with Hopeful for a while, and they talk. And he walks with them, and then he begins to fall behind, and he can't keep up with them.

And he drops out of the story. But then he shows up again at the very end of Christian's story. And Ignorance dies. He goes through the, or actually goes over the Jordan River.

And he shows up at the gate to the celestial city, and he's sure he's going to come in. He's sure he's made it. He's ready to enter the celestial city. And the city is surrounded by these great walls, and out from the top of the wall, over the gate, these voices ring out, where did you come from?

[8 : 00] What are you doing? What do you want? And he answered, I have ate, and I have drank in the presence of the king, and he has taught in our streets. And then they asked him for his certificate, that they might go in and show it to the king.

And he fumbled in his bosom for one, and he found none. And then they said, Have you none? And the man answered, Never a word.

And so they went and they told the king. But the king would not come down to see him. Instead, he told the angels to bind ignorance and take him away.

And they took him to a door and a hill nearby. It's the door to hell. And John Bunyan's words are, For there is a door to hell, right next to the gates of heaven.

You see, assurance, being so confident of your future, is not the same thing as saving faith.

[9:07] But let me tell you another story from Pilgrim's Progress. And it's about a man whose name is Little Faith. And Little Faith was traveling the road to the celestial city, and he fell asleep.

And while he was asleep, which was something he should not have done, but while he was sleeping, three brothers ran up to him. And their names were mistrust and faint heart and guilt.

And these three brothers beat him and robbed him, and they took nearly everything he had away. And the whole rest of the story, Little Faith, the whole rest of the way to heaven, Little Faith struggled.

It was hard. And you see, he wrestled with mistrust. And he wrestled with faint heart. And he wrestled with guilt. They dogged his steps.

And it says he begged all the way to heaven. And he never knew what was going to come of him. He wasn't like ignorance, so sure of the end, so confident of the end.

[10:13] But you know what? Little Faith was not no faith. And he had true faith. And he came to the same gate. And the same voices asked the same questions.

And they asked to see his certificates. And although he didn't have anything else, he did have that. And the gates swung open.

And the angels took him to go see his king. Assurance is not the same thing as saving faith. Our confession, the 1689 confession, says that some might struggle for a long time without it.

Believers might struggle for a long time without it. But brothers and sisters, that doesn't mean that you aren't saved. It doesn't mean that you're lost. You wish you had greater faith.

You wish you had this confidence. You wish you had this full assurance. But let me ask you, do you hate the light and love the dark? Or do you hate the dark and love the light?

[11:25] Do you wish you had greater faith? Is your misery your sin? You say, I wish I hated my sin more.

I wish I loved righteousness more. And that might be true, but that isn't a sign that you're lost. That's a sign of salvation because only the living hate their sickness.

You know that? Only the living care that they're sick. The dead don't care how much they rot. And so do you wish for greater faith? And you say, I hardly believe at all.

Well, do you wish to believe more? Do you wish to have closer walk with Christ? Do you want to be right with Him? Do you wish you could confess all your sins? Sometimes we get hung up and say, I don't confess enough, but I ask you, do you wish that you did?

Those are signs of life. See, faith, real saving faith, is a living, breathing, desiring thing. It isn't always comfortable.

[12:31] So true faith lives, and it longs for things, and it hopes for things, but it's not always comfortable. It's not always comfortable.

Assurance is comfortable faith. Assurance is faith being comforted. But faith isn't always comfortable. Sometimes it takes a long time to get to that point.

And can I tell you, sometimes the assurance follows. It goes through the door of doubt. Sometimes doubt opens the door for great assurance.

And that's another reason you can lift up your head. Many times doubt and uncertainty come first, and then later comes assurance. Do you remember Thomas?

He doubted the longest, but it was he that said, my Lord and my God. He got there at the end. And I have a feeling that afterward, Thomas was better for his doubt.

[13:36] What I mean by that is, he knew how to handle those who doubted. He knew how to handle gently those who were so uncertain, who wrestled with those things.

It wasn't some mystery to him to see some young believer wrestling, because he knew those things in his own heart. But when he believed at last, and when he knew at last, he was probably more useful than he was ever before.

And do you see what I'm saying? Just because you're doubting now, just because you wrestle with that fear and uncertainty now, does not mean that God is never going to give it to you.

That's never going to come to you. God usually does. He usually gives assurance, and he gives it in his own time. And if he is waiting to give it to you, he's waiting for good reasons.

God always delays. God's delays are always gracious delays. So things waited for are more precious than things we get right away. Things waited for are more precious than things we get right away.

[14:51] And so your praise and your joy and your confidence and your hope and your faith will be all greater and will be all sweeter for the wait. And you'll guard it all the more fiercely, and you'll walk all the more carefully to keep that hope and that certainty.

Because sin has a way of destroying that certainty, you're going to be very careful to not destroy it because you know how precious it is. And you don't want to be like little faith who limped all the way to heaven.

You want to guard it. And so God's delay is working for your holiness, and so don't be discouraged. Don't be discouraged. And then listen to Bridge.

He says, Take heed that you do not say, I shall never be comforted. I shall never be helped. I am in a sad condition and I shall never be better.

We're good at saying things like that, aren't we? I shall never be better. I am in an uncomfortable condition and I shall never be comforted. I lack assurance and I shall never have assurance.

[15:55] Beloved, this you cannot say, for you do not know what God will do. His ways are in the deep and his footsteps are not known. Take heed of the word never.

Watch out for that word never. Never is so much of the time the devil's word. You'll never be comforted. It'll never change.

This will never be good. Lift up your head. If you are waiting on God, you're waiting on the one who loves you. And you are waiting on God and no one waits on the Lord in vain.

No one waits on the Lord in vain. And now last, let this be an encouragement to you. Even if here you are, you're struggling with these doubts, you're struggling with this, assurance.

Let this be an encouragement to you. Your obedience and your love and your faith, even now, is precious to God.

[17:00] It's especially now precious to God. It might be some of the most precious obedience and love that you'll ever give to him. Because right now, you're not enjoying the light.

You're not enjoying the heat. You're not enjoying the sunshine. You know, it's really easy to pray and to sing and to obey when your heart is happy and when you have this great confidence, at least relatively speaking.

It's easier then. It's easy to pray and worship and obey when the lights are on. It's much more difficult when it's dark and you're downcast. When you're enjoying the full spring of God's love, you know he is yours and you're his.

That's one of the benefits of assurance that during that time when we are assured obedience is easier, we run, we're not walking, we're not tired. it's harder though.

It's more difficult though in the winter. It's more difficult in the dark. And yes, obedience will be bigger and it will be fuller in the spring when you have full assurance.

[18:14] But you know when that first flower blooms in February, and there's snow on the ground, that one flower is more precious to you than all the flowers that bloom in the summer.

And that's how God sees your obedience. And so lift up your head. Is prayer hard? Is obedience hard?

Your obedience, your prayers, are precious to God. Your little prayers are precious to God. There you are struggling and wanting more, but you're praying.

You're still speaking to him. That's precious to Jesus. And so don't lose heart. A single sparrow doesn't fall to the ground unnoticed. And a single, small, obedient, bit of obedience, of faith, of love, none of that goes unnoticed, unmarked, uncherished.

And you're worth more than many sparrows. So those three things, just because you don't necessarily feel that great assurance, it doesn't mean that you're not saved.

[19:28] And just because you don't feel it now doesn't mean that it will never be that way. And just because right now you lack assurance, it doesn't mean that your obedience and your faith and love is worthless to God.

No, on the contrary, it might be some of the most precious obedience that you ever give to him. So why are you so downcast on my soul? Put your hope in God. Put your hope in God.

Where does that full assurance come from? It comes from God. Who's the one that receives our obedience and our love? Oh, that comes from God. And so put your hope in God. For I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, I do pray for my brothers and sisters here who struggle with great doubt and lack of assurance. Lord Jesus, thank you that these things are no mystery to you.

That you know them upon your people's hearts and you love them and you care for them all the same. We do pray that you would lead all of us to a deeper sense that we belong to you and a deeper sense of the riches of Jesus Christ and a deeper experience of your love and your faithfulness, your grace.

[20:53] No matter what our sin is, your grace abounds greater and over it. God bless you and so give us confidence. Confidence from the cross, confidence from your promises, confidence from your character.

I pray for any who lack that, any of my brothers and sisters who are limping along the way. Help them, Lord, and help us to be an encouragement to one another that none of us has an unbelieving heart.

Pray this in the Lord's name. Amen.