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When Christians want to be sure

The Bible says that, when sinners trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, their sins are forgiven, they are made alive spiritually and they have peace with God. This sounds wonderful, and, as far as I know, I have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ—but how can I be sure that these things have happened to me? This is a question that is frequently asked by new Christians and it is very important.

I cannot know the joy of sins forgiven unless I am sure that they *are* forgiven. I cannot look forward to heaven unless I am sure that I will be there one day. So what happens when we want to be sure?

We trust in the grace of God, not in works

One reason why some Christians are unsure is because they are unclear about the way of salvation. They understand enough to be saved, but they do not understand enough to be sure. What is needed is a better understanding of the grace of God. Grace is the free, unmerited favour of God. It means

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that God gives us salvation as a free gift even though we have not done anything to deserve it. The Bible says, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast' (Ephesians 2:8–9).

We are saved by grace through faith. Faith is the empty hand that takes the free gift. We are saved simply and solely through trusting in what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us at Calvary's cross. It is 'not of works, lest anyone should boast'. If people got into heaven because they had done this or that, they would have something to boast about, but God will not tolerate such boasting (see Romans 4:2). When we get to heaven, we will sing words like these:

Unto Him who hath loved us and washed us from sin,
Unto Him be the glory for ever! Amen.¹

Some Christians are unsure either because they have not been clearly taught that salvation is by grace through faith, or because they are not bold enough to believe that it can be that simple. Christian, it can be, and it is! The Bible says so (e.g. Luke 7:50; John 3:16; Acts 15:11; Romans 1:16; Ephesians 2:8–9). If you want to be sure, trust in the grace of God, not in works.

We trust in the promise of God, not in feelings

Another reason why Christians are unsure is because their feelings are not what they expect them to be. In the book

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Bread For Each Day, Dr M. R. De Haan tells the story of a poor Scotswoman in Glasgow who had attended some evangelistic meetings. She resolved that she would rest her salvation on the words of the Lord Jesus as found in John 5:24. Dr De Haan says that

Major Whittle, the evangelist, wrote the words on a card, and gave it to her. She became very happy, so much so, her little boy was attracted by the joy of his mother, and asked what had happened. She told him the best way she could; the consequence was that he too was led to trust in the Saviour. But the next morning she felt very different. Despondency and doubt had taken the place of peace and joy. Her son noticed it at once, and asked her what was the matter. She replied: 'I thought I was saved, but my feelings are all gone.' 'But', said the little fellow, 'Mother, has the verse changed?' Quick as a flash he got the little card and read it, and looking up radiantly, replied: 'Why no, Mother; it's just the same.' And then he turned to the Bible, and read it there with great joy, shouting almost as he cried: 'It's all here, Mother, the verse is just the same!'²

The verse that Major Whittle wrote on the card says this: 'Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into [condemnation], but has passed from death into life'

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(John 5:24). These words of the Lord Jesus are very emphatic. Most assuredly, they are true. Let all doubts about this be put far from us. The Lord Jesus says that whoever ‘hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life’. Have you heard the message of salvation, and have you believed and trusted in God as the One who sent his Son to be your Saviour? If so, the Lord Jesus says that everlasting life is yours and that there is no condemnation to fear on the Day of Judgement. Already you have ‘passed from death into life’. You can be sure because he says so. The Lord says it, and that settles it!

When we want to be sure, we trust in the promise of God, not in feelings. We are sure of salvation because of what God says in his Word. ‘God is not a man, that He should lie’ (Numbers 23:19). Nothing will make you happier than trusting in the promise of God in his Word.

We show our faith to others by works

Good works do not contribute to our salvation, but they are still important. God wants us to do them (Ephesians 2:10). Genuine Christians want to do them, too. We rejoice that we have been saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are grateful to God for sending him to be our Saviour, and we work ‘through love’ (Galatians 5:6).

The importance of works is emphasized by the epistle of James. This was probably one of the first New Testament books to be written. James was one of the leaders of the

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Jerusalem church (see Galatians 2:9) and he was moved by the Holy Spirit to write what he wrote. James says that genuine Christians show their faith to others by works (James 2:20).

James speaks out against those who say they believe in God and in the Lord Jesus but whose behaviour is unchanged (James 2:14). He says to such people, ‘Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works’ (2:18). Genuine faith is a living thing that produces good works as its fruit. This is how other people know that our profession of faith is true.

When sinners trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, God sees the faith that is in their hearts and saves them immediately, but other people cannot see what God sees. ‘Man looks at the outward appearance’ (1 Samuel 16:7). It is only God who can look at the heart. Other people have to wait until there is an outward change of behaviour before they can be sure that those who say they believe really do.

James illustrates his teaching with an example. Suppose a Christian is in great need, lacking both clothes and food (2:15). Then someone professing faith comes along and says, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled’ but does not actually do anything to meet that need (2:16). ‘What does it profit?’ asks James. It certainly does not help the Christian in great need. Likewise, what is the good of saying we believe if that faith does not produce good works and a change of

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behaviour? James says that such faith is not the real thing. It is 'dead' (2:17). It is not saving faith (2:14).

When sinners really and truly trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour, they are made alive spiritually (Ephesians 2:4–5). They have 'passed from death into life' (John 5:24) and one of the proofs is activity. Living people do things, but dead people do not. So when we want to be sure, we start by trusting in the grace and promise of God. Then, when our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ produces good works and a change of behaviour, it shows that we are alive spiritually, and this increases our assurance. Not only have we passed from death into life, but we know that we have done so (1 John 3:14) and we can sing sincerely the Sunday school chorus:

I'm S-A-V-E-D, I'm S-A-V-E-D,
I know I am, I'm sure I am, I'm S-A-V-E-D!