

7. How Can I Be Sure of My Faith? I'm New to This

For most of my teens and early twenties, I had been put off of Christianity for one reason and another, but after searching through Buddhism, Hinduism, and philosophy, I came across a book that made me think. It was a book about the Second Coming of Christ. The author was saying that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ and that one day He would come and bring this age to an end by His appearance. The writer of the book wrote that on the day of Christ's coming, there would be many who would be on the opposing side to Him, and it would then be too late to change their mind when He comes. Here's the Scripture:

¹⁵Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Revelation 6:15-17).

That passage scared me no end. I read that Scripture when I began to feel guilty about my sin. I concluded that I was not on God's side because I enjoyed sin and did not want to give up smoking marijuana. I knew that if I was to follow Christ, I had to leave my drug life behind. God required me to give Him my all. With that passage of Scripture still on my mind, I went back to my drugs. That night I had a dream or a vision where I saw Christ coming in the sky with His angels, and I saw myself trying to find some cave to hide from Him. I had no assurance that I was right with God and was very fearful of His coming. The fear of God came to my soul, something that Scripture says is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10).

Later on, after I gave my life to Christ, I knew within that I was accepted and loved, not because of any goodness of my own, but I was aware of something imparted or bestowed to my soul by the Lord. I have never lost that feeling inside of knowing where I will go when I die or whose side I will be on at the Second Coming of Christ. You may think that sounds very arrogant, but this relationship and mercy that came to me are not of my making; it is God's work, and all I need to do is to rest in His work. It is by God's grace that I am saved and going to heaven, not by my own works (Ephesians 2:8-9). This life is not the end; there is life beyond the grave. History is not meaningless or cyclical; it moves toward a glorious climax.

He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:12-13)

That is what I desire for all of you reading these words, the assurance that you are His and He is yours and that you can have a healthy, loving, respectful fear of God. Not a cowering fear that He will reject you in that day, but a healthy fear or respect of the God who has called you to Himself. You can know intuitively whose side you are on and where you are going when you die. God wants you to be assured of His salvation; hence the topic for today is, *How Can I be Sure of my Faith?*

A New Life

When someone becomes a Christian, he becomes a brand new person inside. He is not the same any more. A new life has begun! (2 Corinthians 5:17—The Living Bible).

People have different experiences with God when they give their lives to Christ. Here are some things that people have said of their encounter with the Living God:

"I now have hope where previously there was only despair. I can forgive now, where before there was only coldness...God is so alive in me. I can feel Him guiding me, and the complete and utter loneliness that I had been feeling is gone. God is filling a deep, deep void."

"I felt like hugging everybody in the street...I cannot stop praying; I even missed my bus stop today because I was so busy praying on the top deck."

1) Experiences vary greatly. After I gave my life to Christ, I knew that something had happened deep inside of me. God gave me a powerful experience of the love of God for me personally, with a profound sense of knowing that some significant weight had gone from me. I did not realize I was carrying a weight until it had gone. I felt so light and free and at peace within. Perhaps you, too, immediately knew a difference. Some people grew up as Christians and have never felt apart from God. For others, it is more gradual, happening over some time. I have a friend in England, Tony, an alcoholic before he met Christ. One time he got drunk in Paris and caught a train that he thought would take him two or three miles to the outskirts of Paris. The trouble was that he fell asleep and woke up several hours later in Amsterdam, Holland. He had traveled across the border with Belgium and Holland, not knowing that he had gone through two countries. Likewise, some of us cross the border from the kingdom of darkness to Christ's kingdom and do not remember when they passed; they just know that they are now in Christ's kingdom.

What matters is not so much the experience, as the fact that:

2) When we receive Christ, we become children of God. It is the start of a new relationship. Good parents want their children to grow up secure in their parent's love, but some people are uncertain if they are true Christians and accepted by God. The apostle John reassures us with his words:

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

At the end of a beginner's class to Christianity I have taught, the *Alpha Course*, I ask people to fill out a questionnaire. One of the questions I ask is, "Would you have described yourself as a Christian at the beginning of the course?" Here's a list of some of the answers:

- “Yes, but without any real experience of a relationship with God.”
- “Sort of.”
- “Possibly yes/think so.”
- “Not sure.”
- “Probably.”
- “Ish.”
- "Yes, though, looking back, possibly no."

- “No, a semi-Christian.”

Let's fish in that pool for a minute: When I married my wife Sandy in 1980, I had about 300 US dollars to my name, enough for a gold band on our fingers. We had a disastrous honeymoon where we had everything stolen out of our car while visiting a museum in Chicago. I could not work until after being married and submitted Residency Green Card forms into the US Immigration Dept. We had a terrible time for the first couple of weeks of our marriage, but we had one another and a dream of serving God. What if a friend had said to Sandy just after our honeymoon: "Would you describe yourself as married?" What if she had replied, "Yes, but without any real experience of a relationship with Keith." Or maybe she'd have said, "sort of," "possibly yes, think so," "not sure," "probably," "Yes, though looking back, possibly no," or even, "no, we were semi married." That doesn't look like much of a relationship, does it? The Living God has entered into a covenant relationship with you—and Christian marriages are just a picture of the close relationship that God has made with us (Ephesians 5:31-32).

3) God wants us to be sure. **“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).**

What evidence is there that faith is genuine?

Just as three legs support a camera tripod, in the same way, our assurance of our relationship with God stands firmly based on the activity of all three members of the Trinity:

- 1) The promises that the Father gives us in His Word
- 2) The sacrifice of the Son for us on the cross
- 3) The assurance of the Holy Spirit in our hearts

These can be summarized under three headings: the Word of God, the work of Jesus, and the witness of the Holy Spirit. Let's look at these one at a time.

The Word of God

If we were to rely on our feelings, we could never be sure about anything. Our feelings or emotions will go up and down depending on the weather or what we had for breakfast. They are changeable and deceptive. The promises in the Bible, the Word of God, do not change and are reliable. Let's look at three promises in the Word of God:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:20).

In the passage above, Jesus is knocking on the outside of a door and asking to come in. The promise says that if anyone hears His voice and opens the door, He will come in and have the most intimate kind of relationship, that of eating at the same table, a picture of a close relationship.

The Pre-Raphaelite artist Holman Hunt (1827-1910), inspired by this verse, painted "The Light of the World," painting three versions in all. One hangs in Keble College, Oxford; another is in the Manchester City Art Gallery; the third is the most famous and was presented in 1908 to St. Paul's Cathedral, where it still hangs. When the first version was shown, it generally received poor reviews. Then, on May 5, 1854, John Ruskin, the artist and critic, wrote to *The Times* and explained the symbolism at length and brilliantly defended it as “one of the very noblest works of sacred art ever produced in this or any other age.” Jesus, The Light of the World, stands at a door, overgrown

with ivy and weeds. The door represents the door of someone's life. This person has never invited Jesus to come into their life. The Lord is standing outside the door and knocking. He is awaiting a response. The Lord wants to come in and be part of that person's life. Someone said to Holman Hunt that he had made a mistake. They told him, "You have forgotten to paint a handle on the door." "Oh no," replied Hunt, "that is deliberate. There is only one handle, and that is on the inside."

In other words, we have to open the door to let the Lord into our lives. Jesus will never force His way upon us. He gives us the freedom to choose. It is up to us whether or not we open the door to Him. If we do, He promises, "I will come in and eat with him and he with me." Eating together symbolizes the friendship Jesus offers to all who open the door of their lives to Him. Once we have invited Christ to come into our lives, He promises never to leave us:

"I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Many of us are not always aware of God being with us, and we often feel that we have grieved Him somehow. But it is like working with other people in the same room; you are aware that they are there, but you are not always speaking with them. Jesus said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

The third promise in the Word of God is found in John 10:

²⁸I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one" (John 10:28-30).

This promise categorically tells us that you can't lose what God has given you—eternal life. You can walk away from Him, but if you have given your life to Him, you are His child. If you willfully turn back to sin, He is well able to discipline you to the point that you will turn back to Him and forsake your sin. If you have sincerely given your life to Christ, God has made you utterly secure in His love and grace.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead has many implications. First, it assures us about the past, that what Jesus achieved on the cross was effective. "The resurrection of Jesus is not the reversal of a defeat, but the proclamation of a victory." Secondly, it assures us about the present. Jesus is alive. His power is with us, bringing us life in all its fullness. Thirdly, it confirms to us the future. This life is not the end; there is life beyond the grave. History is not meaningless or cyclical; it moves towards a glorious climax.

One day Jesus will return to earth to establish a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1). Then those in Christ will go to "be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). There will be no more crying, for there will be no more pain. There will be no more temptation, for there will be no more sin. There will be no more suffering and no more separation from loved ones. Then we will see Jesus face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). We will be given glorious and painless resurrection bodies (1 Corinthians 15). God will transform us into the moral likeness of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:2). Heaven will be a place of intense joy and delight that goes on forever. Some have ridiculed this by suggesting it would be monotonous or boring. But the Scripture says: "No eye has seen, no

ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9 quoting Isaiah 64:4).

C.S. Lewis describes heaven in one of the stories from the book: *Chronicles of Narnia*:

The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning...all their life in this world...had only been the cover and the title page: now, at last, they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹

The Work of Jesus

Although eternal life is free, it is not cheap. It cost Jesus His life. If we want to receive this gift, we have to be willing to turn our back on everything we know to be wrong. These are the things that do us harm and lead to "death" (Rom. 6:23a). Turning away from them is what the Bible calls *repentance* (literally changing our minds). We accept the gift through repentance and faith.

What is faith? John G. Paton (1824-1907), a Scot from Dumfries shire, traveled to New Hebrides (a group of islands in the Southwest Pacific) to tell the tribal people about Jesus. The islanders were cannibals, and his life was in constant danger. Patten decided to translate John's gospel but found no word in their language for "belief" or "trust." Nobody trusted anybody else.

Eventually, Paton hit upon the way to find the word for which he was looking. When his native servant came in, Paton raised both feet off the floor, sat back in his chair, and asked, "What am I doing now?" In reply, the servant used a word meaning, "To lean your whole weight upon." This word was the expression Paton used.² Faith is leaning your whole weight upon Jesus and what He has done for us at the cross. Jesus took all our wrongdoing upon Himself. This sacrificial death of the Messiah was prophesied in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. More than five hundred years before Christ walked the earth, the prophet foresaw what "the Suffering Servant" would do for us and said: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him [that is, Jesus] the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

Speaking God's Word, Isaiah said we had all done wrong; we have all gone astray. He says elsewhere that the things we do that are wrong cause a separation between us and God (Isaiah 59:2). This guilt is one of the reasons why God can seem remote. There is a barrier between God and us that prevents us from experiencing His love.

On the other hand, Jesus never did anything wrong. He lived a perfect life. There was no barrier between Him and His Father. On the cross, God transferred our wrongdoings (our iniquity) onto Jesus ("the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all"). That is why Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). At that moment, Christ took upon Himself the sin of the world. He is our substitutionary Lamb of God that took our sin away.

¹C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, published by Harper Collins, 1956.

²<https://www.amazon.com/John-G-Paton-Autobiography-Missionary/dp/1848712766>

Christ's substitutionary death made it possible for the barrier between God and us removed for those who accept and receive what Jesus has done for them. As a result, we can be sure of God's forgiveness. Our guilt is lifted from us when we believe and trust in Christ's substitutionary work at the cross. We can be sure that we will never be condemned. As Paul puts it, "therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Because the Scriptures tell us these things, is the second reason we can be sure that we have eternal life: Jesus paid our debt of sin on the cross by dying for us.

Our Relationships.

As well as changes in our character, there will also be changes in relationships, both with God and others. We develop a new love for God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For example, hearing the word "Jesus" has a different emotional impact. Before I was a Christian, if I listened to the radio or watched television, and someone began to talk about Christ, I would turn it off. After my conversion to Christ, I would turn the volume up because my attitude toward the Lord had changed. This interest in anything Christian showed me that my heart was changed and renewed.

Our attitude toward others also changes. New Christians often tell me that they now notice people's faces in the street and on the bus. Before they met Christ, they had little interest; now, they felt concerned for people who often look sad and lost. One of the many differences in my early Christian life was my attitude toward other Christians. I became a Christian in the United States while on a long search for truth. When I was in my teen years, I was into the drug scene, but my heart was restless and fearful of my future. When I heard the gospel and gave my life to Christ, I was told that I needed to get into a Bible-believing church. I wondered if there was such a thing in my hometown of around 16,000 people! When I was about sixteen years old, I attacked a church in my hometown by painting over their box outside that had a light over a Bible. The Bible had a relevant passage for those shopping in the town. I blamed God for my mother's death when I was age five. God led me to the same church I attacked when I was young. There were no 'cool' hippie-type friends there, but when I got to know them, I found that they were likable people that opened their hearts to me. They didn't have long hair as I had at the time, but the same Holy Spirit in me was also in them, and we so enjoyed talking about Jesus together. Indeed, I soon started to experience a depth of friendship with other Christians I didn't know was possible.

Secondly, as well as changes observed in our lives, the Holy Spirit also brings God's inner experience. He creates a deep, personal conviction that we are children of God:

¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children (Romans 8:15, 16).

This experience of knowing things intuitively varies from person to person. Some people have little awareness of this inner witness of the Spirit, while others feel acutely aware of the Holy Spirit's influence. When a person has abandoned themselves to God, this witness of the Spirit is strong. For those not having that awareness, it is not that they do not have the Holy Spirit, but that the Holy Spirit does not have every part of their lives. The more you fill yourself with the promises of God's Word, the stronger will be this love relationship. The more you give yourself into Christ's hands, the greater the witness of the Spirit.

After my conversion to Christ, I returned from America to commercial fishing, working on my dad's boat with him. My heart was overflowing with the love of God and the awareness of His love for me. It was so strong that I felt compelled by the Spirit to tell my dad that I loved him. Now you have to understand the British psyche and especially my family. The words "I love you" had never been heard by my ears from anyone in my family, but here I was, feeling like I needed to break something that had gone on, perhaps through generations, never sharing words of love with one another. Trembling and stuttering, I said to him, "I really love you, dad."

Afterward, I felt like I had conquered something over me; I had spoken from the heart of my inner feelings. Even though I did not get the response I was looking for from my dad, I knew he loved me. I was secure and at rest in that awareness. I knew that my Father loved me, and that was what counted. God's love for us will never change—no matter what we do, I am secure in His love, and so should you be. This awareness of God is the witness of His Spirit. You are His, and He is yours—you can rest in that assurance.

Carl Tuttle is an American pastor who came from a broken home. He had a miserable childhood in which his father abused him. One occasion, after becoming a Christian, Carl wanted to hear what God was saying to him, so he decided to go out into the country where he could pray the whole day without being interrupted. So he arrived and began to pray. But after fifteen minutes, he felt he was not getting anywhere. Driving home, he felt very depressed and disappointed. Going upstairs to see Zachary, his two-month-old baby, Carl went into the room and picked him up. As he held his son, he felt an incredible love welling up within him for this baby boy, and he started crying and talking to him. "Zachary," he said, "I love you. I love you with all my heart. No matter what happens in this life, I will never harm you; I'll always protect you. I'll always be your father, I'll always be your friend, I'll always care for you, I'll always nurture you, and I'll do this no matter what sins you commit, no matter what you do, and no matter whether you turn from God or me." Suddenly Carl sensed that he was in God's arms and that God was saying the same to him, "Carl, you are my son, and I love you. No matter what you do, no matter where you go, I'll always care for you; I'll always provide for you, I'll always guide you."

In this way, the Spirit witnessed to Carl's spirit that he was a child of God (Romans 8:16). This inner knowing of our right relationship with God is the third way we are sure of our relationship with God and are forgiven and have eternal life. We know it because the Spirit of God witnesses to us, both objectively through an ongoing change in our character and relationships and subjectively through a deep inner conviction that we are children of God.

Many of the thoughts of this study are from *The Alpha Course* by Nicky Gumbel. I would recommend his book, *Questions of Life*, printed by Kingsway Publishers.

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