

“How Can I Know I’m Going to Heaven?”

Some people know they’re going to heaven, and I would like to be sure too. Can you help me?

Thank you for your e-mail requesting information about an assurance of your salvation. I will try to lay out some things which I hope will help. God wants us to have an assurance of our salvation, and until we do, we live life in uncertainty.

1. First of all, I would point out that the very fact you are concerned about this is an indication that you are in the Family of God. Non-Christians don’t spend any time thinking about this or being anxious about their spiritual condition. That you are concerned, in my judgment is a “sign of life.”

2. Secondly, we have the clear teaching of Jesus in John 3 in his dialogue with Nicodemus, that salvation comes about by a new, or spiritual birth. The analogy is very clear: Jesus compares physical birth with spiritual birth. And with both, there must be a beginning, a birth before there can be life and growth. In a number of passages we read of this new birth which brings about a transformation when we find ourselves IN CHRIST: “Therefore, if any man is IN Christ, he is a new creature; old things pass away and behold, all things become new.” (II Cor. 5:17).

Now Jesus did not say that we must be born again and again and again. We are born into God’s family once by faith, claiming Christ as our Saviour and Substitute, and we begin to trust in Him, and Him alone, to make us presentable to God the Father when we die. And Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8-9 that this is a result of God’s grace to us, and it is totally apart from any good works that we could do to merit or attain heaven apart from Him and what He did on our behalf.

3. One of the things Paul warns the Galatians about is that they had originally understood salvation was by faith, but they started adding various works to make sure that they were saved. Paul asks, “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you. . . Having begun in the Spirit (by unmerited grace through faith), are you now being perfected by the flesh (works)?” (Gal. 3:1-5)

This is exactly the question you are asking, _____. Do we begin in faith + no works, but then have to keep on working in order to stay saved?

4. There is a place for good works in the Christian life, but it is very important where we position these good works. If we put them before we exercise faith in Christ, then we are working our way to heaven just like every other religion teaches. Good works become the means of achieving salvation. And if we could get to heaven by our good works, then God made a terrible mistake! He let His only Son come and die for our sins. By choosing our good works as the means of our salvation we negate, nullify what Christ accomplished on the Cross.

5. Where do good works have significance? After our new, or spiritual birth. Good works are a sign of Christ’s life within us. We do not perform them in order to remain in God’s family. We do them out of grateful hearts because we find ourselves “accepted in the Beloved.” (Ephesians 1:6).

If we take the Galatians approach, knowing that we were “saved by grace,” but then turn right around and do our good works to stay saved, then we are right back on the old treadmill. Furthermore, the driving force/motivation to do good works with this approach is FEAR. We keep trying because we are afraid we will lose our relationship with God. We could never say with the Apostle Paul that “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” How could he say

that? He wasn't perfect! He could say it because "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day." (II Tim. 1:12)

If we take Paul's approach, we are motivated, not out of Fear, but out of LOVE. We want to serve God and glorify Him in our lives. But there's a problem.

6. Sin is the problem. Christians still sin after their conversion. You know, God could have dealt another way with sinning Christians. When a person first heard and understood the Gospel, and then became a believer, God could have zapped him/her dead right on the spot! That would have taken care of sin in a believer's life!

But God chose not to do that. He chose rather to leave us here, imperfect though we are, to be His ambassadors. And He made provision for cleansing the believer by means of acknowledging our sin to Him in confession and claiming the forgiveness over it which Christ provided through the Cross.

Let me have you just focus on I John 2:1-3. There John says, "My little children, I am writing these things to you — (he's just talked about confessing our sins [I John 1:9] with the promise that God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness)- " that you SIN NOT." (This is the ideal) "But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation (satisfaction) for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."

God does not want us to sin. But if we do, here is the provision for God's forgiveness. We have an Advocate, a defense attorney who pleads our case and we are cleansed. Now I want you to just think about this for a moment. Does one sin, like being angry at your spouse, cause a loss of salvation? How about 10 times a week? Or 100 times a month? How much gossip? Or coveting what others possess? Do you see where I'm going with this? People who talk about being good enough or having (in their own estimation) done enough to retain their salvation in good standing really don't have a very accurate picture of how pervasive our problem is.

7. If one sin isn't enough for us to lose our standing in Christ, then how many and what kind of sins would be enough to push us over the edge and out of the Family of God? No one has answered that question to me satisfactorily. We would never know the answer to that question. Martin Luther addressed this problem five hundred years ago. He, as a monk, had lived with this uncertainty about his soul until he came to understand that the "just shall live by faith." The issue was not sins, it was a lack of righteousness. Being born into God's Family means God has declared us righteousness through our identity with and trust in Christ.

I am not saying that good works are not important. They are. And people who know they have been dealt with in grace and are forgiven have a strong motivation not to sin. I think it's kind of like the difference between a cat and a pig. A cat might fall into a mud puddle, but it immediately gets out and starts cleaning itself. That's its nature. But a pig can lie all day in the mud and it loves it because that's its nature. Another sign of "life" in a believer is that when we sin we feel bad. It hurts us. We tend to be more sensitive to it. And sometimes when we decide to stay in the mud, God has another provision for us. We find it in Hebrews 12: "Whom the Lord loves, He chastens" (vs. 5-14). Our sin becomes a "family" matter when we have been born into the God's family. Paul tells us in I Cor. 11 that "if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged." If we fail to get ourselves back in line and out of the mud, choosing to ignore the "warning lights," our Father, though longsuffering, may have to take us to the "divine woodshed" and discipline us. But it is the discipline of a Father, not the punishment of a Judge. That is what Paul meant when he said to the Corinthians, "For that reason (disobedience) some of you are weak and sickly. . .and some of you sleep (have died under discipline."

8. And that brings us to another problem connected to all of this, and that is the fact that we disappoint God, our family, and the body of Christ, and we see them disappointing us. We rarely wonder how we could act in an un-Christian way, but we sure do wonder about others! And then we begin to wonder if we are really “in the Family,” and we wonder the same about others.

Our problem here is that we, as the Bible says, “(man) looks on the outward appearance, while God looks upon the heart.” Paul says in Romans 8:16,17 “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.” This means that You can know about you, and I can know about me, but we can’t ultimately know by someone’s outward behaviour whether they are God’s children or not. We have probably made misjudgments on both sides. There are some who appear godly, upstanding, etc., who have been playing a clever charade. There are others whom we might assume not to be Christians that may well be. We can wonder. We can speculate. And if we see little or no evidence of the fruits of the spirit, we can wonder. But we cannot, should not judge. Because we just don’t know.

But here is what we DO know. “The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in Himself. The one who has not believed God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the witness that God has borne concerning His Son. He who has the Son has the life. He who does not have the Son does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know (not think, hope, feel) that you have (present tense, not future, present! We possess it now!) eternal life.” (I John 5:10-13)

_____, I hope some of this will help answer your question. Someone has defined “faith” like this: “Faith is when you stop saying please to God, and you start saying, Thank You.” If we have asked Christ to be our Savior, and we have opened the door to our heart and our life to Him and we are trusting only in Him for our salvation, then we need to be saying “thank You” to Him, and then living our lives in a way which demonstrates a genuine gratitude to the One who has forgiven us. and prepared a way of access into God’s presence.

May God Bless you,

Jimmy Williams

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