

**"The Assurance of Salvation"
(Ephesians 1:3-14)
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October 29, 2017**

(Ephesians 1:3-14)

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory."

Today is Reformation Sunday. Reformation Day is on October 31. As you've heard many times already, the event that launched the Reformation was when Martin Luther nailed 95 theses, or topics of discussion on the doors of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. The main reason for nailing those theses was to have a theological discussion with the leaders of the Roman Catholic church about indulgences, which was the Catholic heresy, that one can purchase spiritual merit for oneself or others. The motivation behind the invention of indulgences was to finance the building of the cathedral in Rome.

There were two main doctrines that became the foundations of the Reformation. One is called the formal cause and the other is called the material cause of the Reformation. The formal cause was a question of authority. It was asking the important question, "From where do we get our authority?" Is it ultimately and finally from church councils and creeds? Is it ultimately from church traditions? Is it ultimately from church leaders like bishops and popes? Even now, do I, as your pastor have the final say, the final authority in matters of what we believe and do? This is what the Catholic church back then and still today believe. The Reformers, the Protestants on the other hand said, that the final and ultimate authority is Scripture alone, Sola Scriptura. If the church or tradition or a church leader or a council had decided on something that disagreed with holy Scripture, then Scripture would always prevail over those other things. This is what we believe. Scripture is our final authority.

This was the formal cause of the Reformation, but then there was a material cause of the Reformation. That was the question of how a person is saved. How is a sinner who deserves to be condemned by God, become justified or not guilty before God? Both Protestants and Catholics believe that a person is saved or is justified by grace. Both believe they are saved by Christ. Both believe they are saved by faith. However this is where we differ. It's in the word Sola! Sola means 'alone'. Protestants believe that a person is saved by grace **alone**, in Christ **alone**, by faith **alone**. Catholics on the other hand, they believe that a person is saved by faith and works. They believe that salvation is by grace and by merit. They believe that Christ is a mediator, but so is Mary and the saints and even the priest.

For example, consider the position of the Pope. The Pope has several other titles. He is called the Vicar. Do you know what that means? It means substitute. He is also called the Pontiff. Do you know what pontiff means? It comes from French to mean the bridge. He's also called the Holy Father. Jesus tells us not to call any religious leader 'father' since God alone is our Father.

These were the two doctrines that were being challenged during the Reformation. First, scripture as our final and ultimate authority and second, a sinner is justified by faith alone, and not by works.

That's a little bit of the background. Let me explain to you why these things are so important. It's vitally important because it directly affects the doctrine of assurance. What is the doctrine of assurance? The doctrine of assurance is stated in a question and answer format in the Westminster Larger Catechism. Listen to the two questions it asks on assurance.

Question 79: May not true believers, by reason of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace?

This question is asking, "Is it possible for true believers, because of their faults and sins, ultimately and finally fall from the state of grace?"

Question 80: Can true believers be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and that they shall persevere therein unto salvation?

This question is asking whether or not it is possible beyond the shadow of a doubt for true Christians to know for certain that they will finish the race and go to heaven.

To the first question a Catholic would say, "yes, a true believer can, in fact, fall away from their current state of grace." And to the second question a Catholic would say, "No, true believers cannot know for certain that they remain in grace and will finish the race." For most bible believing protestants, we would answer in the opposite to Catholics. We would say, "No way, absolutely not! A true believer cannot fall away from grace." And "Yes, for certain a true believer can have the assurance that they are in fact in a state of grace and that we will finish the race." How about you? What do you believe?

Why does one group believe the one and the other group believe the complete opposite? Well, it's like this. If salvation is by works, if it is up to Jesus death and resurrection, **and** my works, then I cannot have assurance. Why? Because I can never ever know if I've done my part. This is why the entire Catholic system is essentially a religion of works. Consider purgatory, confession, mortal sins, last rites, their understanding of salvation coming at baptism, almsgiving...all of these things are for achieving merit or good works to get us into heaven.

Luther's example

Let's me share with you the example of Martin Luther. Martin Luther was born and raised into the Roman Catholic faith, but as he grew up, more than anything he wanted to be accepted by God. Listen to the things he did to try to gain his salvation:

1. Even though he was planning on becoming a lawyer, against his parent's wishes, he decided to become an Augustinian monk. What did that mean? It meant living a monastic life in a monastic order. It meant living the life of celibacy. To be a monk meant "the renunciation of self-will, a scant diet, rough clothing, vigils by night and labors by day, mortification of the flesh, the reproach of poverty, the shame of begging, and the distastefulness of cloistered existence." He exchanged his civilian clothes for the habit of the novice. Says his biographer Roland Bainton (p.26).

Once in the monastery he prayed seven times a day. After eight hours of sleep the monks were awakened between 1-2am in the morning by the cloister bell. They sprang up, made the sign of the cross, pulled on the white robe and by the second bell they made their way to church, sprinkled themselves with holy water, and knelt before the high altar and prayed. Then they all took their place in the choir and chanted songs to Mother Mary.

2. About a year or so later Luther had the assignment to lead his first mass. Everything had to be perfect. His clothing, the elements, the liturgy, the words he would speak, everything. He had to make sure his own sins were absolved before leading in this holy ceremony. He literally trembled in fear in performing this ceremony, being keenly aware of his sin and unworthiness.
3. At the same time, his father continued to be deeply against him becoming a monk and let him know it.
4. He entered into lengthy seasons of fasting.
5. Listen to how his biographer describes him. "All such drastic methods gave no sense of inner tranquility. The purpose of his striving was to compensate for his sins, but he could never feel that the ledger was balanced." (34)
6. Then Luther had the opportunity to take a pilgrimage to Rome. This was in the year 1510, seven years before the beginning of the Reformation. While there, he climbed Pilate's Stairs (the Scala Sancta), which are the stairs that are to have led up to the praetorium during the time of Pontius Pilate, the very steps that Jesus stepped on, during his trial. Luther climbed them on his hands and knees, stopping at each step to pray, and to kiss each step, hoping to release some poor soul from purgatory.
7. While Martin was in the monastery it was part of a monk's duty to go to the confessional and confess his sins to a more senior monk. This is called penance. You would confess your sin and the priest would say, *te absolvo*, I absolve you. As if a mere man could do that. Here again are his biographer's words. "He confessed frequently, often daily, and for as long as six hours on a single occasion. Every sin in order to be absolved was to be confessed. Luther would repeat a confession and, to be sure of including everything, would review his entire life until the confessor grew weary." He came to the confession with so many little sins, that the priest said to him, "Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive—parricide (murdering parent), blasphemy, adultery—instead of all these peccadilloes [small offences]."
8. Here are Martin Luther's own words, "I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work." (34)

All of this striving which still left his heart at unease, which drove Martin Luther to go to the Bible, to see if he could learn what it said about the problem with his soul. Two years before the Reformation, in the fall of 1515, Luther was studying and preparing to teach from Psalms. He came to the 22nd Psalm and in the opening lines, it says:

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? ² My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest." (**Psalm 22:1–2**)

Luther was aware that this was a messianic psalm pointing forward to Jesus' cry on the cross. And he asked, "What could be the meaning of this? Christ evidently felt himself to be forsaken, abandoned by God -- deserted. Why? Luther answered his own question this way. "The only answer must be that Christ took to himself the iniquity of us all. He who was without sin for our sakes became sin and so identified himself with us as to participate in our alienation. Christ is the judge that suffers for those he judges."

Then he studied the Apostle Paul's writings, in particular Romans. Here are Luther's own words. "Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "The just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Therefore I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise."

Luther tried with all his might to merit his own salvation...all to no avail...and then he went to the Book and in the Book he found Christ. When he found Christ, he found him to be a sufficient savior. He discovered that a sinner is not saved by works, but through grace and the sheer mercy of God. That's how a sinner is justified, by grace alone in Christ alone, through faith alone.

Okay, so how is assurance tied into justification by faith alone? If salvation is by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone, not by works, not by my contribution, not by my merit, then we can be 100% certain that our salvation is guaranteed and assured. Please understand that this is not about theological hairsplitting over fine points like arguing whether Beethoven is better than Mozart. Nothing less than a person's eternity is at stake in these matters.

The Doctrine of Justification by faith alone implies the doctrine of the assurance of our salvation. We are immediately saved. Immediately the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us.

Even when we consider today's scripture in Ephesians 1, the passage refers to assurance throughout:

1. V3. God has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. This means a completed action. How is it that we receive a blessing in a place that we have yet to go to?
2. V4. He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. God in eternity past, chose us, decided that we would be in Christ and that we would be holy and blameless in the sight of God, which is the only way we could ever be accepted by God.
3. V5. He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. This was predestined according to his will. We were predestined, or predetermined, or pre-chosen to be adopted. Consider the nature of adoption. From what you know about adoption, it is irrevocable.
4. All of this was to the praise of his glorious grace. If half of the people that God called fell away from God, would that be a praiseworthy thing? No. But if everyone God called, came to him, and if everyone who came were saved, then God's grace would be most glorious.
5. Jump down to V13. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, (now listen to the next verse) v14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.

Look, as well, to the verses on the back of your program that speak about our assurance.

The immediate descendants of the Reformation were the Puritans. This is what they taught about assurance. “If you have it, you can never lose it.” They also taught, “If you lose it, you never had it.” (Beeke, Joel R.; Jones, Mark. *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*)

This is a good time to take a test, as the Apostle Paul encouraged us to do:

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? ⁶ And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. (**2 Corinthians 13:5–6**)

Are you saved? Are you in Christ? Do you know if you will go to heaven when you die? Do you know if you will finish the race and remain in grace? Do you have true assurance or false assurance? Take the test with me.

There’s an objective test and a subjective test. The objective test looks for answers. The subjective test looks for experience.

Here’s the objective test:

1. On whom are you relying for your salvation? Your merit? Your good works? A little bit of Jesus and a little bit of you? Or is it Christ alone?
2. Have you repented of your sins, understanding that because of them you are under the wrath of God, deserving that he send you to hell forever?
3. Are you trusting in God’s promises found in his word, such as, “if you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raise him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Those are the objective tests. Have you done them?

Here’s the subjective test:

1. Whom do you love? Do you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Do you love your savior, more than words could express?
2. Are you growing in holiness? Are you growing in grace? Is obeying God become more of a joy and less of a burden? Is there noticeable growth in becoming more and more mature in Christ?
3. Do you grieve over your sins, especially because they grieve the Holy Spirit?
4. Do you know that Jesus Christ himself, the hope of glory, resides in you by faith, through the promised Holy Spirit?

How did you do? Did you pass the test? The assurance of salvation that comes from justification by faith alone is ours to have and to enjoy and to experience.

Let’s pray.