

**Frequently Asked Questions:  
How Can I KNOW that I Am Saved?**

2/4 2011 FAQ Series

Romans 8:12-17

01 16 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

**Introduction to Series**

Today we are continuing our Winter Worship Series entitled **FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions**. The sermons are based on a congregational survey conducted in December. Last week we explored “*What is heaven like?*” Next week we will ask “*What is God’s will for my life?*” Then we will conclude with a collection of *Frequently Asked Questions*. Today’s FAQ is: “*How can I KNOW that I am saved?*”

**Scripture: Romans 8:12-17**

**Introduction**

In the movie *Forrest Grump*, Tom Hanks played a simple country boy from Alabama. In one scene, Lieutenant Dan asked him, “*Have you found Jesus yet, Gump?*” Forrest looked quite puzzled when he replied, “*I didn’t know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir!*”

We are all lost, and God seeks to find his children. The Christian faith proclaims salvation for all who will believe. But how can we KNOW that we are saved? In theology, the answer to this question is known as the **Doctrine of Assurance**.

**I. An Overview of Salvation**

Let’s begin with a fundamental understanding of **salvation**. There is something inherently wrong with the human condition which the Bible calls **sin**. Sin is more than the sum total of the bad things we do and the good things we don’t do. Sinfulness separates us from right relationship with God. Nothing we DO can bridge the gap between ourselves and God.

In Jesus Christ, the Lord acted once and for all to save creation. God became what we are so that we might become who God is. At the cross, sin was crucified. At the empty tomb, new life was given. Salvation comes by grace through faith. All who believe in Jesus Christ enter into a new, life-giving relationship with God.

Salvation is both event and process which may include dramatic moments of transformation and incremental periods of change. There is no one, normative pattern of salvation. God works in each of our lives in unique ways.

So salvation means that we have received by faith what God has done for us. We accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. Our sin is forgiven, and we receive the gift of eternal life.

The Doctrine of Assurance then asks the question, “How can we know—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that we are saved?”

**II. The Two Extremes of Assurance**

Some traditions answer the question by saying, “There’s no way to know. We can HOPE that we are saved, but we can never be certain.” This sort of theology reduces us to plucking flower petals, saying, “*God loves me, God loves me not.*”

*Reader’s Digest* published the story of a woman dating a very timid man. She wrote, “We had been keeping company for months, and I KNEW Sam was very fond of me. But he was so shy that it seemed he would never get up the courage to propose. Then his mother invited us to dinner. His whole family was present.”

The next day Sam asked what I thought of his family. I said, “I liked them very much.” He answered, “They liked you very much, too. In fact, they asked when we were getting married.” Sam paused a long moment and then asked, “What shall I tell them?”

No one wants to live with such a spirit of timidity and uncertainty. We become like children passing love notes in school to God: “*Do you love me? Check YES, NO, or MAYBE.*” A lack of assurance robs Christians of internal joy and external effectiveness.

However, some traditions go to the other extreme. These folk appear all too convinced! Salvation is treated like a fire insurance policy with a one-time premium paid in the past. If asked about their faith, these people answer, “Oh, yes, I took care of that years ago.” However, their lives do not bear present witness to the Christian faith they supposedly professed in the past.

### **III. Blessed Assurance**

A Biblical and theological understanding of assurance is found in a balance between these two extremes. Rather than seeing salvation in simple terms of “Yes” or “No,” it’s more helpful to think about salvation in terms of a **relationship**.

Suppose you approached a **groom** at his wedding reception and asked, “Are you married?” Would he reply, “I’m not sure. I think so, I hope so, but can anyone ever be sure he is married?” If he has any uncertainty, then I guarantee his new bride would quickly seek to reassure him!

It’s a ridiculous question. OF COURSE the man would know that he was married. The wedding had been preceded by months of preparation, bridal showers, a wedding license, a rehearsal, and the ceremony. The preacher had said, “*I declare you are husband and wife together.*” The man could say with full confidence, “I AM married.”

However, a wedding is only the beginning of a lifelong commitment. The relationship must be carefully nurtured daily in order to survive and thrive “*for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death us do part.*”

The New Testament testifies that an assurance of our salvation is an essential part of our relationship with the Lord. It is part of our birthright as God’s children. Paul wrote: “*I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted him to that day.*” (see 2 Timothy 1:8-14) Hebrews 10:19 declares: “*Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.*”

The word “**know**” is an important term in the Bible. More than an intellectual understanding, “to know” in Scripture means to enter into a full relationship with another. Think about the closest human relations you enjoy in this world. You know the other person, and the person knows you.

Listen to how the word “**know**” is used in these verses from 1 John:

- *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may **know** that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)*
- *This then is how we **know** that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence, whenever our hearts condemn us. (see 1 John 3:16-24)*

We have heard our Scripture lesson this morning from Romans 8 where Paul talks about the bold assurance that is ours in Christ Jesus. Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrased Paul’s words in *The Message*:

*The resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It’s adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike, ‘What’s next, Papa?’ God’s Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what’s coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! (The Message, Romans 8:15-16)*

An assurance of salvation is ultimately based upon **God’s promises** made to us in Scripture. While human pledges are often broken, we can trust God’s Word both now and forevermore.

#### **IV. The Witness of the Spirit**

The assurance of our salvation is a distinctive emphasis of Methodism. John Wesley firmly believed that Christians can know that we are God’s children and heirs of life eternal. He also said that we receive this assurance by “**the witness of the Spirit.**”

Wesley based his theology on Scriptural passages such as:

- *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. (Romans 8:16)*
- *God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out “Abba, Father.” (Galatians 4:6)*
- *I know whom I have believed and am convinced he is able to guard what I have trusted him for that day. (2 Timothy 1:12)*

This witness of the Spirit is received in two ways in our life: through the testimony of God’s Spirit and the corresponding testimony within our own spirit.

##### **A. God’s Spirit**

First and foremost, the gift of assurance is a gift from God. It is not so much a feeling as a claiming of God’s promises in our life. In fact, feelings may sometimes get

in the way of this assurance. For there will be times we won't feel saved just as in a relationship we don't always feel in love. Our ultimate assurance comes in claiming God's promises for our lives and knowing the Lord keeps his word.

John Wesley along with other theologians and historians I read are a little vague when it comes to defining exactly what this experience of assurance is like. Further study shows they reflect the Biblical writers' inability to communicate this very clearly. It is something one has to experience. John Wesley said:

*The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.*

Our doubts are put to rest. We learn to live with trust, certainty, joy, and love.

### **B. Our Spirit**

The witness of God's Spirit has a corresponding effect in our own spirit. Encountering Jesus Christ in our lives can never leave us the same again. Both history and individual lives can be divided into "*before and after Christ.*" Christian experience:

- 1) Repentance
- 2) Salvation
- 3) Fruit of the Holy Spirit:  
*"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."* (Galatians 5:22-23)
- 4) Newness/transformation of outward life.

Not conscience but self-consciousness that I am a child of God and now called to live like it.

### **C. The Verdict**

Actually, both the witness of the Holy Spirit and our spirit combine to give us assurance. Imagine you were called to court and tried on the charge of being a Christian. What would the verdict be?

- Own witness: Are you a Christian?
- Others' witness: Can they prove it!
- Holy Spirit: Divine advocate representing us

## **V. John Wesley's Story**

**John Wesley's** life was a vivid testimony to the transforming power of God's assurance of salvation. Wesley was one of the most influential figures of the past three centuries. He started a new church that became one of the largest Protestant denominations in the world. Historians also believe his ministry prevented a bloody

social revolt in England similar to the French Revolution. We are here today because of Wesley's passion to spread "*scriptural holiness*" through out the world.

Wesley was born on June 28, 1703, the *fifteenth* child of Samuel and Susanna. His father was a priest in England's official denomination, the Anglican Church. So John grew up as a PK—a preacher's kid—in the Saint Andrew's parsonage in Epworth.

In 1709, a **fire** swept through the parsonage, burning it to the ground. All the children escaped except for six year old John who was trapped on the upper floor. Neighbors formed a human ladder and the young boy leapt to safety. His mother later wrote: "*He was a brand plucked from the burning for a special destiny.*"

By the time he was eleven, John could read English, Latin, and Greek. He later studied for the ministry at **Oxford** College. His brother, Charles, followed him, and together they led a Christian society on campus. Other students made fun of them, calling the group the "*Bible Moths*" and the "*Holy Club.*" They even made up a mocking poem:

*“By rule they eat, by rule they drink,  
By rule they do all things but think!  
Accuse the priests of loose behavior  
To get more in the layman's favor.  
Method alone must guide them all  
When themselves ‘**Methodists**’ they call!”*

Then in 1735 Charles came to John with an exciting proposition. General James Oglethorpe had hired Charles to serve as his secretary in the new colony of **Georgia**. John joined the expedition as the American colony's chaplain. He planned to care for the settlers' spiritual needs and serve as a missionary to the Indians.

Things did not go well for John in the New World, however. The settlers found him stuffy and rigid. The Indians were unreceptive to the Gospel message. Then the 32 year old minister began dating a teenage girl 15 years his junior. (I'll save you the math—Sophie was 17 years old!) After a rocky romance, Sophie broke up with John and married another man three days later!

The next time Sophie and her new husband attended Communion, John refused to serve her the elements. Sophie's father swore out an arrest warrant for the priest. Ultimately, John sailed out of Charleston with an outstanding warrant for his arrest! On the way home, John wrote in his journal, "*I came to save the Indians; but, oh, who will save me?*"

Upon his return home to London, Wesley was in a depressed funk. Then one night, quite unwillingly, he went to a Bible study on **Aldersgate** Street. During the reading of Martin Luther's preface on Romans about salvation by grace through grace, Wesley wrote: "*I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*"

It was a conversion experience for Wesley. Everything he had known in his head now transformed his life. Rather than living a life of holiness to earn God's love, he now accepted the Lord's salvation as a gift freely given. Then in response to his newborn

faith, Wesley began sharing the gospel with others. His discovery of salvation and assurance changed not only his life but also the entire world.

### **Conclusion**

We too can know the assurance that John Wesley and so many others have experienced. Based upon God's promises, we can know the forgiveness of sins and the promise of life everlasting.

You see, the question "Have you found Jesus?" is actually backwards. It would be more theologically accurate to ask, "Have you allowed Jesus to find you?" God's grace is always seeking the lost. However, we must accept Christ's grace through human faith. Based upon God's promises, the witness of the Spirit allows us to claim with certainty "I am saved."

THEN we can sing with confidence:

*Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine, oh what a foretaste of glory divine.  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God. Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.  
This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.  
This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.*