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HOW CAN I BE SURE I'M A CHRISTIAN?

By John Cheeseman

Is it possible to be sure that one has eternal life? This is a very important question because there are some people who would say that such assurance is not possible. Indeed, they would go further and say that it is nothing less than sheer arrogance and presumption to be certain that one is a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. But what matters is not so much the opinions of other people, but the teaching of God's word. What does the bible say? Does the Bible tell us that it is possible to be sure of one's standing before God? The answer is a most emphatic yes.

The doctrine of assurance runs like a golden thread throughout the Bible, but nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the first epistle of John. It was the importance of assurance that prompted John to write: *"I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life."* (1 Jn 5.13). The same note is emphasised again and again; *"We know that we have passed from death to life"* (3.14, see also 3.19, 3.24 & 5.19). John was not like some so-called Christians, who seem convinced about their doubts and doubtful about their convictions. John was sure. He knew and he prayed that other Christians would share the same happy assurance about their relationship with God. But how can we have such assurance? Below are five grounds for Christian assurance.

The facts about Jesus

Christian assurance is much more than feelings, or hopes, or longings. It is a conviction based upon certain concrete facts of history. As an example, how do you know that your sins are forgiven and that God won't hold you guilty anymore? It is because of the fact that Jesus died for your sins on the cross, and God raised him from the dead as proof that his atoning sacrifice had been effective. Years ago, men owing money in this country were sentenced to terms of imprisonment in what were known as "debtors prisons." And if the person owing the debt ran away and could not be traced somebody else would be sent to prison in his place. Imagine that you had run away and someone else was jailed in your place. Years later you return and see that person walking free, what does that tell you? It tells you that the sentence has been served and you are free. Your assurance is based on the fact that the one who took responsibility for your debt had been released from prison. The penalty had been paid and there is nothing more to pay.

The Christian's assurance of salvation rests on the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ, who undertook to pay the death penalty for our sins, has been released from the prison of death. He rose and is alive today. And God will not condemn those for whom Christ has paid the death penalty.

The Word of God

The Bible teaches that it is impossible for God to lie (Heb ch 6 v18). God always keeps his word. And the greatest promise in the Bible, repeated throughout the New Testament, is that those who put their trust in Jesus Christ are saved for ever. *"I tell you the truth – whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life and will not be condemned: he has crossed over from death to life."* (Jn 5.24) Here is a clear promise made by Christ and it can be utterly relied upon.

In 1798 Lord Cornwallis offered a pardon to rebels in Ireland who entered a particular field and laid down their arms. At first it was feared to be a trap but eventually men accepted the offer and entered, laid down their weapons and received a pardon already signed by Cornwallis to which their name was added. In the future if they were threatened with arrest they could show the signed pardon. When they entered the field they were free men but they did not have assurance until they

received the signed pardon under their name.

The Christian is saved through putting his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, but he can be sure of salvation because of the great promises in the Bible signed by God himself. When the devil causes us to doubt we can look at the pardon declared in God's word "*there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" (Rom 8.1).

The work of the Holy Spirit

"When we cry Abba! Father! it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." (Rom 8.15, 16). Like all the deepest things of the human heart, this is almost impossible to describe in words. Do you know what it is to be aware of the presence of God in prayer? Do you know in your heart that you truly love God? Do you at the same time have a deep conviction that he loves you? Do you really mean what you are saying when you call him "Father"? Do you know what it is to find your heart going out to Him in love, worship, praise, thanksgiving, joy. If you do then these convictions are the result of the Holy Spirit's work within you. These are the areas in which, as Paul puts it, "the Spirit himself witnesses with your Spirit that you are a child of God." Have you experienced these things at least in some degree in your life? If you have then this is another important ground of assurance that you are a genuine Christian and an inheritor of the Kingdom of God.

The things I believe

Do I believe what the Bible has to say about Jesus? This is an important test of the validity of my Christian profession. The apostle John says: "*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, ... by this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God.*" (1 Jn 4.1-3) Jesus told some of his critics "*you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he*" (Jn 8.24). However well meaning a person may be and whatever the quality of his life, nobody can claim to be a Christian unless he acknowledges the deity of Christ. This is a fundamental truth of Christianity. And so you see, for example, that no Jehovah's witness can be a Christian because that particular sect denies the divinity of Christ.

The way I behave

The reality of a person's claim to be a Christian can be checked not only by what he believes, but by the way in which he behaves. Paul said of some that "*they profess to know God, but they deny Him by their deeds.*" (Tit 1.16) This is an area where self-deception is so easy. The apostle James says:- "*Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*" (Jas 1.22). When a person becomes a true Christian, a revolution takes place in belief and behaviour. The Bible is quite definite about it. "*If anyone is in Christ,*" says Paul, "*he is a new creation, the old has passed away. The new has come.*" (2 Cor ch 5 v17). Of course, this doesn't mean that a Christian suddenly becomes perfect – but just as earthly parents can expect physical development in their children, so we can expect to see a gradual and growing change in the life of a true child of God. John links assurance and behaviour repeatedly in his first letter: "*By this, we can be sure that we know God, if we keep his commandments*" (2.3, see also 3.14, 2.5,6, 3.18,19).

So, I would invite you all to apply this important test to yourselves. Are you honestly and earnestly seeking to be obedient to God's revealed will in the Bible? Are you making any progress in holy living? Are you gaining any new victories? Are you overcoming any old sinful habits? Do you long in your heart of hearts to become more and more like Jesus in your thoughts, words and actions? These are the critical tests and the professing Christian should face up to them very carefully. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "*Examine and test yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith and showing the proper fruits of it. Test and prove yourselves*" (2 Cor 13.5). Good advice for all who profess to be Christians today!

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