

Assurance of Salvation – Tim Miller - Oct 3, 2010

Since falling on my face to cry out to Almighty God in prayer for mercy at age 19, I've never lacked the sense of God's presence with me. Hearing that, you might conclude that my Christian life has been one marked by total assurance. You would be wrong in that conclusion.

Mentor – Jim Bontrager

The day I prayed that prayer and was born again, I picked up the phone and called Jim Bontrager. This retired marine loved me and welcomed me into the fold of God. I cannot thank him enough for what he did by word and example. He drove me nuts when I persisted in the pride of my sin, but when I finally gave up resisting God's pull, Jim suddenly made sense. Funny how that happens. Jim and Susie welcomed me into their home (I know I am not the only one for which they did that). Jim sacrificed time and conversations at the end of long tiring days of construction work. My buddy Darrin and I would go to Jim's house every Friday evening those first months of our salvation to pray and eagerly devour whatever Bible passages Jim decided these two young men needed. We started with Hebrews saying that we were supposed to grow from milk to meat because we had so tested all things by the Word of God that we knew what was righteous and what wasn't.

I doubt I'll ever forget Jim taking us so slowly, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, and week by week through **Romans**. Oh! Manna from heaven! I'd never met a man so passionate and desperate and radical and crazy and compassionate. Jim is a fine example of how a man may be unschooled but highly educated. As far as I'm concerned, he's earned honorary doctorates in the schools of prayer, faith, and perseverance.

When I was fresh out of the world, a brand plucked from the burning, face blackened and clothes still smelling of smoke from the extinguished flames, Jim **pointed me to Jesus**. [God will you please raise up Jim Bontragers for each of these young men!]

Passion + Idealism = Uh Oh

I began by saying that I've never lacked a sense of God's presence since that initial prayer for mercy at age 19, but after the first blush of indomitable joy gradually subsided, the combination of (1) my **fervent passion** to know and please the Lord, and (2) **high idealism** about what the Christian life should look like led me to **frequent despair and a cloud of condemnation**. I became a desperate pray-er and Bible beaver and spiritual book chewer because I needed to get right – I needed to stay close. I wanted nothing more than to please God, which meant that my remaining sinfulness drove me crazy.

God seemed to answer my prayers for holiness by peeling back more layers of my ignorance of my deep sinfulness rather than giving my conscience a reprieve. This was actually a severe mercy. For it led me into the Bible. And J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*. I deeply influential in my view of God. And Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. So helpful for a baby Christian to know that intelligent people can bring rational and empirical arguments for this Jesus to be historically reliable. Good solid reason. History. Logic. Evidence for Jesus' resurrection. So important for me as a thinking person. And R.C. Sproul's *The Holiness of God*. Sproul gave me HUGE thoughts of God.

Despair Joins the Party

What a great season of intense growth. All of these influences were truth. But some truths take a while to really get embedded deep down, don't they? Amazing how some of the young people growing up under my preaching will remember radically different emphasis than I intend. And so even though God sent so many wonderful channels of grace and truth into my life, it ended up putting me into a difficult place. The means of grace fueled my hunger for God *and* also fueled my dissatisfaction at my own lack of spiritual attaining. I remember relating very well to Psalm 13

<p>Psalm 13:2 ²How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?</p>
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And Romans 7's perplexed self-disgust became my cloak.

Romans 7:15 my paraphrase: "I don't understand what I do – for I don't do the good I want to do – instead I do the evil I don't want to do."

Where do you turn?

Which is a bigger concern? Hell or Pleasing God?

I'm trying to talk to you about assurance of salvation, but I had to start by letting you know that I never really worried about assurance of salvation *because I feared hell*. That seems like what a person, logically, should worry about. But worrying about going to hell just wasn't a big concern for me. Not really before I was saved, and not much after. But that doesn't mean I wasn't worried! I worried about *pleasing the Lord*! Hell for me was just details.

The question on my mind was "How can I have deep, settled, peace between God and myself? How can my divided heart come together – be integrated?" Soren Kierkegaard said that purity of heart – which Jesus said is the prerequisite to seeing God (**Matthew 5:8**) – is to will one thing. "I will many things," I said. "God's will is among them. What hope of joy in this life then is for me since I've abandoned all to follow him only to find that following him is no easy matter?"

I hope you don't have to struggle in your life with the sorts of dynamics with which I've struggled. Unless, of course, it's the only way to find the experience of God's love that I have found through these struggles. If that's the case, then I wish you all of them, and I bless you with them in Jesus' Name.

HELP!!!ANSWERS!!! Grace and Galatians

In the mercy of God, He sent me a little book on the topic of Law and Grace that opened Paul's letter to the Galatians to me in such a way that the Gospel finally became Good News to my heart. I finally saw that Christ had lived *a sinless life on my behalf* so that as I live for God in union with Him, it is as though God sees me as perfectly obedient because I am connected to his perfect Son. God doesn't treat me as my sins deserve not just because He's waiting for His patience to wear out – but because Christ already did what I *still* don't do. He *perfectly* obeyed. And then He became a curse by being hung on the cross – to rescue me out of the curse. The curse which my, present, constant imperfection and faltering love, waning zeal, too strong unbelief, lurking lust, occasional anger, sneaking selfishness, and embarrassing pride totally deserve. These sins don't *rule* me. But my conscience is ware that I deserve the curse of God for *today's* sins. And I'm a saint!

It's funny – it was a long time after I got saved till I finally came to understand what had happened to me the moment I was saved. It was 1998 when I began to understand that Christ didn't just die so that I could make a thousand fresh starts only to become unclean all over again. That's what I'd been trying. A thousand fresh starts after a thousand failures – an uphill climb to please a daunting but worthy God. To prove to Him that I was worth keeping. To *live down that debt* I owed him since His Son gave his blood. That's a pretty big debt to live down. Some of you maybe relate to that. Maybe you have felt like you fall in and out of God's grace. In and out of His love. What Galatians hammered into me with a chisel, is that it isn't just my punishment for sin that Jesus took, but my debt to obey God is actually paid because I'm connected to Jesus. What this means is, if I'm connected to Jesus, I don't fall in and out of his love. I don't fall in and out of his grace. I'm in. I'm accepted. As a sinner. Imperfect. Just as I am.

Now, after that truth lands on me, I obey God *freely* because I already totally have his love. I don't obey him in order to have his love.

Galatians 3:1-5 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ⁴ Have you suffered so much for nothing--if it really was for nothing? ⁵ Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?

Justification in Christ

- God counts me as *sinlessly perfect* on Christ's account.

- Like Jesus and I **traded report cards** – I get all His A’s and He gets all my C’s, D’s and F’s.
- I get to live in the **sunshine** of a God who actually **smiles** upon me.
- I wake up and am forgiven, and accepted, and **God’s in a good mood!**

“What does this have to do with assurance of salvation?”

I’m saying that this truth – the book of Galatians – righteousness in Christ - gave me %100 assurance of salvation precisely because *I wasn’t the one who had to complete the project for the project to be complete*. I just *trust* that Jesus did complete the project and *receive* that. And that landed on me with force. When justification landed on me like this, sanctification ironically went into higher gear. Freedom. Love. Joy. Worship. Temptation lost a lot of power when that insight really came home. Why? Because *God looked so much better* in the light of this Gospel. Sin looked less attractive when righteousness-in-Christ became real to me. Holiness looked a lot more appealing when Galatians 3 opened up to me. And *the Gospel* finally sounded like good news to a sinner who was desperately trying to follow God.

“May it never be!”

Maybe somebody is thinking – “If God accepted you fully based on Jesus’ obedience and sacrifice, wouldn’t that actually motivate you to obey less and sin more?” When people start asking that, you know somebody’s preaching the actual Gospel! And if the people who are asking it are born again, they’ll be horrified by the possibility that some people might abuse the Gospel’s freedom and view it as a free pass in order to sin without consequences!

Regenerate people *intuitively want* to please the Lord and have an innate *tendency* to move toward repentance and faith. Unregenerate people (people who have not yet been supernaturally born again etc.) are the ones to worry about. They may keep on sinning boldly, not loving the Lord, but claiming to believe in Jesus, with little regard for how their sin affects God or others.

Who is This Sermon For?

We’ve seen amply in this sermon series that a person may have *unfounded assurance*. That is, *unwarranted* assurance of salvation. A person may believe that they are right with God and forgiven of sins and possessing of eternal life, but they may be in fact misled. The other sermons in this series were aimed at awaking those who sleep. They were aimed at slapping such a casual heart awake with the realization that salvation is nature-changing, impossible, and radical. And that if nothing radical and nature-transforming has happened – if you just got a bit of religion; if Jesus is just a means to some other smaller goal, then I question whether you’ve actually encountered Christ yet. I took three sermons to say that. But this sermon is aimed at people, like me, who struggle. People who very earnestly want to love God. People who hear words like, “When the Son of Man returns will he find faith on the earth?” and say, “Oh God, I hope so!”

So what do I say to people like me? How do we assess our conversion? How do we measure the fruit and say, “Yeah – I’m definitely born again”?

Lists and Logic and Love

When I was in love with Carrie and considering marriage I made lists of pros and cons. Actually it was on the airplane on the way home from India. Two columns. Virtues and, well, not vices, but potential incompatibilities. I’d put the two lists side by side, and really, because I was so taken with her, the pro side always won. You don’t decide whether you love someone based on the lists and the logic. And you don’t arrive at assurance by making lists of your fruits and finally arriving at, “Good enough. It is scientifically proven. I am born again.” It doesn’t work like that. In fact, if it did, we wouldn’t be in a grace covenant, because that measuring up routine is *the essence of a non-grace covenant*. We’ll never measure up – so if that’s the method, we’ll never have assurance.

Hebrews 10:19-23 ¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Preach *this* Gospel to yourself daily

Start my daily prayers with proclaiming that I'm able to approach God solely because of Christ's righteous life and sacrificial death. God has called me to His presence, and God has done everything to make a way – a new and living way! That's the basis of my prayer. That's the basis of my approach. Oh – how that cloud of unworthiness would plague me and I would have to nearly shout this Gospel to the ceiling, and then shout the fact that God hears my prayers even when I feel that He's not even listening. He hears not because I feel it, He hears because He's Almighty God. He accepts me not because I feel accepted. He accepts because He is a God who keeps His Word. Those were dark days when I *had* to lean on this truth. But I learned that these truths are sweet. I learned to treasure the Gospel. And the Book. It's full of stuff just like that.

- Assurance doesn't come from measuring our zeal.
- Assurance doesn't come from measuring our faith.
- Assurance doesn't come from measuring our love.

On the contrary, zeal toward God and love people is so much weaker and more fleeting and mixed with wrong motives than I would like. Isn't yours? Don't you agree with this song that Elisha Hoffman wrote in 1902?

Lord, I am fondly, earnestly longing - Into Thy holy likeness to grow;
Thirsting for more and deeper communion - Yearning Thy love more fully to know.

*Open the wells of grace and salvation, Pour the rich streams deep into my heart;
Cleanse and refine my thought and affection, Seal me and make me pure as Thou art.*

Dead to the world would I be, O Father! Dead unto sin, alive unto Thee;
Crucify all the earthly within me, Emptied of sin and self may I be.

I would be Thine, and serve Thee forever, Filled with Thy Spirit, lost in Thy love;
Come to my heart, Lord, come with anointing, Showers of grace send down from above

I want that more and more. I'm not complete yet! If assurance must await perfect love on my end, I'll not get there. No. These features – fruit, faith, love – these *are marks* of conversion, but I don't investigate them *in order to arrive* at assurance. I trust that these marks are present in me. I do believe I see progress in myself, as I hope you do as well. But *I don't base my assurance on counting fruit I've collected in my basket*. If that were the case, I'd despair many times. In fact, to be honest – I do very often despair not that I'm saved, but that my efforts at godliness are worth much. And if that were the case, the thief on the cross would not have any grounds to hope in salvation.

- Assurance doesn't come from measuring our zeal.
- Assurance doesn't come from measuring our faith.
- Assurance doesn't come from measuring our love.
- **Assurance comes from looking to the finished saving work of Jesus on our behalf.**

Resting in it, banking on it, hoping in it, hiding in it, relating to God only on the basis of it. Jesus blood is more than enough to cover the sin of a million worlds; it's enough *for me*. God's word is true. Forgiveness is for *this* sinner. *This* unrighteous one. *This* imperfect lover of God and people. *This* faltering heart of faith. *This one* who doubts that the fruit I find is enough.

Saving Private Ryan - The Lord's Supper - "Earn This" No! Receive this!
