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ELEVEN

The Assurance of Salvation

Is it possible to have assurance of salvation? Can a person know for certain that, if he died at this moment, he would be saved? Absolutely yes. The apostle John wrote:

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

False grace teachers frequently quote this single verse to prop up the confidence of all who profess to believe in Jesus. But they often completely miss John's meaning.

First, John said he wrote to those who believe in the name of the *Son of God*, not those who believe they are saved by believing in a doctrine about salvation. It is not believing that salvation is by grace through faith that saves us—we are saved *by believing in a divine person*. And if we believe that Jesus is a divine person, we will act, talk and live like we do.

Additionally, notice that John said he had written "these things" in order that his readers might know they have eternal life. Of what *things* was he speaking? John made this statement at the close of his letter in reference to everything he had written. He had written his entire letter so that his readers might know they had eternal life. By evaluating their lives in light of what he said marks all true believers, they could determine if they were genuinely saved.

By comparing ourselves with what John said marks true believers, we, too, can determine if God's grace has really changed us. If it has, we are assured that we are saved. This is not trusting in our works to save us. Rather, it is receiving assurance of salvation through the evidence of God's grace through His works in and through us. Many antinomians cling to the memory of a prayer once prayed for the false assurance of their salvation, whereas true believers can look at their lives and see the work of God's transforming grace. We can know¹ that we are saved.

What did John write that helps us make our evaluation? What are the distinguishing traits of true believers? John repeatedly mentions three tests. One is moral (see 2:3-6; 2:28-3:10); one is social (see 2:7-11; 3:11-18; 4:7-21) and one is doctrinal (see 2:18-27; 4:1-6). Let's consider all three.

The Moral Test: Obedience to Jesus' Commands

And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked (1 John 2:3-6, emphasis added).

If we keep Jesus' commandments, we (1) know that we have come to know Him and (2) know that we are in Him.

Some would like us to believe that "knowing Jesus" is an expression that refers to Christians who are more mature in Christ. Young, immature Christians don't really "know" Jesus as well as older Christians do. Therefore, some

¹ Indeed, John's first epistle could be labeled "the letter about knowing." The word know (or knows) is found forty times in its five chapters.

conclude that John was saying that we can tell if we are mature or immature Christians by our obedience or disobedience. But is that what John meant?

Clearly not, for several reasons. In the passage we've just read, John also used the expression, "in Him," stating that we can also know if we are *in Christ* if we keep His commandments. Anyone who has read the New Testament knows that all true believers are *in Christ*, not just the more mature believers. Since those who are *in Him* and those who *know Him* are both distinguished by keeping His commandments, *knowing Him* must be equivalent to being *in Him*.

Second, Jesus Himself used the same expression, *knowing Him*, as equivalent to being saved:

And so [the Pharisees] were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "*You know neither Me, nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also*" (John 8:19, emphasis added).

"I am the good shepherd; and I know My own [all those who are saved], *and My own know Me*" (John 10:14, emphasis added).

"If you had *known Me*, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him" (John 14:7, emphasis added, cf. 1 John 3:6).

"And this is *eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent*" (John 17:3, emphasis added).

Third, John also used the expression, *know Him*, in another place in his first epistle that clearly equates knowing Jesus with being saved:

See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called *children of God*; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because *it did not know Him* (1 John 3:1, emphasis added).

Fourth, the context of the expression, *knowing Him*, within John's first epistle, which is all about the tests of authentic faith, lends further support that the expression is applicable to all true believers. For example, in John's second discussion of the moral test, he unmistakably states that "practicing righteousness" is the evidence of being born again:

And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that *everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him* (1 John 2:28-29, emphasis added).

For these reasons, we can conclude that when John writes of "knowing Jesus," he is not referring to being intimately acquainted with Jesus as more mature Christians are, but is referring to being saved. Those who know Him, obey Him.

John restates the moral test again in later paragraphs:

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And *everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure*. Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. *No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God* (1 John 3:2-10a, emphasis added).

How much clearer could it be? By His grace, God transforms those who truly believe in Jesus into obedient children. John wrote “these things” so that we “may know that [we] have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

Are you obeying Jesus’ commandments? You may want to review the list of Jesus’ commandments in chapter nine. No Christian is obeying them perfectly, but all true Christians are certainly characterized much more by obedience than disobedience.

The Social Test: Loving the Brethren

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain, who was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous. Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you. [What is John’s implication here about the behavior of believers compared to unbelievers?] *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren.* He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 John 3:11-15, emphasis added).

When we are born again, God, by His Holy Spirit comes to live inside of us. Naturally, He does not leave His nature behind. God is love, John says (1 John 4:8), and so when God moves in, love moves in. Paul wrote, “The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

Those who are spiritually reborn find that, in particular, they possess a supernatural love for fellow believers, their spiritual brothers and sisters. In fact, if their natural relatives are unsaved, they find that they actually prefer to spend time with their spiritual relatives. Or, when a car on the Interstate highway passes theirs with an “I love Jesus” bumper sticker, they feel a warmth within for the unknown occupants of that car. Had they lived during the time of the second-century Greek Philosopher, Celsus, they also would have been the target

of his criticism: “These Christians love each other even before they get acquainted!”

This divinely-given love goes much deeper than just passing out hugs and handshakes after church. It is the same love God has for His children, caring and compassionate:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth (1 John 3:16-18)

The love true Christians have for each other is so real that it identifies them as Christ’s disciples in the sight of unbelievers (see John 13:35) and distinguishes them from unbelievers in the sight of God (see Matt. 25:31-46). Those who do not love their brothers do not love God (see 1 John 4:20).

Of course, this love can grow, and those who truly possess it don’t always display it perfectly. Nevertheless, every true believer is conscious of the inward reservoir that tends to seep through his eyes, hands, thoughts and words. He loves other disciples of Jesus. Do you? John wrote “these things” so that we “may know that [we] have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

The Doctrinal Test

Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also....Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God....Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God (1 John 2:22-23; 4:15; 5:1).

This doctrinal test is often the only test considered valid by antinomians. If someone confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, he is considered

saved, even if he fails John's other two tests. Keep in mind that it is possible to verbally confess one's faith that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God, while denying the same facts by one's actions. At least four times in his first epistle, John writes of those whose actions nullify their words:

The one who *says*, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, *is a liar, and the truth is not in him* (1 John 2:4, emphasis added).

The one who *says* he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked (1 John 2:6, emphasis added).

The one who *says* he is in the light and yet hates his brother is *in the darkness* until now (1 John 2:9, emphasis added).

If someone *says*, "I love God," and hates his brother, *he is a liar*; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 John 4:20, emphasis added).

In light of this, we would be foolish to think we are truly passing John's doctrinal test if we are failing his moral and social tests. All three are equally important. Notice how John unites all three in a summarizing statement near the close of his letter:

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ [the doctrinal test] is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him [the social test]. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments [the moral test] (1 John 5:1-2).

John wrote these things "in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). John's letter fills with assurance those who are truly born again, while it warns those whose faith is false. As I wrote in the introduction to this book, if I were self-deceived concerning my salvation, I'd rather find out

now than after my death. Now there is time to repent and trust in Jesus—then it will be too late.

Those with Overly-Sensitive Consciences

There is, I've discovered, a small percentage of true believers in Christ who are likely to be unduly alarmed about their spiritual state after reading a book like this one, primarily because of their own personality. They are already very devoted to Christ and have very high standards for themselves. Often they are perfectionists in their personal lives. In some cases, they were raised under the influence of a very demanding parent, in whose eyes they never felt as if they quite "measured up." In other cases, they have spent time imprisoned in legalistic churches, where sin was always the sermon topic and never grace, or where external standards such as hair style or dress length were the litmus tests of one's salvation. Perhaps they were indoctrinated to believe that they lost their salvation every time they sinned.

These are Christians who, for lack of a better way to say it, have overly-sensitive consciences. They are quick to condemn themselves. If they tithe *and* financially support three impoverished children, they feel guilty that they don't support four, and consequently wonder if they are saved. They serve others unselfishly in their church, but because they struggle getting along with one cranky old deacon, question if they are truly born again. They share the gospel with co-workers, but feel guilty because they haven't quit their jobs to be a missionary in Haiti. They're thirty-fold Christians but not one-hundred fold Christians (see Mark 4:8). They're not adulterers, fornicators, homosexuals, idolaters, drunkards, liars or thieves, but because they aren't perfect, fear they might go to hell, even though their lives are characterized by righteousness.

Such believers can only be balanced by God's Word. If you are such a Christian, I encourage you to read through the New Testament and note the imperfections of the many who were redeemed. We all still stumble in many ways, particularly in what we say (see Jas. 3:2). The fruit of the Spirit still has room to grow and mature in all our lives. God's work in us isn't completed yet. So don't let the devil twist what God has said and condemn yourself. God loves you, and, so far, His only perfect child is Jesus.