

I hear no sound except the amplified agony of my own anxious soul. The contrast between my internal condition and external environment could not be more pronounced: I am drenched in sweat, my heart pounding in terrifying angst. My bedroom is dark, still and cold. I lay in bed restless, apprehensive and fearful.

A deep darkness envelops me, and despair echoes in the cavernous solitude of my soul. I hear nothing but subtle serpentine whispers: Am I really a Christian? Do I really love and trust Christ? Does He really love me?

A handful of nights have found me in this state. In those moments I am certain that God loves sinners. I am certain that Christ died to save sinners. I am certain that all that is necessary for sinners is to trust the gospel. I am certain that I am a sinner. I acknowledge all the essential elements, yet my angst is not assuaged. Those gospel facts seem distant, impersonal and external. He loves sinners, but does He love me?

Have you ever been haunted by this “dark night of the soul?” How shall we find healing and hope? Before talking about healing, it might be helpful to diagnose the problem. In doing that, we need to ask three questions: Why do people doubt? How can we diagnose the roots of doubt? How are we to respond to doubt?

## Roots of Doubt

There are a number of reasons why people doubt their salvation. Though more could certainly be offered, we will look at three in particular.

### 1. Lack of salvation

This is obvious, but it needs to be addressed. You might doubt your salvation because you are not really saved. Matthew 7:21-23 speaks of those who are deceived into believing they are saved and will be surprised at the final judgment. This type of doubt is the grace of God, His kindness meant to lead you to repentance, a buzzing alarm intended to awaken you from spiritual sleep.

### 2. Forgetfulness

You might doubt your salvation because you are prone to forget the gospel. This is particularly true of those who

really struggle to receive God’s love. You believe that you have to earn it yet know that you cannot measure up. In the midst of your poor performance, doubt seeps in. You have forgotten that God loves you, not because of who you are or what you have done, but because He is loving. You have forgotten that you are saved by grace alone.

### 3. Secret sin

There is biblical precedent for diminished confidence in the presence of hidden and habitual sin (1 John 3:19-22, Psalm 32:1-5). In some sense, it seems that God has hardwired this reality into us to force us toward humble confession and gospel-centered community. In fact, if you feel no great conviction in the presence of secret cycles of sin, your sickness is probably more serious than you believe.

For those wanting more explanation of these points, listen to Matt Chandler’s sermon, *Dealing with Doubt*, from August 2011.

## Diagnosing Doubt

It does little good to know the general roots of doubt unless you are prepared to figure out which is true of you. Imagine going to the doctor and complaining of certain symptoms. The causes of these symptoms can differ dramatically from a simple temporary condition, to a chronic but treatable disease, to a terminal diagnosis. How foolish would it be to just content yourself with knowing what it could be without seeking to know what it actually is? In the same way, those wrestling with the assurance of salvation have a sickness that needs to be diagnosed, and knowing potential roots is insufficient. We must go about the work of self-examination.

*Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD!*

### Lamentations 3:40

*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!*

### 2 Corinthians 13:5

Perhaps you agree that self-examination is good and necessary but question whether it is possible given the depths of the depravity of the human heart. After all, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand

it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). In such a case, consider the words of Proverbs 20:5: "The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out." Though the heart is deceitful, diseased and deep, it can be drawn out. It is possible to examine ourselves truly though not exhaustively. Seek the help of the author of all wisdom and understanding (Proverbs 2:1-5; James 1:5) and begin the painful yet profitable work of self-examination, all the while dependent upon the illumination of the Holy Spirit (Psalm 139:23-24).

Any patient needs the help of a qualified physician, and the Scriptures are full of skilled doctors competent to diagnose our doubts and despair. The apostle John's first epistle is one helpful instrument to assess our spiritual sicknesses. Having written his gospel "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31), John takes up the pen and writes an epistle "to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). He writes the gospel so that the church might believe, and he writes the epistle so that they may know that they have believed. Do you desire to know that you believe? Listen to the words of the apostle.

The concept of confidence and assurance permeates John's short letter. Seven times he writes, "by this we know that" and follows it up with such phrases as: "We have come to know him." "We are in him." "We are of the truth." "He abides in us." "We abide in Him." (1 John 2:3, 2:5, 3:19, 3:24, 4:13, 5:2). Additionally, he writes that we might not be deceived (2:26, 3:7), that we would have confidence (2:28, 4:17, 5:15), that our hearts would be reassured (3:19), and that fears would be cast out by love (4:18).

John's pastoral hope is that his beloved would not be deceived and fearful but would instead have confidence and assurance in light of the manifestation of God's love in Christ. So, how does he help us diagnose our doubts? Consider a few examples:

*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

#### **1 John 2:3-6**

*But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence*

*before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.*

#### **1 John 3:17-24**

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*

#### **1 John 4:7-13**

Throughout the epistle, the apostle frequently commends at least three "tests": one doctrinal, one moral and one social. John asks three questions to help navigate through the fog of uncertainty. Do I believe the truth? Do I have an ongoing commitment to the work of sanctification? Do I live a life of sacrificial love for others? In other words, what is my response to God's truth, my sin and other people?

According to John, true belief manifests itself not merely theologically but also morally and socially. Those who trust and love God, thus, love others and hate sin. Failure to love others and pursue holiness is rooted in a failure to truly believe the gospel.

Do you truly believe God's Word? Do you diligently pursue holiness? Do you sacrificially love others?

## **Responding to Doubt**

If you fail any of these tests, something is wrong. It does not necessarily indicate that you are not a Christian, but it does indicate a serious disorder which must be treated. You can respond to this problem in two ways, but only one is appropriate. You can give in to the doubts and fears or use them to drive you to the gospel. Even now, grace is offered to you so that you might repent and believe the gospel. Like all the warnings in Scripture, the words of 1 John were written so that we might be awakened from our slumber and take hold of the grace that is offered in Christ.

Whether you are unsaved or temporarily trapped in cycles of forgetfulness or sin, the cure is Christ. He is our hope, help,

healer, treasure, pleasure, inheritance, reward, joy and greatest good. He is the ultimate balm to soothe our unsettled souls. He is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses and is filled with compassion, grace, love, kindness and patience. Take the whispers of doubt and turn them against the enemy by using them as fuel to fly to Christ.

While bound in the Castle Doubt by the Giant Despair in Bunyan's classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the protagonist suddenly realizes he has a key which sets him free. The key is the promise of God. If you are ensnared in doubt and despair, turn to the same promises. Turn to the promise of a God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin and showing steadfast love and faithfulness to His beloved. Trust in the promise of the only-begotten Son crucified and raised that we might walk in newness of life and fullness of joy. Take hold of the promises of God, anchor yourself to them and find refuge from the stormy and dark night of the soul. Hope is harbored not in who you are and what you have done, but in who He is and what He has done.

## Practical Tips for Pursuing Assurance

1. "Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely" (Robert Murray McCheyne). In commending self-examination, we must beware the danger of inordinate introspection. Doubt functions by focusing our thoughts entirely on ourselves, whereas our attention should be directed to Christ. Though you momentarily take your eyes off the road to check your speedometer, you don't consistently stare at it lest you crash. In the same way, you have to occasionally and temporarily engage in self-examination, but beware the perilous paralysis of excessive analysis. We are ultimately changed by looking to Christ, not ourselves (2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2).
2. Continue in the spiritual disciplines. Read the Bible, meditate on God's promises, pray, fast, serve others, sing and engage in corporate worship. You should not expect God to grant you assurance when you are neglecting the very means of grace which He has provided for the edification and encouragement of His children (2 Peter 1:3-11).
3. Make every effort to mortify sin. Though sin does not condemn (Romans 8:1) the child of God, the Scriptures do suggest that sin will rob us of confidence (1 John 3:19-22). As John Owen said, "Be killing sin or sin will be killing you" (see Romans 8:13).
4. Talk to others about your struggles. Find a faithful friend who will listen and encourage you toward Christ. Talk to a minister or pastor to drag your doubt into the light. Despair festers in dark places (Psalm 32:1-5).
5. If your doubts are based upon some intellectual obstacle, seek help from a knowledgeable friend or pastor. There are good answers out there. Don't allow your questions to snowball into an avalanche of doubt.
6. Posture yourself to hear from God. This might mean abstaining from media for a season, taking a trip to get away from the noise of life, getting up before the rest of the family, etc. Do this not as a means to manipulate God into speaking to you but in humble recognition that our lives are often too cluttered to listen. It is the Spirit who will ultimately comfort and assure you (1 John 3:24, 4:13; Romans 8:16), so position yourself to take notice of Him.
7. Persevere. In some sense, your experience of the presence of Christ in this life will always be lacking because the full riches of His redemption are reserved for the resurrection and restoration of all things. Cling to His promises as you walk through this present wilderness. Eventually the blazing sun will melt away the dawn's dense fog.

*Why are you cast down, o my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God.*

**Psalm 42:11**

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## Recommended Resources

### Assurance of Salvation

- **Helping People Have Assurance of Salvation**  
by John Piper
- **The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance** by Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday

### Depression and Despair

- **Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures**  
by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones
- **When the Darkness will not Lift** by John Piper

### Depression and Despair

- **Can a Christian Lose Salvation?**
- **An Unforgivable Sin**
- **Suicide**