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Assurance Made Simple

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Lazar, Shawn C., 1978—

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Printed in the United States of America

ASSURANCE MADE SIMPLE

“WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be assured of my salvation?” I often get asked that question. People want to have assurance, but they’re confused about it. What is assurance? How can you have it? What is it based on? And is there a difference between genuine and false assurance? If so, what?

These are all important questions that require clear thinking. I find it helpful to think about assurance in terms of a simple syllogism.

Assurance Is a Belief

To begin, assurance of salvation is not a feeling, emotion, or experience. Instead, it is a belief. Specifically, it is the belief that, “I have everlasting life.”

If you’re persuaded that you have everlasting life, then you have assurance.

That’s what it is.

That’s all it is.

Simple, right?

Of course, you don't need to believe *those exact words* to have assurance. Instead, you can believe the equivalent concepts such as, "I will go to heaven when I die," or "I will spend forever with God," or "I am justified." If you believed any of those propositions, you would be assured of your salvation.

The big question is, how do you reach that conclusion?

How can you become persuaded that you have everlasting life?

What is it based on?

That's where the *assurance syllogism* comes in.

A Simple Deduction

Do you remember studying simple logic in high school? The first thing you might have learned was the deductive syllogism. Here's a classic example:

All men are mortal.
Socrates is a man.
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Is it coming back to you?

You take one premise (e.g., "All men are mortal"), add a second (e.g., "Socrates is a man"), and then draw the necessary conclusion (e.g., "Socrates is mortal").

It's the simplest form of logical thinking, the kind we use every day, often without realizing it.

You can think about assurance in the same way.

That is, you can think about assurance as a deductive syllogism in which the conclusion is, "Therefore, I have everlasting life."

The question is: how do you get there? What are the premises that conclusion is based on?

Before exploring those questions, let me introduce you to a syllogism you might already believe in, without realizing it.

The Practical Syllogism

When it comes to assurance, Calvinist and Arminian theologians¹ teach the so-called *practical syllogism*.

In my experience, that's what most churches teach.

That's probably what your pastor teaches, too.

Their syllogism is "practical" because it bases your assurance on your practical behavior, i.e., your works.

Here's how the argument goes:

The first premise of the practical syllogism is some standard of behavior that regenerate people are expected to live up to.

The second premise comes from observing your behavior to see if you have met the standard.

And then you draw the appropriate conclusion, such as:

Genuine believers do not drink.

I do not drink.

Therefore, I'm a genuine believer.

Or here's another:

Genuine believers do not have sex outside of marriage.

I do not have sex outside of marriage.

Therefore, I'm a genuine believer.

The problem is those arguments commit a logical fallacy. Specifically, they commit *the fallacy of affirming the consequent*.

Simply put, the conclusions wrongly assume the only reason why you might not drink, or might not sleep around is because you're a genuine believer. But there might be many reasons for

¹ For the record, I am neither Calvinist nor Arminian, but what is called Free Grace.

your behavior! Being a genuine believer is *not* the only explanation. For example, maybe you don't drink because you're working in Saudi Arabia, and there is no alcohol to buy. Or maybe you aren't sleeping around because you're in prison. The fallacy assumes there's only one explanation for the conclusion, when, in fact, there are many.

So that version of the practical syllogism is flatly illogical.

That's why some teachers teach the practical syllogism a little bit differently. Instead of looking for a positive behavior to live up to, they look for negative behaviors (i.e., sin) that falsify your claim to be born again. It's like a scientist looking for evidence to falsify his theory. For example:

Regenerate people do not commit adultery.
I committed adultery.
Therefore, I am not regenerate.

Or:

Regenerate people do not get angry.
I get angry.
Therefore, I am not regenerate.

Why does this lead to doubt instead of assurance?

Because you sin everyday! We all sin!

Even if you live up to one moral standard of behavior (e.g., "I don't smoke!" "I don't take drugs!" "I don't sleep around!"), chances are you'll fail in another (e.g., "But I sure do struggle with anger and jealousy and lust"). How do you know if you're *really* regenerate with such mixed results?

You don't.

And what's worse, even if you meet a standard *now*, there's no guarantee you will *in the future*. You don't know what the future holds. You might end up committing adultery. In which

case, that would prove you weren't really regenerate to begin with.

In other words, the practical syllogism is never grounds for *assurance* of salvation; if anything, it is grounds for *doubting* your salvation.

So if the practical syllogism leads to doubt instead of assurance, what other option is there?

The Assurance Syllogism

Consider what I'm calling *the assurance syllogism*. Instead of basing your assurance on your works, the assurance syllogism bases assurance on Jesus' promise of eternal life.

This is assurance based on something external to you (the promise), not something internal to you (your works).

We can see that kind of thinking at work in John 11:25-27, where Jesus spoke to Martha about the message of life.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus had several ways of presenting the promise of life. In this case, He told Martha that whoever believes in Him "will never die"—meaning, never die spiritually. Of course, if you can never die, that means you have *everlasting life*, which is the term Jesus most often uses (cf. John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24).

Let's take that promise as the first premise in our syllogism. Now, what's the second premise?

Next, Jesus asked Martha a simple question—“Do you believe this?” This is the question everyone must answer when presented with Jesus’ message of life.

What about you? Do *you* believe it?

Martha could have given three different answers: “I *don’t* believe,” or “I *don’t know* if I believe,” or “I *do* believe.”

Each answer can be taken as the second premise in our syllogism.

And each would lead to a different conclusion.

Let’s consider each one in turn.

The First Possibility

Let’s imagine that Martha answered, “I *don’t* believe.” What conclusion would she come to?

Whoever believes in Jesus has everlasting life.

I don’t believe.

Therefore, I don’t have everlasting life.

If Martha concluded, “I don’t have everlasting life,” she would obviously not have assurance of salvation. At least, not based on Jesus’ promise. She might have assurance based on other grounds (a possibility I’ll discuss later), but it would not be based on believing Jesus’ promise of life.

Many people have that same problem today: they lack assurance because while they may believe different facts about Jesus, they don’t believe in His promise of life.

You can believe that Jesus lived and died and rose again and taught a wonderful system of morality and yet not believe His promise of eternal life. There are some people who know Jesus commanded us to love, but don’t know He also invited us to believe in Him for life.

Is that the reason why you lack assurance? Is it because you don't believe Jesus' promise of eternal life?

The Second Possibility

The second answer Martha could have given is, "I don't know if I believe." In that case, this would have been her conclusion:

Whoever believes in Jesus has everlasting life.

I don't know if I believe.

Therefore, I don't know if I have everlasting life.

Of course, if you don't know you have everlasting life, then you lack assurance. Whether you disbelieve or doubt Jesus' promise, the result is the same—no assurance.

What about you?

If you lack assurance, is it because you don't know if you believe in Jesus' promise?

Why not?

Maybe you don't know what faith is?

Maybe you don't know what it means to believe?

I can sympathize.

When I was younger, I became very confused about the nature of faith. I was in Evangelical circles that used a lot of confusing Christianese.

For example, a lot of pastors teach that faith is an emotional feeling or type of behavior or an existential encounter with Jesus.

Others teach that faith is something that must happen in the heart, not the head.

Others say that believing means obeying.

Frankly, that's all confusing.

When I began hearing that kind of jargon from the pulpit and from friends, I began to doubt my salvation. I believed in

Jesus...at least, I thought I did...but then I started to wonder—do I really believe? I don't *feel* anything in particular. How do I know if I'm only believing with my head, not my heart? What's the difference? What does that feel like? I started to worry that I wasn't believing hard enough—as if you had to squint your eyes and flex your muscles to make faith effective.

It took years to unlearn that theological baggage and to get back to the simple truth that to believe *is to be persuaded that something is true*.

That's it.

For example, when God promised Abraham a son, even though, at that point, it was naturally impossible for him to have a son, Abraham believed God's promise. What did it mean to believe? Here's Paul's answer:

He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform (Rom 4:20-21).

Abraham was *convinced* that God could keep His promise. God promised a son, and Abraham believed God was able to do it. That's what it means to believe.

Are you convinced that Jesus keeps His promise of eternal life?

Are you persuaded that Jesus is able to give you eternal life, through faith in Him?

Do you think He will do it?

If so, then you believe. If not, then you don't believe, no matter how you might feel.

So coming back to Martha, those are two possible answers to Jesus' question. What's the third?

The Third Possibility

Here is the answer Martha actually gave: “Yes, Lord, I believe.” She believed what He said about Himself.

She believed Jesus was the Messiah.

She was persuaded He could guarantee her everlasting life simply by her believing in Him for it.

Hence, as soon as Martha gave that answer, what could she conclude?

Whoever believes in Jesus has everlasting life.

I believe.

Therefore, I have everlasting life.

Martha would have been assured of her salvation, i.e., she would be sure she’d never die spiritually because that’s what Jesus promised.

Believing and Assurance

That’s the assurance syllogism in a nutshell. Unlike the practical syllogism, the assurance syllogism is based on faith in Jesus’ promise, not based on introspecting your works and motivations.

If you believe Jesus’ promise, you should reach the same conclusion and be sure of your salvation.

If you’re not sure of your salvation, but claim to believe in Jesus’ promise, maybe you don’t really understand what Jesus said.

The Lord promised that everlasting life is *the present possession* of believers. “He who believes in Me *has* everlasting life,” the Lord said (John 6:47, emphasis added). *Has*. That’s present tense.

So, if you consider yourself a believer, and you know that Jesus gives everlasting life as a present possession to believers, what do you have?

If you believe Jesus' promise, you know you have everlasting life *right now*, as a present possession, because that's what you're believing in Him for.

In other words, *you cannot believe Jesus' promise without being sure of your salvation*. If you aren't sure, then you aren't believing. It's that simple.

In other words, *assurance is of the essence of saving faith*.

For example, imagine if I promised you, "I just put \$100 in your pocket." Are you sure you have \$100 in your pocket?

It depends on whether you believe me or not.

If you believe me, you'll be sure.

If you don't, you won't.

It's the same with assurance. If you believe Jesus' promise of eternal life, you'll be sure of your salvation. If you don't, you won't.

Part of the problem here is that lots of pastors do not teach salvation correctly.

They don't ever talk about Jesus' promise of eternal life.

Maybe they don't know about it.

Instead, what they talk about is hoping to get to heaven when you die.

Have you ever heard that?

"I sure hope I get to heaven when I die."

In English, *hope* is less than *certainty*. When you hope that something happens, you're saying it's possible that it won't. Hence, *hoping* that something is true is not the same as *being sure* that it is true. Hoping for a *future possibility* is not the same as being assured of a *present reality*.

If Jesus had promised that believers could only have the *possibility* of gaining everlasting life *sometime in the future*, then lack

of assurance would be built into His promise. You could hope you'd be saved, but you couldn't be sure of it.

I fully admit that, given that kind of promise, assurance would *not* be of the essence of saving faith. In fact, *doubt* would be of the essence of faith! And isn't that exactly what many pastors teach? They say that faith always has doubt mixed in! As one popular teacher put it, "Doubt always coexists with faith, for in the presence of certainty, who would need faith at all?"

No wonder people are so anxious! The pastors are teaching people to doubt!

Friend, doubting God's promises is not a virtue, but a sin. It's calling God a liar.

The Lord said that believers *have* everlasting life (John 3:16, 36; 5:24).

That's a present reality.

A present possession.

A present guarantee.

It is not a *hope so, maybe, could be, if you're lucky enough, you might make it to heaven when you die* type of doubtful religion so many people subscribe to.

No. What Jesus promised is eternal life—right here, right now, through faith in Him.

If you consider yourself a believer who has faith in that promise, then you *must* believe you have everlasting life as a present possession. And if you believe that, you have assurance.

What About False Assurance?

Of course, not everyone who believes "I have everlasting life" actually has it. There is such a thing as *false assurance*.

There are many people—perhaps millions and billions—who think they are going to spend eternity with God, but who aren't born again.

So what's the difference between genuine assurance and false assurance?

Once again, it helps to think of assurance in terms of a simple syllogism.

Superficially, genuine assurance and false assurance both share the same conclusion: "I am saved" (or the equivalent). The difference comes in when you examine *the premises* upon which the conclusion is based. While genuine assurance is based on believing *true premises* (i.e., Jesus' promise of everlasting life), false assurance is based on believing *false premises*.

Here are some examples of false assurance based on false premises.

First, false assurance can come from believing in *a false god*. Hence, a Muslim might reason like this:

Allah will save those who die in jihad.
I will die in jihad.
Therefore, I will be saved.

A Muslim who believes that may have assurance of salvation, but it would be false assurance because Allah does not exist, and no one will be saved by murdering people.

Second, false assurance can come from believing *a false gospel*. For example:

God will save everyone who is baptized as a child.
I was baptized as a child.
Therefore, I will be saved.

Or:

God will save everyone who takes communion.
I take communion.
Therefore, I will be saved.

Or:

God will save everyone who is basically good.

I am basically good.

Therefore, I will be saved.

Those are examples of believing in salvation by works. People who believe in salvation by works can have *some* assurance of salvation (especially if they have a high opinion of their own goodness), but it is false assurance because no one is saved on the basis of works (Rom 3:20; Gal 2:16). Belief in a false gospel leads to false assurance.

Third, false assurance can be based on *mystical experiences*. For example:

Whoever has felt a burning in the bosom is saved.

I felt a burning in my bosom.

Therefore, I am saved.

If someone's assurance is based on a mystical experience, it would be false assurance. Who knows what that feeling was or where it came from? Was it from God or from last night's pizza? In any case, the Bible does not base assurance on fleeting experiences and emotions.

In sum, in order for a conclusion to be true, the premises must be true. False premises will lead to false assurance. That's the difference between true and false assurance. Genuine assurance comes from believing the saving message. Accept no substitutes!

Conclusion

What does it mean to be assured of your salvation? It simply means being persuaded of this: "I have everlasting life."

If you believe that, then you have assurance.

And if you believe that based on Jesus' promise of everlasting life, then your assurance is genuine.

Jesus promised everlasting life as a present possession to believers.

If you believe that promise, then what do you have right now?

WANT MORE?

Did you enjoy *Assurance Made Simple*? Then be sure to read Shawn Lazar's book: *Beyond Doubt: How to Be Sure of Your Salvation*, available here:

<https://faithalone.org/shop/books/beyond-doubt-how-to-be-sure-of-your-salvation/>

And sign up for a free subscription to [*Grace in Focus*](#) magazine.

