

Assurance

St Andrew's - 29th December 2024 - Ephesians 2:1-10**

Introduction

Someone recently commented that there are a lot of people in a church like ours, that will, when pressed, say things like 'I hope I'm saved'. If you ask 'will you be with Christ when you die?' they might answer 'maybe, I hope so, God willing'. Whilst that's much better than saying no, wouldn't it be nice to be able to say yes?

If we made the notion of salvation a little more vague, and asked "will you go to heaven when you die?", would we get a different spread of answers from those in the church and those outside the church? Many outside the church would say yes, and many, often those that are pretty dedicated in the church, would say they're not sure. Some of the most committed Christians have the most doubt about their status as real Christians.

Now your salvation is not dependent on your feelings, or your assurance or whether you have doubts or not. Plenty of people will in the end be saved and will have had lives marked by doubts. I suspect most of us know this intellectually - we know that salvation is through Christ alone, and depends not on what we do or even what we feel - but that knowledge doesn't make it to our hearts. Salvation doesn't come from our sense of certainty. Doubts don't doom you.

But on the other hand, scripture tells us to have assurance - we are told to seek out assurance. Peter writes in his second letter (2 Peter 1:10):

...be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election...

Paul writes to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 13:5):

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?...

The writer to the Hebrews says this (Hebrews 6:11):

*And we desire each one of you to show the same **earnestness to have the full assurance of hope** until the end*

and this (Hebrews 10:22):

*let us draw near with a true heart in **full assurance of faith**...*

Paul's letter to the Colossians says (Colossians 2:1-3):

*For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, **to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.***

We might wish to be able to say the sort of thing that Paul writes to Timothy (2 Timothy 1:12):

*But 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.*

We're told to have assurance - to not doubt our salvation. We're instructed to examine ourselves to come to a clear knowledge of whether we possess true saving faith. We see in scripture the examples of those that had this assurance and acted like it. And yet, there are people here today that have not got that assurance.

So that's the idea today - what is the ground of our assurance?

Ephesians 2:1-10

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body[a] and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Four kinds of people

I've said I'm talking about assurance, and maybe the scripture quotes earlier made it sound simple. But it's quite complicated. Because it's not just the case that we all need to be positive and just have blind hope. There's some pitfalls, some so deep they lead to hell.

One theologian puts it like this. There are four kinds of people in the world.

First, there's those that are unsaved, and know it. They know they are heading to hell. Such people exist, though they probably don't come to church, so might not find them here this morning. If this is you though, you're not allowed to nod off, some of this might be important to you.

Second, those that are really saved, and know it. Those with true assurance. This is a good place to be, I know there are some here in this situation. You likewise still have to pay attention.

Third, those that are saved, but don't know it, those Christians that are not assured. This is, as I said, all too common, but it does work out in the end, so not a bad place to be.

Fourth, those that are unsaved and that don't know it. The people that are in reality not saved, but think that they are. This is a real problem, and it would be foolish to think we as a congregation were immune from it.

False Assurance

Jesus tells us about this at the end of the sermon on the mount. Matthew 7:21-23:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

Scary words, and made doubly scary by the use of repetition. Think of the times in the Bible where names are repeated - "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?", "Abraham, Abraham" as God stops Abraham in his tracks on Mount Moriah. When Jesus says "Simon, Simon, Satan would sift you like wheat", or of course on the cross, as Jesus cries out "My God, My God", quoting Psalm 22.

It's a way of talking that evokes closeness, intimacy and urgency. These people that will say 'Lord, Lord', have that false assurance - they really think they have the relationship, but don't. In that day, they will, with urgent pleas, say 'Lord, Lord', yet be cast out by Christ.

This should give us pause - we might be told to seek assurance, but not of this sort. There is a kind of assurance that leads to destruction.

It's possibly helpful to think about what false assurance might look like to get perspective on what true assurance looks like. How might such false assurance come about? Let's imagine the start of many a joke, there's a queue forming outside the pearly gates and St Peter is asking people why they should be let in.

Universalism

St Peter asks the first person "Why should you be let in?" The answer comes - "What do you mean? I'm dead!?"

We have, in much of our society, and this even seeps into the church, a soft universalism. People talk about their loved ones looking down on them, of being together again after death, a warm fuzzy spin on the afterlife. Hell is, if not doctrinally, often implicitly, empty. Call it justification by death - all you need to do to go to heaven is leave earth.

But if we follow Jesus' teaching, we see the reality of hell, the reality that there will be those that are not saved. Salvation is neither automatic, or for everyone. You can't assume, on the basis of nothing, that you're saved. But when pressed, most people try a different approach.

Works righteousness

The next person comes up and says "Look, I'm a good person. I've done some good stuff, and I've avoided the major bad things."

We all know this won't cut it - what is the first commandment, the greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. If you think you're good enough, you will be disappointed. What's the standard we measure against?

To some degree we all have this attitude - we set our standards at such a point that we fall squarely on the correct side. We often compare ourselves not to the standard of God's word, where we would be found wanting, but to the standard we choose for ourselves. We lie to ourselves about how good we really are.

Now, in church, we don't usually say we're good in general - we have a more specific form of this. We're more sophisticated in our works righteousness.

Sacerdotalism

The next person comes up and says, "Well I responded to the altar call many years ago and the pastor led me through a short prayer, and so I'm in."

We might call this a modern form of sacerdotalism - the idea that there's some rituals or sacraments that you do or a priest that does these things and that's what gives you ground to stand before God. Not being good as such, but something to *do*. We in the protestant world might look at Roman Catholicism and see lots of sacerdotalism, but we have it too,

usually more subtle.

It might be that you responded to something at some point in time, and you felt you had your ticket punched so to speak, and that's that. You went to the front and someone led you through reading out the sinners prayer - job done. You had an "experience" some time ago, that must mean something.

This is another alarmingly common view - contrary to scripture, which says that the saved person will live out that faith, faith is not something you do once, rather the one who endures, is saved.

"I'm enduring" you might think "I endure this every Sunday". We might call this the 'church member' approach - I come every Sunday, within reason, therefore I must be ok. I take communion whenever it's offered, therefore I'm in. Or maybe some of us draw the line at giving money or volunteering time.

But the grounds of our assurance cannot be that we did some thing, or even continue to do something - many will say, Lord, Lord, and we see what they did - much more than just turn up to church. They prophesied and cast out demons and did mighty works.

The grounds of true assurance

What then are the grounds of true assurance? Today's scripture can help us.

The gospel starts with the knowledge of our sorry state of affairs - our sin.

v1-3

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Everyone, Christian or not was born in sin. We're told here that we were *by nature* children of wrath. We are described as being *dead* in our trespasses and sins.

Here, Paul describes some of the implications of being in this state of sinful nature - following the world, following the prince of the power of the air, that is, Satan, living in the passions of our flesh, driven by our sinful desires. Elsewhere Paul puts it like this as he quotes the Old Testament (Romans 3:10-12):

as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

11 no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one.”

Our great problem is that we are born by nature sinners. The sinful nature is not a nature of merely making mistakes - it's not merely that we mess up and can't quite get it right. No, Paul tells us, quoting Psalm 53, that no one seeks for God. In our sinful nature, we don't merely fail to do the right thing, we don't want the right thing. The overarching sin, the first commandment, that we disobey, is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. To have no other gods before the true and living God. This is the problem that we are all born into. The problem is built into our very nature, and if the problem is that we are *by nature* children of wrath - that is, that our very nature is offensive to God and warrants His wrath poured out on us, then what hope is there? You can't change your own nature.

Now, we're supposed to be talking about assurance, and this seems like rather bad news that should make us fear for any kind of salvation at all. But in this terrible news is to be found a good dose of hope. Before we get to the good news to come, we recognise that whatever it is that happens, our assurance is not going to come from us. Can the leopard change his spots? Can we change our own nature? No. So what happens?

v4-5

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

That little phrase "But God" is one that sticks out, it's memorable. And for good reason - it doesn't say "but we", or "but you". It says "but God". The story turns around not because of anything we do, but because of what God does. Salvation starts with God.

What reason is there for this? His being rich in mercy and because of the great love with which He loved us. These children of wrath, who deserve eternal destruction, are yet treated with mercy and love. Not something God is obligated to do, nor does out of obligation.

In spite of our sinfulness, we are made alive. Don't skip over the symbolism here - when Paul says we were dead and made alive, he's doing more than using a metaphor. He says elsewhere that the wages of sin are death - sinful men are dead men walking. And importantly also, dead men don't raise themselves, it's not possible.

And it's in Christ that we are made alive - made alive through His death and resurrection, made alive *in Him*. There's no being made alive apart from Him.

Adam and Christ

Romans chapter 5 tells us that all men are really found in one of two men. We are either in Adam or in Christ.

Romans 5:

12 ...just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...

17 For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

You are either in Adam, or in Christ. There's no middle ground.

Sometimes assurance is lost because we look at ourselves and compare against the greats of Christianity. It's not hard to believe some people we know are saved, they exude it, they live it out. But we look at ourselves and find ourselves wanting.

But the good news here is that there aren't levels of salvation, there aren't tiers of Christians, if you are in Christ, you are as saved as the Apostles that saw Him face to face. You are as saved as Paul, even if you didn't experience anything like he did on the damascus road. Don't ask yourself if you're as good a Christian as others, ask yourself if you're in Christ. If you are, then you're as saved as the best of them.

v6-7

6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

The consequences of being in Christ Jesus - that we are raised up, we are seated in heavenly places. Again, this is something that is not just for super Christians, or those that are special. In Christ, we are sons of God, given a share in the inheritance, welcomed into the family and treated as if we belong there.

And the blessings are only just starting - in coming ages He will show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

v8-9

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Now the part that I think really gives us great assurance, if we will hear it. Salvation is by grace through faith, and it's all a gift of God.

So much of false assurance rests on a false conception of salvation. You hopefully saw earlier that much false assurance is the idea that we meet God's standards ourselves. Either because we assume God's standards are so low as to include almost anyone, or because we decide the right standard is the one that includes us, or because we have a deluded idea of our own righteousness, or because we think God's standard is really not

about sin, but about some decision we make or about some act we perform. But true assurance rests in the knowledge that we don't meet God's standards. We are sinners in need of grace.

We couldn't meet His standard, no matter how hard we try - the standard of God is not attainable for us. If we take the most famous outlines of God's laws, whether it be the ten commandments or Christ's condensing of the law into two rules, nobody in history has got past rule one. Love the Lord your God above all else. We don't meet the standard - we rebel against our creator. So our salvation doesn't and can't depend on us.

Now if you don't mind, I'm going to get all Capital R Reformed about this. Some look at this verse and they say that yes, the grace is a gift, yes the salvation is a gift of God, yes it's not by good works, but the faith? No, that part is me. It's through faith that this is all comes about - my decision, my belief, that bit's on me.

But the verse doesn't say that - it says specifically that it's not your own doing. That it's a gift. The Reformed view is that even the faith is a gift. No one seeks for God, unless God gives them the gift of faith.

If your assurance is found in the idea that you made a choice, or that your decision or belief is what sets you apart from others, then your assurance is on shaky ground. If it all rests on your choice, then what if you change your mind? What if your belief runs out of steam?

No, true assurance is found in the truth that our salvation doesn't belong to us and that we therefore cannot lose it, because it is the gift of the unchanging faithful and true God. If salvation rested on your desires or thoughts, you'd be saved one day and not the next - we're fickle people, prone to waver. Salvation must rest ultimately in our unchanging faithful God.

It is that no one may boast - and the only way that there can be no possibility of boasting in ourselves is if God did all of it for us.

v10

10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Paul reiterates that God did it all - we are His workmanship, created, recreated in Christ Jesus.

Then finally, we see our part to play - that we have been created "for good works that God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

This is a consequence of what we have read about. The good we do, that God leads us in doing, is a consequence of our salvation, not a cause of it. We do good because we are made alive in Christ, we do good because we have been transformed. Even the life we live after we are regenerated starts not with ourselves but with God - He has prepared these good works beforehand.

Paul contrasts the Christian, who walks in these good works, with what we were, those who in the words of verse 1 and 2, walked in trespasses and sin. There is dramatic change in the Christian, we walk in new paths, set out for us by God.

Conclusion

Typically, when we think about assurance, the prescription is a good dose of introspection. Look inside yourself, examine yourself and see if you are really saved. No bad thing - Paul tells the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 13:5):

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith.

If we do look inside, examine ourselves, don't look for evidence in the form of those things we talked about as false assurances. Look for a greivance at sin, a desire to follow God's law, an affection for the Biblical Christ (not an affection for the Christ of our imaginings, but the Christ found in scripture), and a desire to read and follow scripture. In short, look for the things that only God can give us as a gift. Measure against the standard of scripture - John's first letter is a good place to start. And we're not looking for perfection either - if you look for perfect love for Christ, you won't find it yet. But if you find any real love for the Christ of scripture, you can take comfort that such love only comes from the Holy Spirit's work within us.

But if all we do is look inside, we won't find what we're looking for.

Robert Murray McCheyne put it like this in a letter expounding upon Jeremiah 17:9 and we'd do well to listen:

*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"
Jeremiah 17:9*

*Learn much of the Lord Jesus. **For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ.** He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief! Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in his beams. Feel his all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in his almighty arms.*

Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him. Let the Holy Spirit fill every chamber of your heart; and so there will be no room for folly, or the world, or Satan, or the flesh.

We might add, no room for doubts either. We are, to paraphrase Paul, to be changed from one degree of glory to another, in beholding the brilliance of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18).

When we look at Christ what do we see? We see all that He has done for us. We see righteousness that surpasses anything we can conceive of ourselves, and we see grace that stoops so low as to reach us sinners. We see a salvation that He accomplished for us, and sustains forever, the ever faithful God.

Now I don't expect to have majorly increased everyone's assurance this morning. I don't expect that if you came with doubts, you won't leave with them. But I hope I've pointed some of you in the direction where these doubts can be alleviated. And since your salvation doesn't ultimately depend on you, or your feelings, your doubts don't doom you. Faith is a virtue, and like all virtues is subject to sanctification - if can be improved, and strengthened with exercise.