

Blessed Assurance? Yes!: A Doctrine of the Assurance of Salvation

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“Now a slave has no *permanent* place in the family, but a *son* belongs to it *forever*.” (John 8:35)

“. . . those who are *led* by the Spirit of God *are* sons of God. For 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.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that *we are God’s children*. Now if we are *children*, then we are *heirs*—heirs of *God* and *co-heirs* with *Christ*, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” (Romans 8:14–17)

“Are you saved?”

Has anyone ever asked you that? What did you answer? If the question makes you feel uncomfortable, why?

Has anyone ever approached you on the sidewalk and said, “If you were to die tonight, would you be sure of receiving eternal life?”

Well, would you? Are you sure? On what basis are you sure?

I teach the Bible to college students from many denominations. About a fourth of them are from one of the many Evangelical denominations which encourage members to refer to themselves as “Born Again.” When these students ask, “Are you saved?” they may mean “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord and been born again?” However, “saved” is, for them, also a code word meaning “one of us.” Thus, I hear students say, “He’s saved” when they mean “He’s a fundamentalist Christian like we are, so he’s okay.”

These “saved” students often believe in the teaching theologians call “eternal security,” but my students refer to as “once saved, always saved.” By this

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

they generally mean they believe that having once been “saved” at a specific time, they can never be lost, no matter what they do.¹

The majority of my students are far less certain of their salvation, even if they too claim Christ as their Savior. In many cases they are correct to be uncertain, because their walk with God has been very erratic and they see little evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives (Gal 5:22–23). In other cases, they are walking with God, but modest or unwilling to predict the perseverance of their present faith to the end.

What does the Bible teach? What is assured, what is certain, or at least as certain as possible in a world where our faith is in something and Someone we do not yet see (Heb 11:1)? How assured can we be of our own individual salvation? Do some of us deny an assurance of salvation we could fairly claim? Do some of us claim an assurance of salvation which is more accurately called presumption?

One of my favorite hymns, a hymn I’ve heard sung by dozens of congregations, is this:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O, what a foretaste of glory divine!

Fanny Crosby, who wrote these words in 1873, identified, in the lyrics, seven excellent reasons for her own assurance of salvation, all based on her faith in the trustworthiness of God’s promises in His Word:

1. “Heir of salvation” [that is, adoption as a child of God];
2. “Purchase of God” [that is, ransom or redemption from sin and Satan];

¹ Norman L. Geisler, who himself believes in “eternal security,” has revealed what I call the “dirty little secret” of the “once saved, always saved” teaching in his book *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999). On the basis of 1 John 2:19, Geisler argues that if people do not persevere in their faith to the end or at least do not die in their faith, it is because they were never born again and so were never actually “saved.” My students use this argument sometimes, but never about themselves. Consider, though, the case of a student who believes in eternal security and claims to be born again, believes he is born again, is told he is born again. He is sure he can never be lost. In later years, however, he turns away from God and dies unrepentant. Geisler says this proves he was never actually born again, or he would have remained faithful. Where, though, is the security in the “once saved, always saved” position if you can never be sure if you have really been “once saved”? The result is that where the Arminian says, “I have been born again, but if I turn away forever I’ll be lost,” the believer in eternal security has to say, “If I’ve been born again, I can never be lost, but I won’t know until I die faithful if I’ve actually been born again.” As Geisler points out, the end result is the same (130). Many believers in eternal security, of course, don’t hear this “dirty little secret” from their pastors. I prefer the Arminian teaching that we can indeed have assurance of salvation, even though that assurance is conditional on perseverance. This paper shows that the Bible gives us evidences by which we can know we have been born again. If Geisler’s position is correct, then we could exhibit all these evidences, yet not be born again at all. The result is that we have no real way of knowing if we have in fact been born again. We can claim it on the basis of a powerful emotion, but we may be mistaken, so we have no assurance at all. It seems unwise to deny people the assurance offered by God’s Word because it conflicts with a theological presupposition based on a few proof texts.

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

3. “Born of his Spirit” [that is, having been born again];
4. “Washed in His blood” [that is, sacrificial atonement and baptism];
5. “I in my Saviour” [that is, assurance through being “in Christ”];
6. “Filled with His goodness” [that is, the evidence of salvation given by the fruit of the Spirit and “the fruit of the light” (Eph 5:9)]; and
7. “Perfect submission” [that is, walking consistently and humbly with God].

I could simply say “Amen” and stop there, but perhaps I should say more.

Assurance and Presumption

There is a *true assurance* of salvation which can be enjoyed by every Christian who trustfully walks in the “path of life” (Ps 16:11), who lives by “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). Even though we slip and fall from time to time, we will be saved and live with God forever if we continue to repent and continue to walk with God, rather than turning away from Him and walking in the “way of death” (Rev 14:4; Heb. 11; Jer 21:8). Sinners with ears open to the still, small voice of the Spirit and with a continual, teachable attitude of humble repentance swim in a sea of forgiveness in the heart of God. If they remain in that sea they can never be lost, even if they “fall short of the glory of God” every day of their mortal lives (Rom 3:23; John 3:16).

There is also a *false assurance* of salvation which is better called *presumption* because it is not based on the full teaching of God’s Word and may lead to destruction. Some walk in the “way of death,” as it is called in Jeremiah 21:8, because they presume God is so loving that He will eventually save everyone, so they choose to live in sin. Others walk in the “way of death” because they presume salvation is theirs because they were baptized and confirmed in the “true faith,” even though they live in sin. Some walk in the “way of death” because they presume being “born again” is the work of a single moment of faith that does not need to lead to a lifelong walk with God (in contrast with James 1:4: “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”). Others walk in the “way of death” because they presume a “Spirit” which tells them to do what the Bible forbids is God’s new truth for today. Some walk in the “way of death” because they presume it is impossible for Christians to sin, whatever they do (a faulty reading of 1 John 3:9).

Assurance of God’s Faithfulness

There are two types of true assurance we need to consider. One is the assurance that Jesus saves, that God is who He claims to be, that He will fulfill His promises.² The other is the assurance of our own salvation. Many Christians

² The most important SDA source for this aspect of assurance is Hans K. LaRondelle’s *Assurance of Salvation* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1999). LaRondelle was also the principal contributor to the Sabbath School Lesson Quarterly on the topic (January–March 2000), but the book provides a more detailed look at the topic. I have made use of some of LaRondelle’s categories in the section

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

who claim to be certain that God is faithful are not sure that they themselves are faithful or that God intends to be faithful to them. Let's look at these two types of assurance in the light of what God says to us in the Bible.

Assurance in God's Word. Assurance is built on God's Word. If God's Word is not true and trustworthy, any assurance we may feel is no more than presumption. If the Bible is only partly true, only partly reliable, there can be *no assurance*. Why? If part of the Bible is *not* true, how do we *know* that the part we think is true is in fact true? Assurance begins with our trusting that the whole Bible is true and God's Word to us and for us. (1 Thes. 2:13 "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.") All of what follows is assuredly true only if God's Word can be trusted.

Assurance in God's Plan. In Rev 12 Christ reveals to John the great controversy between Michael and the dragon—between Christ and Satan. He reveals the war in heaven that led to Satan being cast down to earth, where he "leads the whole world astray" (v. 9), "accuses them before our God day and night" (v. 10), and makes war against "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (v. 17).

God's Word assures us, though, that God has a plan to rescue us and that the end is at hand. We find that assurance in Isaiah 14:23–27, in the very chapter in which God gives a coded message to His people about the fall of Lucifer:

The LORD Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand. I will crush the Assyrian in my land [the enemy, Satan]; on my mountains I will trample him down. His yoke will be taken from my people, and his burden removed from their shoulders." This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

In the final chapter of God's Word, Christ assures us that He has not forgotten His plan. "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done" (Rev 22:12). If God's Word is true, then we have full assurance that this salvation will come to pass as promised.

Assurance of God's Love. If we can trust God's Word, we can have complete assurance in God's unchanging love and His longing to adopt us as His children. Jeremiah 31:3 says, "The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.'" God says, "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned

which follows. However, the primary intent of this paper is to examine the evidences on which personal assurance of salvation might be based, and these are outside the scope of LaRondelle's book.

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty" (Mal 3:6–7).

Assurance in Christ the God/Man. If God's Word is not mistaken, we have the assurance that in Christ the Son of God became man and died in our place, so we could have life. John tells us, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Jesus tells Nicodemus, "'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him'" (John 3:16–17). Paul writes, in Rom 3:25–26, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." Peter writes, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pet 1:18–19).

Assurance in Christ's Resurrection and Ascension. If God's Word is true, we have the assurance that Christ rose from the grave in glorified flesh and ascended to heaven. When Jesus appears to His disciples after His resurrection, He says, "'Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have'" (Luke 24:39). Preaching on the Day of Pentecost, Peter says, "'Seeing what was ahead, he [David] spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear'" (Acts 2:31–33). Peter writes, "He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God" (1 Pet 1:20–21).

Assurance of a Heavenly High Priest. If God's Word is not mistaken, we have the assurance that Christ, as our heavenly High Priest, continues to make possible our connection to the heavenly Father who loves us. In Heb 2:17 Paul writes: "For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." He continues, in Heb 4:15–16, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

of need.” In Moses’ day the Holy God so longed to dwell among His unholy people that He asked them to build Him a sanctuary, a tent, where He could live (cf. John 1:14). There He could be surrounded by those He loved, even though no one could live within half a mile of Him because of His holiness. They couldn’t actually enter into His presence, though He longed for them to be able to do so, but by setting aside sin and uncleanness and through repentance and the blood they could “draw nigh” (Heb 7:19; James 4:8). Christ’s heavenly ministry is not to appease the wrath of God, but to mediate as God/Man between the Father and humanity so repentant sinners who cannot by themselves approach a loving but Holy God can receive the reconciliation the Father so earnestly longs for.

Assurance of a Heavenly Defender. God’s Word assures us that Christ defends us against Satan’s accusations. We find in Job 1:7 that Satan roams through the earth. Peter tells us Satan is roaming through the earth looking for “someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). Christ reveals to John that the dragon tried to “devour” the “child,” Christ Himself, when He was born (Rev 12:4). In Job we learn that Satan accuses us before God of unfaithfulness (Job 1:6–12, 2:1–7), but faithful Job, unable to defend himself, says, “Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high” (Job 16:19). Christ reveals to John that Satan accuses the brethren “day and night” before God, but John also writes, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1).

It is common and comforting to speak of our having assurance in heaven because our defense attorney is our big brother and our judge is our father—how can we lose? We mustn’t forget, though, that though the Father Himself loves us, He is utterly holy and can do no wrong, so when Satan accuses, God must be absolutely fair. God loved Job, yet when Satan accused Job, God had to test Job and prove him righteous. The assurance that comes from having Christ as our heavenly defender is that while we are being accused *in absentia*, we are not without representation. Like Job, we have “an advocate” to speak up in our defense when we are accused by the adversary, one who knows what it is like to be human and “tempted in every way” (Heb 4:15).

Assurance of Judgment Against the Wicked. If we can trust God’s Word, we have the assurance that God will judge the wicked who hurt His children, find them guilty, and destroy them. In Revelation the seven trumpet judgments, the seven plagues that fall on the earth, and the destruction of Babylon all occur in response to the prayers of the saints for salvation and justice.³ God says to Moses, “I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free” (Acts 7:34). When Christ returns, it will again be in response to the oppression of His people.

³ Rev 5:8; 6:9–11; 8:3–5; 16:1, 5–7; 17:6; 18:4–6, 20, 24; 19:2.

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

Listen to the prophetic message God gives to Zephaniah:

The great day of the LORD is near—near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD. Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like filth. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD's wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth. (Zeph 1:14–18)

Peter tells us, “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat” (2 Pet 3:12).

There are those who deny God's wrath because they can't reconcile it with His love. Yet those same people may proclaim God's call to help those who are oppressed. Does God hear prayers? Does God answer prayers? If God's adopted children plead with Him to free them from those who are hurting them and destroying the earth (Rev 11:18), can they fairly expect God to respond? If you caught someone harming your children, would you not be tempted to use violence against that person, were it not that God says “Vengeance is mine; I will repay” (Deut 32:35)? Would you not cry out for justice? God's wrath is His response against those who try to persecute or pervert His children. It is a righteous wrath, not a sadistic wrath. It consumes and destroys in order to put an end to suffering.

Romans 1:18 says, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, . . .” In Rom 2:5, Paul writes, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.” We can have full assurance that if God can be trusted, these promises will come true.

The Assurance of Christ's Return. If the Bible actually is God's Word for us, then we can have the assurance that Christ is coming back to raise the righteous dead and take us to live with Him. In John 14:1–3, Jesus Himself promises to return:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

The apostle Paul promises Christ's glorious return and the resurrection of the dead in 1 Thes 4:14–17:

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.

From these texts you cannot be sure that He will come for you, but you can be sure that He will come.

The Assurance of An Earth Made New. God's Word promises us that God will remake the earth after destroying it by fire and melting the very elements. If we trust God to keep His word, we have the assurance that those who trust in Christ will live eternally on an earth made new. John writes, in Rev 21:1-4,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Here is God's promise in Isaiah 66:22-23:

"As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the LORD."

As Paul often writes, "Here is a trustworthy saying" (1 Tim 1:15, for example). If God can be trusted, then His Word is true, *all* true. If His Word is true, then we can be *sure* of all these things. If we're not sure of some of His Word, if we doubt the Bible is reliable, then logically we should doubt these things, too. That is why *assurance is only for those who BELIEVE*.

Evidences of Personal Assurance Salvation

But, you say, it's all very well to point out all this assurance we can have in God's faithfulness on the basis of God's Word, but "the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19). What about our own salvation? *Can there be any assurance that we ourselves will be saved? There can, though it's always conditional on being faithful to the end.*

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

Jesus says, to the church in Laodicea, “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” (Rev 3:20). Imagine the assurance of salvation as Christ’s “open door policy.” Once you have opened the door and invited Him in, as long as you don’t shut the door and refuse Him entrance He will keep on coming in and eating with you. Those whose hearts are open to God and His guidance may be assured of salvation. The only way they can lose out on salvation is to slam the door and lock Christ out of their lives.

In Isa 66:2, God makes this precious promise: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” That’s it exactly. The assurance of salvation does not come from being able to count the days or months or years since you last broke a commandment. It comes from the evidence that your spirit is humble and contrite, quick to hear God’s bidding and quick to take His advice and do what He asks, according to His Word and according to the Holy Spirit’s whisperings. As David prophesies, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

The continual response of the “broken and contrite heart” to God’s bidding is, of course, obedience—humble, grateful, and quietly joyful obedience. Many New Testament verses call for obedience (e.g., Rom 1:5, 6:16; 2 Cor 9:13, 10:5; 1 Pet 1:2 ; 2 John 1:6). The most common Greek verb translated “obey” is *hupakouo*, which is derived from the words *hupo*, meaning “under,” and “*akouo*,” meaning “hear.” We understand better what God means by “obedience” if we realize that its root meaning is “under hearing.” Obedience is not the perfect performance of certain acts, but a continual listening for and hearing of God’s bidding. That’s what it means to be “under hearing.” As James 1:22 says, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” If we really believe in God, if we really know Him and love Him, His wish is our command. For a believer to hear His Word without doing His Word would be ludicrous. If you do not do, either you have not really heard or you do not really believe.

The assurance of salvation is not a matter of feelings, but evidence. It is not proven by feeling overwhelmed during a meeting and bursting into tears. Saying it is so does not make it so. The true assurance of salvation does not stem from a lasting memory of something that happened once and never again.

Fortunately, the New Testament offers a number of evidences or criteria by which we may obtain, as it were, scientific, experiential, and experimental assurance that if we are faithful, we will be saved (Heb 10:36; 1 Tim 4:16; James 1:4). There is evidence by which we may know we are not “in Christ” and evidence by which we may know we are “in Christ.” If we are not “in Christ,” perhaps we may yet be saved—after all, it is God who is the Judge and who knows hearts and knows who is savable—but we can certainly have no biblically-authorized assurance of the fact.

Will NOT Inherit Eternal Life:

When I was in college, I learned that Paul was the great apostle of salvation by grace, utterly opposed to salvation by works. I learned that James, on the other hand, was, as Luther said, “an epistle of straw” because it taught salvation by works. When my first son was born we decided to combine the two and called him James Paul. This is, of course, a terribly wrong-headed analysis of these two inspired writers.

The fact is that several times Paul lists those who specifically will not inherit eternal life. James and John also list characteristics of these people. Bear in mind that these authors are not talking about those who have done these things and repented or those who slip but repent and return to the “path of righteousness,” but those who do these things and say there is nothing wrong with doing them—those who walk in “the way of death.” Actually, they are not primarily speaking about church members, but about “the wicked” who do not know God. However, if we harbor such sins in our lives as cherished habits—thinking we love God and God loves us, so these sins don’t really matter—these verses definitely apply.

Bear in mind, too, that we must be very cautious, on the basis of Christ’s parable of the wheat and the tares, about judging church members and saying, “He’s doing that, so he won’t be saved.” Use these evidences to judge yourself and hear the Spirit’s call to repentance.

Let’s read through the verses that offer the most explicit evidences:

1 Cor 6:9–10 “Do you not know that **the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God**? Do not be deceived: Neither the **sexually immoral** nor **idolaters** nor **adulterers** nor **male prostitutes** nor **homosexual offenders** nor **thieves** nor the **greedy** nor **drunkards** nor **slanderers** nor **swindlers** will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Gal 5:19–21 “The **acts of the sinful nature** are obvious: **sexual immorality, impurity** and **debauchery**; **idolatry** and **witchcraft**; **hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions** and **envy**; **drunkenness, orgies** [more accurately, “partying”], and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that **those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.**”

Eph 5:3–6 “But among you there must not be even a hint of **sexual immorality**, or of any kind of **impurity**, or of **greed**, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be **obscenity, foolish talk** or **coarse joking**, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: **No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.** Let no one deceive you with empty words, **for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient.**”

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

Rom 13:12–14 “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in **orgies** and **drunkenness**, not in **sexual immorality** and **debauchery**, not in **dissension** and **jealousy**. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the **desires of the sinful nature**.”

Rev 21:8 [Jesus speaking] “But the **cowardly**, the **unbelieving**, the **vile**, the **murderers**, the **sexually immoral**, those who **practice magic arts**, the **idolators** and all **liars**—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Rev 21:27 “Nothing **impure** will ever enter into it [the New Jerusalem], nor will anyone who does what is **shameful** or **deceitful**, but only whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

Rev. 22:14–15 [Jesus speaking] “‘Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, **those who practice magic arts**, the **sexually immoral**, the **murderers**, the **idolaters** and **everyone who loves and practices falsehood**.’”

Heb 12:14 “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; **without holiness no-one will see the Lord**.”

James 2:12–13 “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because **judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful**. Mercy triumphs over judgment!”

1 John 2:4 “**The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar**, and the truth is not in him.”

1 John 3:6 “**No-one who lives in him keeps on sinning**. No-one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.”

1 John 3:10 “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: **Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother**.”

1 John 3:14 “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. **Anyone who does not love remains in death**.”

1 John 3:15 “**Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer**, and you know that **no murderer has eternal life in him**.”

1 John 3:17 “**If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?**”

1 John 4:8 “**Whoever does not love does not know God**, because God is love.”

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

3 John 11 “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. **Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.**”

Let’s break these into categories. When we speak of “sin,” we tend to think of the “big ones,” such as fornication and murder, especially if we don’t find them tempting. God’s list, however, hits much closer to home. Look at those who can’t reasonably have the assurance of salvation:

Sex: Sexually immoral (6); Adulterers; Male Prostitutes; Homosexual offenders; Impure (2); Debauched; Obscene

False Gods: Idolators [vile, shameful] (4); Practicers of Witchcraft; Practicers of Magic Arts (2)

Physical Violence: Murderers (3); Thieves; Swindlers

Intemperance: Drunkards (3); Partiers [orgies] (2)

General Sinning: Sinners continually; Evildoers; Disobedient; Unbelievers

Spoken Sins: Liars [deceit, falsehood] (3); Slanderers; Sowers of discord; Anger [fits of rage]; Arguers [dissensions] (2); Members of factions; Foolish talkers; Coarse jokers

Silent Sins: Greedy (2); Envious; Jealous; Selfishly ambitious; Haters; Cowards

Ungodliness: Loveless (3); Unmerciful; Ungenerous to the poor; Unholy.

This list should be enough to convince every one of us that “by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal 2:16). As Paul writes, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal 3:10). If our assurance must be built on perfect performance, not only can we have no assurance, but we can have no hope.

But there *is* hope, and there *can be* assurance. As Paul writes in Rom 7:24–25, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” He also writes, “Without holiness no-one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). We are *called* to holiness, but we *grow into* holiness. Heb 10:14 says, “by one sacrifice he has *made perfect for ever* those who are *being made holy*.” Peter says that *growing* in virtue as we mature as children of God makes *sure* our salvation.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godli-

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

ness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is short-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election *sure*. For if you do these things, *you will never fall*, and you *will* receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. (2 Pet 1:3–11, emphasis added)

Do you find evidence in your life that you are “being made holy”? When God speaks to you through His Word or through His Spirit, do you say “Yes” in your “broken and contrite” heart and give that sin to your heavenly Father so He can take it away and lead you in “the paths of righteousness”? If so, you *can* have assurance of salvation.

Perhaps you have one of these sins in your heart, but you don’t care. Perhaps you love one of these sins too much to give it up. Perhaps you don’t see anything wrong with it. Perhaps you excuse the sin as part of what makes you human. Perhaps you say you were born that way or became that way because of your parents. If this is how you feel, plead with God to break you open, because as you stand perhaps you will be saved—God knows—but you yourself can have no assurance.

These sins serve as evidence. Since they are listed specifically as sins which will keep us from eternal life, if one or more of them is deeply rooted in our hearts, we can be sure that we cannot now have assurance of salvation.

For those on the “path of life,” it helps to see these sins and temptations as road signs, side roads, and off-ramps. “Wrong Way!” “Do Not Enter!” “Caution!” “Sharp Curve Ahead!” “Speed Limit 55!” We can be on the right road and still find these warnings, but if we do find these warnings, we must respond at once and do the right thing about them.

Those who are born again tend to say “Yes!” to God when He guides them, but as they are “being made holy,” they sometimes say “No.” I know from experience that there is a cycle which those who are born again tend to go through if they say “No” to the Savior they say is their Lord:

1. They are experiencing an open-hearted walk with God, hearing His voice and responding.
2. God reveals a sin in their lives.
3. They deny it’s a sin.
4. God stops talking to them and waits.
5. They finally notice the silence and wonder what’s wrong.
6. They remember what God has already revealed and they have denied.
7. They give the sin to God and He takes it out of their lives and gives them victory.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

8. Once again they hear God's voice and feel His peace and walk with Him.

All this time, though, even when they've stalled or seem to have run out of gas, they are on the "path of life." They can get off if they insist, but those who are really on it rarely choose to get off for good, even though they may stall quite often.

We KNOW we WILL Inherit Eternal Life

The Bible doesn't offer only negative evidence of our salvation. It also offers positive evidence. A number of texts give us proofs by which "we know" we are in Christ and so will be saved. Let's look at some of these:

- 1 John 2:3–5a **"We know** that we have come to know him [Christ] **if we obey his commands**. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him."
- 1 John 2:5b–6 **"This is how we know** we are in him: **Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.**"
- 1 John 3:14 **"We know** that we have passed from death to life, **because we love our brothers**. Anyone who does not love remains in death."
- 1 John 3:18–20 **"Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth**. This then is how **we know** that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."
- 1 John 3:21–22 **"Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence** before God and receive from him anything we ask, **because we obey his commands and do what pleases him**.
- 1 John 3:24 **"Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them**. And this is how **we know** that he lives in us: We know it **by the Spirit he gave us**."
- 1 John 4:6 **"We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth** and the spirit of falsehood."
- 1 John 4:13 **"We know** that we live in him and he in us, **because he has given us of his Spirit**."
- 1 John 4:15 **"If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God."**

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

3 John 11 “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. **Anyone who does what is good is from God.** Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.”

Rom. 8:16 “The **Spirit himself testifies** with our spirit that **we are God’s children.**”

Heb. 10:12–15 “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy. **The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this.**”

Just look at how sure the Bible tells us we can be:

We know we have come to know Him.
We know we are in Him.
We know we have passed from death to life.
We know we belong to the truth.
We know He lives in us
We know we live in Him and He in us.
We have confidence before God.
God lives in him and he in God.
We are God’s children.

If we have “passed from death to life,” if “we live in [Christ] and he in us,” if “God lives in [us] and [we] in God,” if “we are God’s children,” how can we be lost? Only by leaving home and never coming back. Only by choosing the “way of death” and refusing God’s pleas for us to return to the “path of righteousness.” Only by hardening our hearts and locking out the Holy Spirit.

We might also draw assurance from the Beatitudes spoken by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. If Jesus says, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matt 5:6), can we take Him at His word? Ellen White writes:

If you have a sense of need in your soul, if you hunger and thirst after righteousness, this is an *evidence* that Christ *has* wrought upon your heart, in order that He may be sought unto to do for you, through the endowment of the Holy Spirit, those things which it is impossible for you to do for yourself.⁴

Many people who claim to be Christians have never really surrendered to God, have not given up their allegiance to the world, are not in Christ, are not really adopted as God’s children, and so can have no assurance of salvation. Their claims to assurance—alas!—are mere presumption. It is true that in this

⁴ *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 19 (emphasis added).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

life earthly lusts and the spirit are always at war in our bodies (see Rom 7:22–23). However, Jesus said, “No-one can serve two masters” (Matt 6:24). John writes, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

A lot of Christians try to hold “dual citizenship.” They want to be passport carrying children of God so they can have eternal life, but they don’t want to give up their passport from the kingdom of this world. They want to fit in here. They don’t want to be seen as foreigners in this world. But God calls for us to be “strangers and pilgrims,” “a peculiar people,” different from the people around us (1 Peter 2:11, 9).

Before we are truly ready to surrender our worldly passports and become God’s adopted children, we often try God’s way for a while—perhaps for several weeks or months—then return to our old lives. We may do this a number of times.

This is like the home visits adoption agencies sometimes arrange for older children who are being adopted. Sometimes there is a “foster home” arrangement for several months before children have to decide if they want to be adopted by a family. Perhaps they stay for a weekend, then return to the orphanage and their friends and old ways. Then, because the family still wants them, they stay for a week or two, getting used to strange ways of doing things, but they aren’t ready to commit themselves, so they return to the orphanage.⁵ Then something terrible happens at the orphanage, and the children decide that being adopted can’t be worse than this, no matter how “different” the family is.

Because a full surrender to God is so difficult for us until we have been thoroughly broken by the suffering of this world and realize we can’t save ourselves, it’s hard to be saved, even though it’s free. (Bear in mind, though, that this difficulty is due entirely to us—not to God, who is eager to save us.)

However, because those who have truly been born again and are “in Christ” are “new creations” (2 Cor 5:17), it’s also hard to be lost once you’re saved. Once you’ve really been transformed by the Holy Spirit and tasted the joys of salvation and grown accustomed to God’s ways of doing things, you may fall short of the mark now and then, your eyes may be drawn by some flashy bauble, but why would you want to go back to something not nearly as joyful?

“[T]hose who have been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God, and the powers of the coming age,” as Paul puts it in Heb 6:4–6, may trip and fall daily, but they do not easily “fall away.”⁶

⁵ 1 John 2:19 comes very close to this analogy: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”

⁶ In this passage Paul is of course stating that if those who experience these things fully “fall away,” it is “impossible” for them to “be brought back to repentance.” We must temper this, however, with the good news that the Prodigal Son left home for a long time, but evidently did not en-

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

Let's review these evidences of salvation on which we can base our assurance. God's Word says we can have assurance of salvation:

- If we obey Christ's commands to love God and one another (2);
- If we love our brothers (2);
- If our hearts (or consciences) don't condemn us;
- If we walk as Jesus did;
- If we listen to John (and others from God, as found in God's Word);
- If we acknowledge Christ as God's Son;
- If we do what is good; and
- If we have the Holy Spirit in us (4).

Actually, we find here a recipe for a holy life: a life of love, goodness, and obedience, guided by the Word and the Spirit. Those who live this life are already experiencing salvation, so of course they can have assurance.

How does "The Spirit himself testif[y] with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom 8:16)? In three ways. First, the Spirit gives us His fruits: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). When we begin finding these have become part of our character—quite uncharacteristically—we are noting the Holy Spirit at work, and if the Holy Spirit is doing this kind of work in us, that is evidence on which we can base assurance. Second, the Spirit gives us spiritual gifts which help us serve others and gives us the zeal to serve others. If we feel this urge to serve, where before we were afraid to serve, that too is evidence which should assure us. Third, the Spirit "testifies with our spirit," comforting us, telling us God loves us, telling us "we are God's children." If we hear the true voice of the Comforter assuring us, we have evidence which should make us feel sure.

Probably the best biblical explanation of our assurance of salvation is in Paul's "adoption" metaphor found in Eph 1:5, Rom 8:13-23; Rom 9:4; and Gal 4:4-5. If we are God's children and stick close to our adopted Heavenly Father, we will be saved.

Imagine a little homeless girl adopted by a wealthy family and taken to live in their mansion. Instead of enjoying herself as she learns the family's ways, instead of learning to walk and talk and dress and think like a member of the family, she is shy as a mouse and always has an anxious look on her face.

"What's wrong?" her new mother asks her.

"I'm afraid I'll do something wrong and you'll send me back to the streets."

"But we've adopted you, dear," her new mother says. "You belong to us, now, and we belong to you. We're never going to send you back. That's not even possible. If you want to leave us and never come back, you can, but we

tirely "fall away," as Jesus has him coming back. It is also the case—appalling though it is to admit it—that the great majority of those calling themselves baptized Christians have never been willing to accept this level of intimacy with their Lord. Thus, though they may not be saved, they cannot be said to have "fallen away" from something they never had.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

can't send you back. We've signed the papers. It's official. You don't get un-adopted when you do something wrong and adopted again when you apologize! That's not how it works! As long as you're willing to stay here and be part of the family, you can, for the rest of your life. If you make a mistake, come tell us about it and we'll forgive you. But don't worry that we're about to send you out on the street again."

Jesus says, "Enter into the joy of thy lord" (Matt 25:21). Have you done that?

Consider the laws God gave His chosen people. When Israelites sinned or became unclean they had to repent and offer a sacrifice or go through a cleansing ceremony. However, when they sinned they didn't stop being God's covenant people until they repented. Instead, they became covenant people who needed to turn back to God.

Likewise, when God's adopted children sin they don't stop being His children until they say they're sorry. When you commit a sin, you are not lost until you repent. The idea of being lost and saved again a hundred times a day is simply not biblical. If we live in a constant attitude of being obediently "under hearing," if we have a "humble and contrite heart" easily touched by God's Spirit, we can live and bear witness to others in full assurance.

This is the Gospel: "Jesus calls you to follow Him, whatever the cost. If you are willing to trust Him enough to turn yourself over to Him completely, he'll transform you and make you like Him. And when He begins doing that, you will have evidence that even though you are still growing in Him and making mistakes now and then, you belong to Him. And you can be sure He will return and give you eternal life unless you insist on turning away from Him and never coming back."⁷

Ellen White touches the heart of assurance so well in her book *Steps to Christ* that she deserves to be quoted at length:

⁷ J. R. Spangler writes, in one of the most important SDA articles on this topic, "One of the greatest hindrances to our evangelistic outreach is, I feel, a lack of assurance on the part of our people. How can we share our faith in Christ unless we *know* that God has accepted us as His son or daughter? And how can we know we are His child unless we base our acceptance solely on Christ's merits alone? This is the foundation on which our love for Christ and motivation for His service are built" ("From the Editor: What Assurance of Salvation Can a Seventh-day Adventist Christian Have?" *Ministry*, February 1979, 20–22). This editorial is continued in June 1979, 22–23. Other useful SDA articles on the topic include the following: Frank B. Holbrook, "Does the Judgment Jeopardize Assurance?" *Adventist Review*, 22 July 1982, 6–8; Israel Leito, "The Assurance of Salvation: Finding Our Anchorage in 'the Sure Word of Prophecy,'" *Adventist Review*, 30 October 1997, 30–31; Robert S. Folkenberg, "In Full Assurance," *Adventist Review*, 30 October 1997, 56; Robert S. Folkenberg, "Called to Assurance—In Christ," *Adventist Review*, 28 October 1993, 6–9; Robert S. Folkenberg, "Assurance in Christ," *Adventist Review*, 7 May 1992, 13; A. C. McClure, "Growing Up Worried: How to Have Assurance in the End-Time," *Adventist Review*, [n.d.] October 1996, 9–10; David N. Marshall, "Watch Out for 'Grace-Busters'!" *Adventist Review*, 8 October 1992, 8–9; Sandy Eickmann, "To Be Right With God," *Adventist Review*, 29 October 1988, 57–59.

CHRISTIAN: BLESSED ASSURANCE? YES!

While the work of the Spirit is silent and imperceptible, its effects are manifest. If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact. While we cannot do anything to change our hearts or to bring ourselves into harmony with God; while we must not trust at all to ourselves or our good works, our lives will reveal whether the grace of God is dwelling within us. A change will be seen in the character, the habits, the pursuits. The contrast will be clear and decided between what they have been and what they are. The character is revealed, not by occasional good deeds and occasional misdeeds, but by the tendency of the habitual words and acts.

It is true that there may be an outward correctness of deportment without the renewing power of Christ. The love of influence and the desire for the esteem of others may produce a well-ordered life. Self-respect may lead us to avoid the appearance of evil. A selfish heart may perform generous actions. By what means, then, shall we determine whose side we are on?

Who has the heart? With whom are our thoughts? Of whom do we love to converse? Who has our warmest affections and our best energies? If we are Christ's, our thoughts are with Him, and our sweetest thoughts are of Him. We long to bear His image, breathe His spirit, do His will, and please Him in all things.

Those who become new creatures in Christ Jesus will bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." Galatians 5:22, 23. They will no longer fashion themselves according to the former lusts, but by the faith of the Son of God they will follow in His steps, reflect His character, and purify themselves even as He is pure. The things they once hated they now love, and the things they once loved they hate. The proud and self-assertive become meek and lowly in heart. The vain and supercilious become serious and unobtrusive. The drunken become sober, and the profligate pure. The vain customs and fashions of the world are laid aside. . . . There is no evidence of genuine repentance unless it works reformation.⁸

I praise God for the assurance of salvation which I have and which you can have, too, if you're willing to be adopted and accept God's name as your own! I've known what it is to not be sure, and I know many people who aren't sure. Many of them, of course, shouldn't be sure and can't be sure. But what of those who really could, if only they were willing to trust in Jesus and take Him at His word? Are you in this number?

The assurance of salvation is like putting on a soft fleece sweater on a chilly morning. It's comforting. It feels delicious. I roll my shoulders and twist my neck back and forth and bask in the warmth of it. It's a warmth that relaxes me and frees me to work efficiently instead of shivering with cold.

As Paul writes, "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Tim 1:7). I have a friend who is a lawyer. For

⁸ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, [1892; rev. 1896], n.d.), 57–59 [emphasis added].

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the first few years after he joined a major law firm he worked long hours in constant terror that if he didn't he would be fired. Now he is a partner in the firm. He still works long hours, but he is no longer afraid. Now he is confident of his position in the firm, and because of that confidence he is a more effective worker, and at last he can enjoy his work.

God's Word offers us a number of evidences by which we may be sure of our salvation. God offers us a confidence which allows us to serve Him with joy and peace instead of in constant fear. This assurance leads to a quiet glow of God's presence which leads the heart to gratitude and praise. As Fanny Crosby writes, "O, what a foretaste of glory divine."

God's Word tells us we can be confident of His love. We can be confident of His care. We can be confident of God's mercy. We can be confident He has died for us. If we have these evidences in our lives, we can be confident that we are God's children, that we belong to Him, that He belongs to us, that we are in Him, that He is in us. We can be confident He will never forsake us, even though we can forsake Him.

This is the assurance God offers us. If we are walking with God and our hearts do not condemn us, if the Holy Spirit is not being shut out but obeyed, we can be confident that if we do not turn away, we *will* be saved. We can be confident that even if we should die suddenly, Satan cannot claim us, because we live in an attitude of submission to God. We are His children, His holy ones.⁹

There is a false assurance which is really presumption.¹⁰ But this is the true assurance of salvation.¹¹ This assurance is "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see," as Paul writes in Heb. 11:1, defining faith. Assurance and certainty are synonyms. That means assurance is an important part of real faith, the kind of faith that makes you willing to go where God asks you to go and do what God asks you to do, even when it doesn't make any sense.

Do you know this assurance? If you don't, why not? Wouldn't you like to?

⁹ Ellen White writes, in *Christ's Object Lessons* (419–420), "The religion of Christ means more than the forgiveness of sin; it means taking away our sins, and filling the vacuum with the graces of the Holy Spirit. It means divine illumination, rejoicing in God. It means a heart emptied of self, and blessed with the abiding presence of Christ. When Christ reigns in the soul, there is purity, freedom from sin. The glory, the fullness, the completeness of the gospel plan is fulfilled in the life. The acceptance of the Saviour brings a glow of perfect peace, perfect love, perfect assurance. The beauty and fragrance of the character of Christ revealed in the life testifies that God has indeed sent His Son into the world to be its Saviour."

¹⁰ "No repentance is genuine that does not work reformation. The righteousness of Christ is not a cloak to cover unconfessed and unforsaken sin; it is a principle of life that transforms the character and controls the conduct. Holiness is wholeness for God; it is the entire surrender of heart and life to the indwelling of the principles of heaven." Ellen White, *Desire of Ages* (555–556).

¹¹ "In the new birth the heart is brought into harmony with God, as it is brought into accord with His law. When this mighty change has taken place in the sinner, he has passed from death unto life, from sin unto holiness, from transgression and rebellion to obedience and loyalty." Ellen White, *The Great Controversy* (468).