

SESSION 15: Our Sure Hope

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 63-66

WCF	WLC	WSC
17-18	79-81	

Introduction

In our study of how redemption accomplished (*historia salutis*) becomes redemption applied (*ordo salutis*), we have examined how effectual calling unites us to Christ. We have unfolded how, in union with Christ, we partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification. One of the things we discussed in our last session is that sanctification is warfare.

As in any war, so in our sanctification there will be defeats. When we are stung by such defeats, it is easy to fall into defeatist thinking. The Enemy would love to persuade every Christian to despair. In times of struggle, what guarantees do we have that we will actually make it in this Christian life? In days of darkness, what assurance can we have that our faith is sure? These are the sort of questions addressed in this session as we consider perseverance and assurance.

The Sure Guarantee

Our standards define the perseverance of the saints as follows: “They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved,” (WCF 17.1). This strong promise echoes Scripture. Our Lord said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand,” (Jn 10.27-29). And Paul affirms, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ,” (Phil 1.6).

How do we understand such a promise? On what basis can we, who know the deceitfulness of our hearts and the tang of our lusts, believe such a guarantee? Our sanctification at (most) times feels like sailing a very small ship through a very great storm. When the deep yawns below us and the waves tower over us, on what can we cast our anchor?

The answer is that perseverance of the saints rests “not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace,” (WCF 17.2).

Notice what is said here. Perseverance is founded on *the work of the Godhead*: the Father’s love and election, the Son’s mediation, and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Whose work is missing in this list? *Ours*. It is on the basis of *God’s sure work, not our response*, that we find “the certainty and infallibility” of perseverance. As WLC 79 notes, we are “kept by the power of God.”

The passage most frequently cited in objection to this doctrine is Hebrews 6.4-6:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

Noting that this difficult passage “cannot be in contradiction to the clear teaching of other passages,” Morton Smith writes:

The above description of the person, does not actually affirm that he is a true believer. All of these things may be true of the person, who coming under the light of the Gospel makes profession of the faith, while he has no real part in it.... Judas Iscariot is, of course, the classic case of one who professed the faith, and appeared to be a part of the body, but who was never converted. He, no doubt, could have been described with these verses in Hebrews.¹⁹²

To this we would add that our standards elsewhere associate this passage from Hebrews with the “rocky ground” hearer of whom our Lord spoke in the parable of the sower.¹⁹³

The Pastoral Focus

Yet the difficulty of the passage from Hebrews raises an important point. Both doctrines under examination in this session – perseverance and assurance – are criticized as encouraging moral laxity. How do we address such concerns?

In response, let us note carefully the subjects of our standards’ discussion: “They whom God hath accepted” (WCF 17.1); “the saints” (WCF 17.2); “true believers” (WLC 79). To whom are given the promises of being kept by God’s power? *Not to all who profess, but to all who truly believe.*

This tells us something very important about both doctrines under consideration in this session. Their focus is *pastoral*. They are meant to encourage struggling yet sincere Christians, not those who blithely profess Christ with their lips but deny him with their lives.

But of course this raises a new – and very pastoral – question. Who counts as a “true believer”? How can one be sure? To answer these questions, we turn now to the doctrine of assurance.

Two Important Distinctions

As we begin our discussion of assurance, we ought to note two distinctions made by our standards. Firstly, *assurance is not of the essence of faith*. It is possible to be a sincere Christian and yet lack assurance (WCF 18.3, WLC 81). Consider the words of the prophet: “Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God,” (Is 50.10).

Secondly, *assurance is not of the essence of faith*. It is possible for a person to be self-deceived about the state of their souls: “hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favour of God, and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish,” (WCF 18.1). Here again, consider the words of another prophet: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17.9).

¹⁹² Smith, *Systematic Theology*, II.505.

¹⁹³ See the proof texts cited by WLC 68 and WCF 10.4.

The Imperative Quest

These qualifications notwithstanding, our standards insist that believers can “be infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and shall persevere therein unto salvation” (WLC 80), and that “this certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion,” (WCF 18.2). As the apostle writes, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life,” (1Jn 5.13).

Not only is real assurance really possible; to seek it is a *real duty of every believer*: “it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness,” (WCF 18.3).

Note well the purposes stated in WCF 18.3. Why do we seek assurance of salvation? *Not for license, but for love*. “In the Gospel do we so behold God, as that we may love God. It is there, and there only, where God stands revealed as an object of confidence to sinners and where our desire after Him is not chilled into apathy, by that barrier of human guilt which intercepts every approach that is not made to Him through the appointed Mediator.”¹⁹⁴

A Threefold Diagnostic

So how can a person tell? Our standards give us a threefold diagnostic. This diagnostic has three tests and three tools. The former are listed in WCF 18.1, and the latter in WCF 18.2:

Three Tests

1. Faith: “such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus...”
2. Love: “and love Him in sincerity...”
3. Life: “endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him...”

Three Tools

1. Scripture: “the divine truth of the promises of salvation...”
2. Evidence: “the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made...”
3. Testimony: “the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits...”

How do we apply these tests and tools in practice? The most straightforward test is the third. A life devoid of *any* fruit is a life devoid of true faith. But how do those who struggle with the first two pass through the valley of the shadow of our doubts?

Through the Valley of the Shadow of Doubt

Many serious Christians struggle with doubts regarding the assurance of their salvation. Such struggles are not always the result of obvious sin or inconsistency in their spiritual lives, and therefore are not simply remedied. In order to resolve their struggle, believers in this condition need two things: sound theological instruction and clear practical guidance. Based on a long personal struggle, the present author believes there are essentially seven key steps necessary in order to pass out of the perpetual darkness of uncertainty regarding our salvation. The first four are theological, and the second three are practical.

First, we must *understand who God is*. Foundational to solving a struggle with doubts is to begin with the revealed character of God. Remember that the devil’s oldest trick is to make us suspicious of God.¹⁹⁵ But God is not a demanding tyrant whom we, or even Christ, must appease *in order for*

¹⁹⁴ Chalmers, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.”

¹⁹⁵ See our discussion of “The Devil’s Oldest Trick” in session 8.

him to love us. Rather, God is a loving Father who gave Christ *because* he loves us (Jn 3.16). We don't have to *make* God love us; *God is* love (1Jn 4.8-11). We must know this, and believe it – not because we always *feel* it, but because Scripture *reveals* it.

This first point has an additional, important implication. If we commit ourselves to God's self-revelation of *himself*, we should also commit ourselves to God's Word as the standard for evaluating *ourselves*. Feelings of doubt may persist for years, and may resist all efforts to pin them down. What can we do? We can commit ourselves to assessing our hearts by, and accepting the conclusion of, Scripture. On this very point, Puritan pastor William Guthrie wrote, "If we prove from Scripture, which is the uncontroverted rule, that you are gracious, and have made a covenant savingly with God, then resolve to grant so much, and to acquiesce in it... Therefore, seek eye-salve from Christ to judge of things according as the word of God shall discover them to be."¹⁹⁶

Having committed ourselves to the verdict of Scripture, the second step in overcoming doubts is to *understand the free offer of the gospel*.¹⁹⁷ Though not all will receive him, Jesus offers himself to all (Jn 1.11-13). He offers eternal life in himself to whoever desires it (Jn 7.37-38, Rev 22.17). Whoever asks receives (Mt 7.7). "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," (Romans 10.13). Therefore we should never doubt Christ's goodwill. "And this is the promise that he made to us – eternal life," (1 John 2.25).

Is this promise truly given to all people? Note that at Pentecost, the call to repent in faith is called "the promise." "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself," (Acts 2.38-39). The gospel is called "the promise" repeatedly throughout the New Testament.¹⁹⁸

Thus *the free offer of the gospel is Christ's promise to me*. When we understand this, the gospel becomes truly wonderful – because now I may see clearly that all the most beautiful promises in the Gospels are no longer just for others, but now also for me! Jesus came to give *me* life abundantly (Jn 10.10). He laid down his life for *me* (Jn 10.11). He gives *me* eternal life, and nobody can snatch *me* out of his hand (Jn 10.28). He will give *me* rest (Mt 11.28) Everyone who confesses him, believes in him, calls upon him, will be saved (Rom 10.9-13) – and this includes *me*! Every gospel proposition is as if Christ said to me, "This is what I promise to do for you. Believe me!"

Once we understand the free offer of the gospel as a personal promise from Christ, we are in a position to take the third step in overcoming doubts – which is to *understand what faith is*. As we discussed previously,¹⁹⁹ faith is never an abstract relationship to certain information. It is always a relationship to a *person*. How can we trust a person who is not physically present? The answer is that we grab onto his *promises*. A promise can never be separated from him who makes it, for a promise is an extension of the promiser. Note how John makes this clear by associating the *promise* of the gospel with the *person* of Christ: "And this is the promise that he made to us – eternal life," (1 John 2.25); "And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son," (1 John 5.11). By receiving his promise, we receive Christ himself. In believing his promise, we trust him. Thus Christian faith is simply *believing Jesus will keep his gospel promises to me*.

¹⁹⁶ William Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest* (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002), 26.

¹⁹⁷ Here we review what we discussed at length in session 13 under "Faith and the Free Offer of the Gospel."

¹⁹⁸ See Acts 2.39, 26.6; Romans 4.13, 14, 16, 20; Galatians 3.17, 19, 22; Ephesians 3.6; 2 Timothy 1.1; Hebrews 11.39, 1 John 2.25.

¹⁹⁹ Again, see "Faith and the Free Offer of the Gospel" in session 13.

The fourth step in overcoming doubts is to *understand how faith saves*. We are saved not by works, but by grace alone through faith alone (Eph 2.8-9). The trouble is, many Christians treat faith itself, the act of believing, like a work. We fall into believing we must “do it right” in order to be saved.

But faith is not a work. Paul sets the two in opposition: “And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,” (Rom 4.5). Faith trusts not its *own* ability or activity, but the ability and activity – the promises and power – of *God* (Rom 4.20-21). I am saved not by *how well* I believe, but only by *whom* I trust.

Think of the man born blind. He had limited propositional knowledge. But what did the Lord ask him? “Do you believe *in the Son of Man?*” (Jn 10.35) The *subjective* operation of faith may vary in strength from day to day, or even moment to moment. Yet the *objective* foundation is Jesus himself, who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever,” (Heb 13.8). Faith draws all its potency not from its *experience*, but from its *object*. We trust not our performance, but his person.²⁰⁰

Having walked through these first four theological steps, we may now take the three practical steps toward overcoming doubts. How do we activate a commitment to Scripture and understanding of faith and the free offer of the gospel?

The fifth step in overcoming doubts is to *prove faith’s existence by its exercise*. Instead of endlessly *examining* your faith, *exercise* it! Don’t wallow in doubt. Defy doubt by active faith. Don’t try to “do it right” – do it *now*! Prove your faith lives.

God commands us to believe right now. “And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ...” (1 John 3.23). Reflecting on this, Fisher comments, “Wherefore, you having so good a warrant as God’s command, and so great an encouragement as his promise, do your duty; and by the doing thereof you may put it [namely, your believing] out of question, and be sure that you are also one of God’s elect.”²⁰¹

How do we prove that our faith lives? The best way to prove you are alive is to breathe. In the same way, the best way to prove your faith lives is to make it breathe. How? Faith breathes by prayer. “Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world, is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again, is *praying*,” (J.C. Ryle).²⁰² David writes, “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us,” (Psalm 62.8).

Prayer vocalizes faith (Rom 10.11, 13). You may use your own words, or the words of Scripture (Ps 119.94, Mk 9.24, Jn 9.38, etc.). Tell Jesus you believe his gospel promises to you. Only pray with sincere desire, and you have proven your faith lives! *The exercise of sincere prayer proves the existence of faith*. Paul asks, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?” (Romans 10.14). How indeed!

²⁰⁰ Again, see “Faith and the Free Offer of the Gospel” in session 13 – giving special attention to Keller’s example of “weak faith in a strong branch” at the end of the section.

²⁰¹ Edward Fisher, *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 145.

²⁰² J.C Ryle, *Practical Religion* (reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 61.

Yet as soon as we mention sincerity, the sensitive heart may tremble. Thus the sixth step in overcoming doubts is to *prove our sincerity by our desires*. Rightly do we fear self-deception (Jer 17.9). Yet the sincerity of one's faith can be known. The possibility of self-deception can be disproved. How? *By examining our desires*. Jesus blessed "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied," (Mt 5.6). "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you," (Ps 73.25).

Do I hunger and thirst for righteousness? Do I desire Jesus more than anything else? *This is a certain mark of regeneration*. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God," (Rom 8.7-8). And "the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned," (1Cor 2.14). If I desire God, I am not hostile to him. If I accept the things of God, it must be because I am no longer a "natural" man.

The final step in overcoming doubts is to *prove the reality by the remedy*. When you find yourself wrestling with recurring fear or doubt, don't obsess about it. Rather, *confess* it! Jesus forgives unbelief (Jn 20.26-29). When you are surrounded by a cloud of spiritual noise, *give your noise to Jesus!* Let every question be given to him. Give all your self, with all your clouds, to him every day. In so doing, you are *proving the reality* of your faith *by the remedy* you seek for its deficiency.

Yes, indeed - who does not lack faith? Who can believe? Certainly no one would believe if he maintained that he "had" faith, so that nothing was lacking to him, and that he "could" believe. Whoever believes, knows and confesses that he cannot "by his own understanding and power" in any way believe. He will simply perform this believing, without losing sight of the unbelief that continually accompanies him and makes itself felt. Called and illumined by the Holy Spirit as he is, he does not understand himself; he cannot help but completely wonder at himself. He will say "I believe" only in and with the entreaty, "Lord, help my unbelief." For this very reason he will not suppose pose that he has his faith, but he will hope and hope and hope for it as the Israelites hoped afresh every morning for the manna in the wilderness. And when he receives this faith afresh, he will also daily activate it anew...

The serious question, however, is whether anyone can allow himself self to persist in the dreary assertion, "What I lack is faith," once he has been shown that and how God's work is done, God's word is spoken, and God's Spirit is operating... Or will he leave off all coquetry with his own unbelief and live in the freedom that has been revealed and granted to him?²⁰³

The Testimony of the Holy Spirit

Before concluding, we would do well to consider the testimony of the Holy Spirit mentioned in WCF 18.2 and of which Paul writes: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God..." (Rom 8.15-16).

John Murray wrote, "We are not to construe this witness of the Spirit as consisting in a direct propositional revelation to the effect, 'Thou art a child of God.'"²⁰⁴ But if we are not to expect a voice, for what should we look? What does it mean that the Holy Spirit "bears witness with our spirit"? The present author has never encountered a better explanation than the following:

²⁰³ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 104-105.

²⁰⁴ Murray, *Romans*, 297.

This operation of the Spirit is best understood, if we produce any syllogism by which our spirit witnesses our sonship; as for example, Whosoever loves the brethren is passed from death to life, and consequently is in Christ: but I love the brethren; therefore, I am passed from death to life. Here there is a threefold operation of the Spirit, or three operations rather. The first is a beam of divine light upon the first proposition, convincing of the divine authority of it, as the word of God. The Spirit of the Lord must witness the divinity of the Scripture, and that it is the infallible word of God, far beyond all other arguments that can be used for it. The second operation is a glorious beam of light from the Spirit, shining upon the second proposition, and so upon His own graces in the soul, discovering them to be true graces, and such as the Scripture calleth so. Thus we are said to 'know by His Spirit the things that are freely given unto us of God.' [1 Cor 2:13.] The third operation is connected with the third proposition of the argument, or the conclusion, and this I conceive to be nothing else but an influence upon faith, strengthening it to draw a conclusion of full assurance upon the foresaid premises... I conceive the second operation of the Spirit upon the second proposition, and so upon the graces in the man, is that witness of God's Spirit, that beam of divine light shining upon those graces by which they are made very conspicuous to the understanding... the truth and reality of such and such graces in the man, which our own spirit or conscience depones [testifies] according to its knowledge, and the Spirit of the Lord certainly affirms and witnesses to be so; there is a sentence drawn forth, and a conclusion of the man's sonship by the man's faith, breathed upon by the Spirit for that purpose: and this conclusion bears the full assurance of a man's sonship. It may be presumed, that some true saints do not partake of this all their days.²⁰⁵

If Guthrie is right, then the Spirit's testimony is wonderfully simple: *the supernatural conviction that we actually meet the conditions which Scripture declares necessary and sufficient for salvation.* Here's how it works:

1. Take a biblical syllogism: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life," (John 3.36).
2. As far as I know myself, I believe in the Son. ← Spirit's witness = conviction this is true.
3. Therefore I have eternal life.

Sinclair Ferguson seems to agree:

Paul's statement that it is only through the Spirit that a person can say, "Jesus is Lord," may provide a key. It is the believer who bears witness thus to Christ; but it is only through the ministry of the Spirit in his life that this can take place. In the same way, it is the believer who cries, "Abba! Father!" but we can do this only as the Spirit bears his joint testimony with our spirit. The testimony of the Spirit of sonship is therefore not something existentially distinguishable from this testimony of our own spirits. It is distinct from it, but it cannot be distinguished by an introspective analysis of our consciousness— any more than we can directly detect the work of the Spirit when we say, "Jesus is Lord!" B. B. Warfield finely expresses the balance here when he writes: "Distinct in source, it is yet delivered confluent with the testimony of our own consciousness."

.... It should be noted, however, that while the witness of the Spirit is not the same as the fruit of the Spirit, Paul does not present it as a kind of "Route B" to assurance for those whose lives are empty of that fruit. The witness of the Spirit goes hand in glove with the fruit of the Spirit, for Paul has been describing the believer as a person who walks according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh, who lives by putting to death the misdeeds of the body... B. B. Warfield once again well expresses the balance here when he says that the witness of the Spirit is, in a word, not a substitute for the proper evidence of our childship; but a divine enhancement of that evidence.²⁰⁶

When we confess from the heart that "Jesus is Lord," it is both we *and the Holy Spirit* who testify.

²⁰⁵ William Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest*, 106-108 (emphases added).

²⁰⁶ Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 208-209, 210-212.

Important Questions

1. Suppose you meet a person who professes to be a Christian. They don't attend worship except on holidays, they don't read the Bible, and they don't pray unless they're sick. "But I'm sure I'm going to heaven," they insist when you express some alarm. "From the moment I said the sinner's prayer at summer camp, I've never once doubted my salvation." How do you respond?
2. Critics claim the doctrine of assurance leads to presumption, which leads to spiritual apathy. We might rightly claim the contrary: that it is lack of assurance that impedes love for God. How would you make this argument?

Additional Resources

William Guthrie, *The Christian's Great Interest*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 67-103, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
19	91-152	39-84