

WCF – Of Assurance Of Grace And Salvation -
Chp 18 pt 3

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The Westminster Confession
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We turn in our Westminster Confession of Faith to chapter 18 and paragraph 3.

This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

So what this paragraph is teaching us is that assurance is not essential but obtainable and desirable. Assurance not essential but obtainable and desirable.

First of all, it is not essential. It says, "This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it." That is, it is not essential to being in Christ. There are true believers who do lack assurance of salvation. They are safe but they lack the comfort of knowing that they are safe, or of being assured of it. 1 John 5:13, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God." So here there is a distinction between believing and knowing that you have eternal life, and the apostle says that he's written these things, that one reason he's written them is that they may be assured, that they may be strengthened and assured of eternal life in Christ.

Isaiah 50:10, "Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God. Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves

about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow." So verse 10 speaks of the child of light walking in darkness, and verse 11, the child of darkness walking in a light of his own manufacturing but verse 10 is relevant to our point at the moment, that the child of light can walk in darkness, the one who fears the Lord, who obeys the voice of his servant, and yet walks in darkness and has no light, let him trust in the name of the Lord.

Mark 9 and verse 24, we often turn to this verse on this subject, "And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." That is, that faith was weak and assailed with many doubts.

And the confession gives us a proof text, Psalm 88. We will not read the whole of it, but Psalm 88. "O LORD God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee: Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry; For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave." This Psalm is probably the most mournful of all the Psalms, or at least the most mournful with little relief; some of the other Psalms are relieved at the end, the joy of the Psalms, but this is almost unrelieved mourning and sorrow. But it's in the Psalms for a reason. It is in the Psalter which we are meant to sing for a reason, and surely one of those reasons is to show the struggling, doubting believer that their experience is not unique or outside the realm of the experience of the people of God. God has given us in the Psalms a book of Psalms inspired by the Spirit that cover every experience of the children of God.

Psalm 77 and verse 1 to 12, again we will not read all of it, but, "I cried unto God with my voice, even unto God with my voice; and he gave ear unto me. In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord: my sore ran in the night, and ceased not: my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered God, and was troubled: I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed. Selah. Thou holdest mine eyes waking: I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times. I call to remembrance my song in the night: I commune with mine own heart: and my spirit made diligent search. Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? Selah."

So the people of God sometimes do lack assurance and it is not of the essence of saving faith to be fully assured of salvation. Of course, all those who are in Christ are safe in Christ. There is no gray area as far as being in Christ or out of Christ, but there can be doubts and fears as to which category we are in. But then, secondly, assurance is obtainable. Assurance is obtainable. So, it goes on, "yet, being enabled by the Spirit of God to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto." So the Spirit can enable us to know what has been given to us of God. The spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus, regeneration and faith and justification and adoption, these are blessings bestowed upon us by God and the same Spirit of God can show us that they have been bestowed upon us.

1 Corinthians 2 and verse 12, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God."

1 John 4 and verse 13, "Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit."

Hebrews 6:11 and 12, "And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

This is assuring us that by the use of ordinary means, the right use of ordinary means, we can have assurance of salvation without extraordinary revelation. We do not need some revelation directly from God to assure us that we are the children of God, but by the right use of ordinary means, of reading the complete inscripturated Word of God and by the blessing of the Spirit through prayer and by the use of the public means of grace, the reading of the Word, the preaching of the Word, the singing of the Psalms, prayer and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, we can, by the use of these ordinary means, come to an assurance of salvation in Christ.

Ephesians 3. Ephesians 3:17-19, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God." So it is quite clear there that a Christian, by the Spirit, can know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that he can be assured of that love and of that love to him in particular.

Thirdly, desirable. Assurance of salvation is not essential but obtainable and desirable. The Confession of Faith goes on to say, "And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness." So it is desirable and it is to be sought. The doubting Christian is not to settle into a state of uncertainty with complacency.

It is to be sought, 2 Peter 1:10, 2 Peter 1 and verse 10, "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall." Make your calling and election sure, not that they can bring about their calling and election, it doesn't mean make sure in that sense, but make sure that is ascertained with certainty the reality of that calling and election. It's talking about the knowledge, the assurance of calling and election. Now, you'll notice the order and it's the reverse of the decree of God. God elects in eternity and effectually calls in time, whereas we, in order to be assured of these things, must work in reverse. We must go back from downstream to upstream, as it were. We need to know that we are called, that is, that we've been brought to faith in Christ by the power of the Spirit of God working in us in order to know that we are elect. There is no mystical knowledge of election aside from

knowing that we are called effectually and have been brought to rest and rely upon Jesus Christ. In other words, we can't in some way know that we are one of God's elect, and then be brought to believe on Christ. God does not reveal the names of the elect, not even to the elect themselves in advance, his sovereign purpose of election comes to fruition by our effectual calling. And how do we know that we are effectually called? Well, by asking ourselves, do we indeed trust and rely upon Jesus Christ to save us? If we do, then the very willingness to depend upon Christ is the fruit of effectual calling and that effectual calling is the result of eternal election by God.

So this assurance is to be sought, and to be sought in the right way, not by special revelation outside of scripture to the effect of telling us that we're a child of God, and much less by some method of seeking to know our election in some direct way from God but by seeking, according to the scriptures to determine whether we trust Christ alone for salvation because we have been effectually called in time, having been chosen in Christ in eternity. Secondly, a second element that is desirable is joy in God. We can only really have joy in God if we have assurance of salvation, and joy in God is spoken of in the scriptures as a norm for the Christian.

Romans 5:1 and 2, "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." And verse 5, "And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." There the work of the Spirit in assuring us of the love of God and the joy which comes with that is spoken of.

Then in Romans 14, and verse 17, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." So Christian joy is surely something desirable, something that we have only if we have assurance of salvation.

Romans 15 and verse 13, "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost." So God can give us such hope, such confidence in Christ and of our title to eternal glory that we have joy and peace in believing.

Ephesians 1:3 and 4, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." The apostle, by the Spirit, blesses God and exhorts us to think highly of God on account of the blessings bestowed, and he begins in verse 4 with the blessings bestowed in Christ Jesus with eternal election and with the end result that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. But clearly the apostle had a joy and a thankfulness which was the result of being assured of the grace of God toward him.

Psalms 4 and verse 6 and 7, "There be many that say, Who will shew us any good? LORD, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us. Thou hast put gladness in my heart,

more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased." So the Lord can put gladness into the hearts of his people through assurance of his love.

Psalm 119:32, "I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart." And then this is moving more explicitly onto the thought of joyful obedience. Joyful obedience, the assurance of God's salvation, gives us a joy in obeying the Lord in thankfulness for his mercy bestowed and so our heart is enlarged, it is opened up, as it were, with the joy of the Lord, and we run the way of his precepts with eagerness.

And that brings us to joyful obedience, the third point, or sub-point, under this desirable heading. The proper fruit of obedience, of assurance, is joyful obedience. You see that the Confession says, "and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance: so far is it from inclining men to looseness." 1 John 2 and verse 1 and 2, "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." And these verses tell us that the aim of the apostle's writing is that they sin not, but if we sin, we have an advocate with the Father.

Romans 6:1 and 2, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" The objection is that if the gospel is true and we are justified by faith, then can't we say, well, let's live as we like, let's sin that grace may abound? But the answer is that those who are born of the Spirit will say no such thing. It's not a logical answer in the sense that it is logical, but it's practical. It's not a theoretical answer, this is why this objection isn't correct, it's a reality answer that those who are born of the Spirit will not say this and those who are believers have been born of the Spirit and the sin-dominated man has been crucified with Christ and he's been raised, the new man raised to newness of life. So, it's not illogical, we don't mean that, but it's an answer based on the practical reality, the impossibility that someone who is born of the Spirit and a believer in Christ will want to live just as they always have been.

Titus 2:11 and 12, "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world." Verse 14, "Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." So the effect of assurance of our part, our lot in the promised salvation, is good works, that we love God and we're thankful to God and we desire to glorify God.

2 Corinthians 7 and verse 1, "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." Having these promises, that is, the effect of the promises and believing them is perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Romans 8:1 and 2, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in

Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." This is simply telling us that those who are justified, the work of sanctification has begun in them because Christ bearing the guilt of sin removes the necessity of the penalty, which includes being given over to all corruption and to the bondage of sin. Those who are justified are being sanctified and the knowledge of our justification is an incentive not to looseness, but to godliness.

1 John 3 and verse 2 and 3, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." In other words, the hope, the expectation of being perfectly holy with Christ in the world to come has the effect of desiring or the accompaniment of desiring to be holy, to purify ourselves even while we are in this world. We can't anticipate the holiness of heaven with joy without seeking holiness in this present life.

Psalm 130:4, "there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared." The effect of forgiveness is loving reverence for God.

1 John 1:6 and 7, "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." So, again, the effect of walking in the light and in the light to the extent of assuring, of being assured of salvation, is that we walk in holiness.

So we are to seek this assurance by the ordinary use of means, public and private, that the Lord will bless, so bless his truth to us, that our faith will overcome all temperamental pessimism, all sense of guilt, to see the sufficiency of Christ as to know that we are safe in him, and that thus the joy of the Lord might be our strength in pursuing holiness in the fear of God.