

January 4, 2015

ASSURANCE

Romans 8:14-17

“When we cry, ‘Abba! Father’ it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God!” (Romans 8:15-16)

The gift of Assurance which Christians are able to receive is a very cherished part of the process of salvation. Some might never experience it, and others might experience it over and over again. I have! The experience of Assurance is what John Wesley described when he felt his “heart strangely warmed.” His father had called it “the inward witness.” It is *“the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit.”*

Wesley described his moment of Assurance in his Journal on May 24th, 1738. “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before 9:00, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation. And an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death...”

Before Wesley received this spiritual blessing, he had sought it. In January of 1738, he had written: “I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he has it.” The problem that confronted Wesley at this stage of his life was not whether or not he was a Christian, for he claimed that fact quite often before 1738. The question at hand for him was, “How do I *know* I am a Christian?” His quest was for certainty.

In 1725, in a letter to his mother, John Wesley wrote, “That we can never be so certain of this pardon of our sins as to be assured that they will never rise up against us, I firmly believe.... But I am persuaded we may know if we are now in a state of salvation, since this is expressly promised in Scripture...” Wesley did insist that assurance related not only to final salvation, but to present salvation from which it is possible to fall. Assurance is “not necessarily perpetual, neither irreversible.!”

There is a danger in the belief “once saved, always saved.” Even after his wonderful experience of Assurance, in the paragraph that follows the description of his heart-warming experience, he wrote in his Journal: “It was not long before the enemy suggested, ‘This cannot be faith; for where is the joy?’ Then I was taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation, but to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsel of His own will.”

Wesley knew that all too often Assurance has been made a matter of emotional feeling. To Wesley, it is a divine conviction which God works in the spirit. It can be a very emotional moment, but it is not just a matter of *feeling*.

So what was Wesley sure of?

First, he was sure of the moment. At 8:45, on May 24th, 1738, John Wesley knew that Jesus Christ was his Savior. For that moment, I believe, he was absolutely sure of his own salvation. But that kind of Assurance never truly lasts, though the memory of that moment may never fade. This brings us

to a second reality of which he was sure: he was made sure of Jesus Christ! And thirdly, he was sure that He was *"a child of God."* (Romans 8:16) The Holy Spirit was bearing witness with his spirit that this was, without a doubt, true.

It may be wrong to be too sure of ourselves. When we are, we become proud. The Apostle Paul was very sure of himself until he encountered Jesus Christ in his sudden conversion on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9) (Note something relevant, here: The experience of Conversion, or, Justification, is not the same as the experience of Assurance. Though the grace of God can bring both almost simultaneously, they are different and distinct from one another.)

Paul never became so sure of himself that he thought he had it made, as far as salvation was concerned. Just hear him say: *"I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."* (Romans 7:18) He counted all his gains as loss that he *"might gain Christ and be found in Him."* (Philippians 3:8-9) He wanted a righteousness based on faith that if possible he might attain the resurrection of the dead. But then he went on to say, *"not that I have already attained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own."* (Philippians 3:13)

Paul was sure of Jesus Christ.... that He is the Way, and that Paul was on the right path; but he was never too sure of his own course, until, I believe, he was able to say in his Second Letter to Timothy, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness."* (4:7-8) Paul was older, and, about to be executed for his faith. By then he felt absolutely assured of his salvation.

I do believe we can be sure of Jesus Christ, of what His grace can do for us, of how He has died for our sins and risen to give us new life. But as long as we are not yet completely sanctified, we are bound by our sinful human nature. The bad news is that *"None of us is righteous, no not one. All... are under the power of sin."* (Romans 3:10)

The good news is that God yet offers us Sanctifying Grace. Remember how Wesley said, *"We do not sin because we have not grace, but because we do not use the grace we have!"*