

THE LARGER AND SHORTER CATECHISMS.

WHAT MAN OUGHT TO BELIEVE CONCERNING GOD

QUESTION # 81.

(Larger Catechism)

Q #81. *Are all true believers at all times assured of their present being in the estate of grace, and that they shall be saved?*

A. Assurance of grace and salvation not being of the essence of faith,¹ true believers may wait long before they obtain;² and, after the enjoyment thereof, may have it weakened and intermitted, through manifold distempers, sins, temptations, and desertions;³ yet they are never left without such a presence and support of the Spirit of God as keeps them from sinking into utter despair.⁴

Question 1—*Is assurance of the essence of faith?*

Answer—That assurance of grace and salvation is not of the essence of faith, Eph. 1:13. This assurance spoken of here is that sensible assurance which results from a conversation that corresponds to the profession we have made, 1 John 2:3. It differs from that assurance which is a necessary ingredient of faith, which we call the *assurance of faith*, Heb. 10:22. This assurance of faith is a peculiar privilege of the church, 2 Cor. 5:1; so much, that without this assurance it is hard to conceive of any genuine faith in those who lack it, 2 Cor. 13:5.

Nevertheless, there is that *assurance of sense* which is a privilege in the church unto which not all attain, 1 John 5:13. Thus, while the apostle Peter notes that the church had a certain kind of assurance consequent upon their faith, 1 Pet. 1:8; yet elsewhere, he writes exhorting some who, at the time of his writing, did not have it, 2 Pet. 1:10. Thus, the assurance of grace and salvation, which is in view here, is not to be accounted of the essence of saving faith, Song 8:5; rather this assurance is the fruit of faith working in believers, Col. 1:4-6.

Question 2—*Is this assurance soon attained?*

Answer—In this sensible assurance of grace and salvation, the sovereignty of God discovers itself, as much as it does when he makes the ordinances effectual to salvation in giving converting grace to those who attend upon them, Acts 13:48. Some are called early to be made partakers of the salvation which is in Christ, 2 Tim. 3:15; others later, Acts 16:30, 31. The same may be said with respect to God giving assurance, Rom. 5:3-5. Some are favored with this privilege soon after or when they first believe, 2 Tim. 1:12; others are like those spoken of by the apostle who remain in the bondage of fear throughout their whole lives, Heb. 2:15. Many have often inquired into the state of their souls, and have been unable to discern any marks or evidences of grace in themselves, whose conversation is such that others cannot but conclude them to be true believers, Isa. 50:10. Their spirits are depressed, Ps. 88:1-3; doubts and fears prevail, and tend to make their lives very uncomfortable, Ps. 88:13-15; but they cannot immediately find it, Ps. 88:6, 7, 9, 10.

¹ Eph. 1:13.

² Isa. 50:10; Ps. 88:1-3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 13-15.

³ Ps. 77:1-12; Cant. 5:2, 3, 6; Ps. 51:8, 12; Ps. 31:22; 22:1.

⁴ 1 John 3:9; Job 13:15; Ps. 73:15, 23; Isa. 54:7-10.

Question 3—*May this assurance be weakened and even intermitted?*

Answer—Those who once attain to this assurance may find that it is either weakened or intermitted thereby losing the comfortable sense of grace and salvation, Ps. 22:1. The joy of faith may be suspended, when the acts and habits of faith remain firm and unshaken, Ps. 31:22. The particular reasons, which the providence of God points out to us, for the lack of assurance may be reduced to four heads:

First, the weakening of the sensible assurance of grace and salvation may be occasioned by the manifold distempers, or bodily diseases, which afflict believers, Job 13:4. The soul and body are so closely joined to and dependent upon each other, that the one can hardly suffer without the other, so that bodily distempers affect the mind, excite and give disturbance to the passions, and adds to the uneasiness which attends these distempers, Rom. 7:24.

Second, this loss of sensible assurance is also due to sin whereby all the troubles of life are brought upon us, including the doubts and fears arising from the want of a comfortable sense of or interest in the love of God, Ps. 51:8, 12. It often pleases God, in the method of his providence, thus to deal with his people, that he may humble them from presumptuous sins, Ps. 19:13; more especially those committed against light and conviction of conscience, that he may bring to remembrance their sins of omission, or neglect to exercise those graces, in which life consists, that they may feel the effect of their stupidity, indifference and carnal security, Ps. 85:6-8.

Third, this assurance is often weakened or intermitted through manifold temptations, for Satan is very active in this matter, and shows enmity against the interest of Christ in the souls of his people, as much as lies in his power, Job 1:9-12. Though it is impossible for him to ruin the soul, by rooting out the grace which is implanted in it, John 10:28; yet he tries to disturb its peace, and weaken its assurance, and, if not prevented, to hurry it into despair, 1 Pet. 5:8; Heb. 2:14, 15. Thus, if we are not favored with immediate answers to prayer, and sensible communion with God in the performance of that duty, he tempts us to infer that we shall never obtain the blessing we are pressing after, so that they we lay aside this duty, 2 Kings 6:33.

Fourth, the lack of assurance experienced by the believer is, for the most part, attended with, and arises from, divine desertion, Song 5:2, 3, 6. Not that God will cast off his people, whom he has foreknown, but that he will withdraw his comforting presence, and withhold the witness of his Spirit to work grace in the soul, Ps. 77:1-12. From this arises those doubts and fears which attend the lack of assurance; however, God still speaks to them, Isa. 54:7.

Question 4—*What is the state of believers who lack assurance?*

Answer—Believers are not left without such a presence and support of the Spirit of God as keeps them from sinking into utter despair, 1 John 3:9. Though a believer may have despairing apprehensions concerning his state, and thought the guilt of sin may lie upon him like a great weight so as to depress his spirits; yet he shall not sink into endless misery, Ps. 73:15, 23. Nor are they so far left as not to desire grace, though they conclude themselves destitute of it, Ps. 51:11. Furthermore, a believer, when in a despairing way, is notwithstanding enabled, by a direct act of faith, to give himself up to Christ, though he cannot see his interest in him, Job 13:15. Though they are comfortless and hopeless, yet the lovingkindness of God in his dealings with his people will not lay on them more than they can bear, so that they will not be utterly abandoned in their despair, Isa. 54:7-10.