

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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God intends that our life should be a happy one. He does not begrudge us happiness, but fills our life with joy and gladness. There is no reason why our lives should not be intensely happy, enjoying the good gifts that God has given us. But if we are to achieve this it will only be through living a life based on faith, that is based on the recognition that God is always our almighty and all loving shepherd. Otherwise the events which happen to us will get us down and undermine our serenity. God has not promised us freedom from sorrow and grief. Our Lord was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. But He has promised that we will not have trials more than we are able to bear (I Cor. 10:13) and also that He will be with us in them (Psalm 23:4)

Knowledge that God will be with us in the future lifts the load of anxiety - if we really believe it "Cast all your cares upon Him," says St. Peter in chapter 5 of his first letter, "for He cares for you". But we can only do this if we live by faith each day, and not only when troubles come. Each day we should remember God and His sovereign love, and live in the knowledge of His promises, which means, of course, that we must know the Bible, where those promises are to be found. The Bible is written in clear language, not difficult to understand, especially if you get a modern translation.

One of the great factors which contributes to Christian joy is the knowledge that our future is in God's hands and so is safe, not only up to death, but beyond. Every Christian who knows and believes God's promises as He has given them to us in scripture, is able to say, as St. Paul said "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him, against that day" (2 Tim. 1:12) and in another place St. Paul wrote "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day: and not only to me, but also to all them that have loved his appearing." (2 Tim. 4:8).

It was characteristic of the apostle Paul that as he faced the future, with its uncertainty, and its ultimate conclusion in death, he was full of absolute confidence and assurance. He knew that he was going to Heaven. There is no doubtfulness or uncertainty in that exclamation of his, which I have just quoted "...henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness". You will recall that he gave expression to the same sentiments in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Church at Rome, when he called upon his readers to be absolutely confident of their salvation in Christ. He exclaimed: "Who shall

separate us from the love of Christ? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? Shall trouble or death?..... I am persuaded", he went on "I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:33)

There is no shadow of a doubt that the Apostle was absolutely confident of his own eternal salvation, and he expected his readers in the Church at Rome to experience this confidence for themselves, about their own future. There are similar expressions in Acts 1:6 and in John 10:28 where Jesus promises those who believe in Him "I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish."

Now this confident expectation of salvation is not found only in the New Testament; but it is equally characteristic of the Old. Thus, the Old Testament psalmist sang "God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." Note - "My portion for ever". Again, all of us will recall that most famous of all the passages of the Bible, the twenty-third Psalm, where David wrote "...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil....Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." As David contemplated the future, with its inevitable vicissitudes, its ups and its downs, and its culmination in the final valley of death, he was perfectly confident of his relationship to God through it all. "Thou art with me", he wrote, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

You may ask, how is it possible to have this sure confidence in the face of death and of the judgement of God which follows? How is this confidence possible, when we are so conscious of our sins and short-comings? Yet there is no doubt that the Bible reflects and expresses such confidence and it expects us to enjoy it too if we are Christians. The answer to the dilemma is quite simple; we are to be confident because our hope of salvation is based and grounded on what our Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished for us, on what He did on our behalf at Calvary. We are saved because He died for us. Thus it is to God that we look for salvation. It is in the Lord that we have confidence. "Rejoice in the Lord alway" says St. Paul to the Philippians. It is only in the Lord that we can rejoice and have true confidence. Certainly there is no joy or confidence if we contemplate ourselves.

If our salvation were to depend on our own good works,

height of the moral ladder to which we have climbed by our own effort, or if our salvation depended on the strength of our grip on the rungs of that ladder, we could have no confidence: and it would be presumption to base any hope on this. But it is on Christ that we depend. Christ's work for us is perfect and we are accepted by God in Him, if we put our faith in Him. So, as the hymn writer has so aptly summed up the Gospel: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling". It is not what we have been able to do, but what Christ has so perfectly done for us that secures our entry into Heaven. Our ground of hope is Christ and Christ only. This ground is sure, and so our hope is sure. As we face the future we look to God with full confidence and certainty that He will keep His promise to save all those who put their trust in Christ. Said St. Paul "I know Whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day".

It may be thought surprising, in view of the fact that the Bible teaches us to have a joyful confidence in regard to our future, that the Roman Catholic Church should teach that such confidence is a sin. Yet, in fact, it does teach this and it anathematizes those who are completely confident about their eternal safety; for example Canon 16 of Session 6 of the Council of Trent, anathematizes those who are certain of their ultimate salvation. The same viewpoint is expressed by Thomas Aquinas, the most famous Roman Catholic writer who in his Summa (II-I.Q.112.a.5) wrote "no man can know whether he has sanctifying grace", that is, no man can know whether he is going to heaven or to hell. Similarly, in a pamphlet entitled "So you think you are saved", written by a well-known Sydney Roman Catholic spokesman, we read on page 26 "Never in this life are we allowed to make it a certainty that we shall be saved". But as we have seen, the psalmist was certain "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever". St. Paul was certain, and he expected his readers at Rome to be certain of their salvation, and St. John wrote in I John 5:13 "Those things have I written unto you that you may know that you have eternal life, even to you who believe on the name of the son of God."

After all, how could we have any happiness or serenity of mind if we were uncertain whether we were going to heaven or hell. Everything else pales into insignificance if we take this question seriously. But God intends us to have a happy frame of mind. Indeed, He commands it, "Rejoice in the Lord always". And one of the chief ingredients of this happy frame of mind is the knowledge that the future is in His hands and that He has forgiven us our sins and will complete the work

He has begun in us and will bring us to Himself. "God is faithful who also will do it" St. Paul told the Thessalonians (I Thes. 5:23,24).

In view of the clear and emphatic teaching of the Bible the question arises 'how does the Roman Catholic denomination come to hold and teach the opposite view. The solution of the difficulty is not far to seek. The Roman Catholic church believes that our salvation is based, not on the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ only, but also in part on our own merits. Naturally, if this were so, it would be impossible for persons, sensitive to their own deficiencies, as we all should be, to have any joy of assurance of salvation, except in the case of a special revelation; and in keeping with this, members of the Roman Church are told that they should live under the shadow of the uncertainty of their final salvation. They cannot be sure that they are going to heaven.

This erroneous teaching follows naturally from the Roman Catholic view that salvation depends in part on our own efforts; for if this teaching were true, who could have a sure confidence as he faced death, for none of us would dare to be so presumptuous as to think that at the Judgement Day his own merits would be certainly sufficient to obtain God's approval. Christ has taught us when we have done all to say, 'we are unprofitable servants'. So it would be impossible for anyone who is not completely callous to his own deficiencies, to have that joyous assurance of the certainty of future bliss, a joy which is reflected and inculcated in the Bible, so long as he is basing his hope of salvation, even in part, on the sort of life he is living.

This erroneous teaching of looking to our own efforts to get to Heaven, is not, of course, confined to Roman Catholics. It springs up naturally in the human heart, and that is doubtless its source in Roman Catholicism. It is held, sometimes unconsciously, by a great number of people outside the Roman Catholic Communion. However, the teaching of the Bible is clear that God does not promise us salvation because of our merits, I quote from Titus 3:4 (in Mr. Knox's translation) 'He saved us and it was not thanks to anything we had done for our own justification. - So, justified by His grace we were to become heirs, with the hope of eternal life set before us'. From this passage, as well as many others it is clear we will be accepted by God at the Judgement Day only on account of the merits of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, through faith, and not for our own works or deservings. His merits are perfect; that is why we may be sure of our salvation. If any of you who are listening this evening are uncertain of your salvation, then either you are unaware of the promises of God in His Word; or else you are looking, at least in part, to the sort of life that you are

looking, at least in part, to the sort of life that you are trying to live, to win you a place in Heaven. Uncertainty with regard to future bliss is an indication that you are basing your salvation elsewhere than on Christ alone. For only as we rest entirely in Him, are we able to have the joyous assurance of the forgiveness of our sins and of acceptance with God, an assurance which the Bible teaches should be the constant experience of every Christian.

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