Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Is It Real?
Scripture: 1 John; 1 John 5:1; John 10: 10; 1 Peter 5:10
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11 Biblical Tests of Genuine Salvation

In 1746, about six years after the Great Awakening, in which Jonathan Edwards was the primary instrument of God to preach the gospel and bring about the greatest revival in American history thus far, Edwards wrote A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections. He wrote it to deal with a problem not unlike one we face today: the matter of evidence for true conversion. Many people want the blessings of salvation, especially eternal security, but no more.

In the explosive drama of the Great Awakening, it seemed as though conversions were occurring in great numbers. However, it didn't take long to realize that some people claimed conversions that were not real. While various excesses and heightened emotional experiences were common, scores of people didn't demonstrate any evidence in their lives to verify their claim to know and love Jesus Christ, which led critics to attack the Great Awakening, contending it was nothing but a big emotional bath without any true conversions.

Thus, partly in defense of true conversion and partly to ex-pose false conversion, Jonathan Edwards took up his pen. He came to this simple conclusion. The supreme proof of a true conversion is what he called "holy affections," which are a zeal for holy things and a longing after God and personal holiness. He made a careful distinction between saving versus common operations of the Holy Spirit. Saving operations obviously produce salvation. Common operations of the Holy Spirit, he said, "may sober, arrest and convict men, and may even bring them to what at first appears to be repentance and faith, yet these influences fall short of inward saving renewal" (Iain H. Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography [Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987], p. 255).

How can you tell whether the Holy Spirit has performed a saving operation? As the principle evidence of life is motion, Edwards wrote, so the principle evidence of saving grace is holy practice (pp. 262-63). He said true salvation always produces an abiding change of nature in a true convert. Therefore, whenever holiness of life does not accompany a confession of conversion, it must be understood that this individual is not a Christian.

In the very year Edwards' treatise was published, popular teaching asserted that, to the contrary, the only real evidence of true salvation is a feeling based on an experience--usually the experience at the moment of the alleged conversion. That teaching introduces the prevalent but erroneous concept that

a person's true spiritual state is known by a past experience rather than a present pursuit of holiness. Edwards flatly contradicted that notion: "Assurance is never to be enjoyed on the basis of a past experience. There is need of the present and continuing work of the Holy Spirit ... [in] giving assurance" (p. 265). This is no esoteric theological debate: the substance of your assurance is at stake.

A number of New Testament writers, of course, were very concerned about this matter of true salvation, as was our Lord Jesus Himself. The apostle John dedicated his first letter to the subject, stating his theme at the end: "These things I have written 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). Throughout the letter is a series of tests to determine whether you possess eternal life. If you don't pass these tests, you'll know where you stand and what you need to do. If you do, you'll have reason to enjoy your eternal salvation with great assurance.

Have You Enjoyed Fellowship with Christ and the Father?

This is an essential element in true salvation and the first test John presented. Look with me at chapter 1, which begins: "We [John and his fellow apostles] have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us--what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (vv. 2-3). Obviously he was going beyond just the earthly acquaintance he had with Jesus because he had no such earthly acquaintance with the Father. Rather, he was presently enjoying communion with the living God and the living Christ.

Now at first you might be tempted to think, Well, good for John, but his was not an isolated experience. In 1 John 5:1, he says, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him" (emphasis added). It is characteristic of any believer to love God and Christ. It is a sign of the holy affections Jonathan Edwards spoke of. A relationship with God is basic to salvation. It is what we as believers were called to. "God is faithful," Paul says, "through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9).

Paul described what that fellowship meant to him personally: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20). There's something very experiential about that truth--it's not just a cold fact that we as believers have divine life living in us; there's an experience to be enjoyed in knowing God intimately.

Jesus implied as much when He said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10: 10). If He had just said, "I came that you may have life," we could conclude He was talking only about His gracious provision of eternal life. By adding that life could be abundant, Jesus was moving into the dimension of experience. The Christian life is a rich life. We're meant to experience joy, peace, love, and purpose. When someone who's about to be baptized testifies about coming to Christ, you won't hear, "The fact is, folks, I'm saved, and I'm just here to announce that." Invariably the person will describe to you the feeling--the overwhelming sense of forgiveness and purpose in his or her life.

Here's a taste of the abundant life Scripture describes in terms of our fellowship with the Lord. The "God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3); "the God of all grace" (1 Peter 5:10); the God who supplies all [our] needs according to His riches in Christ (Phil. 4:19); the God who leads us to speak to one another in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to Him (Eph. 5:19); the God to whom we cry "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15) like little children to the daddy we adore; the God we draw near to in time of trouble (Heb. 4:16)--He Himself so greatly enriches us. Our fellowship with Him is the abundant life we experience.

Have you experienced communion with God and Christ? Have you sensed Their presence? Do you have a love for Them that draws you to Their presence? Have you experienced the sweet communion of prayer--the exhilarating joy of talking to the living God? Have you experienced the refreshing, almost overwhelming sense of grace that comes upon you when you discover a new truth in His Word? If you have, then you have experienced the fellowship of salvation.

Are You Sensitive to Sin?

Let's go back to chapter 1 of John's first epistle, to this declaration in verse 5: "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." John was saying that the message the Lord sent to us is about Himself, specifically that He is absolutely sinless. The Greek text literally says there's not a single bit of darkness in Him. Therefore, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do notpractice the truth" (v. 6).

Light and darkness do not coexist. One drives the other away. John went on to develop that theme: "If we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us" (vv. 7-10).

Some people make some pretty amazing claims that hold no water. They claim to have fellowship with God--to be Christians (v. 6), to have no sin (v. 8), and even to have never sinned (v. 10). They think they are walking in the light when actually they are walking in darkness. It is characteristic of unbelievers to be oblivious to the sins in their lives. The individuals mentioned in verse 8 are not dealing with their sins because they think they've reached a state where they have no sin. But they are deceiving themselves. Those mentioned in verse 10 have never even confessed or acknowledged sin. With that attitude they are in fact denigrating God because God says "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23, emphasis added). Since unbelievers are so insensitive to the reality of their condition, human sinfulness is the right starting point in sharing the gospel.

Believers, on the other hand, "walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light" (v. 7). We walk a virtuous walk, and what's more, "we confess our sins" (v. 9). True believers have a right sense of sin. They know if they're going to commune with God they have to be holy. When sin occurs in their lives, they know it must be confessed.

John takes this teaching a step further in the next chapter. "My little children," he explained, "I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (v. 1). True believers realize they don't have to sin. But when they do, they know whom to go to--Jesus Christ, the believer's advocate. The intercessory work of Christ is one of the great trinitarian securers of our salvation. That's an encouraging reality to hang onto when confronted with personal sin.

The person who is truly saved is sensitive to the sinful realities in his or her life. That's the example Paul left us in speaking of his heightened awareness of sin's work in his own life (Rom. 7:14-25). Consider how that applies to you. Are you very much aware of the spiritual battle raging within you? Do you realize that to have true communion with God, you have to live a holy life--that you can't walk in darkness and claim to have fellowship with Him? Are you willing to confess and forsake any sin in your life as you become aware of it? Do you realize you can choose not to sin--that you're not fighting a battle you're obliged to lose? But when you do fail, do you go to your divine advocate? Do you sometimes cry out with Paul, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24) because you're so weary of the burden of sin in your flesh? If so, you are obviously a Christian. And since salvation is secure, you might as well enjoy it and be fully assured.

Do You Obey God's Word?

First John 2:3 couldn't be clearer: "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments." If you want to know whether you're a true Christian, ask yourself whether you obey

the commandments of Scripture. That's how Jesus described a true disciple when giving His Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples (Matt. 28:20). Obedience to the commands of God produces assurance--the confidence of knowing for sure "that we have come to know Him." The Greek word translated "keep" in verse 3 speaks of watchful, careful, thoughtful obedience. It involves not only the act of obedience, but also the spirit of obedience--a willing, habitual safeguarding of the Word, not just in letter but in spirit. That's supported by the word translated "commandments," which refers specifically to the precepts of Christ rather than laws in general. Legal obedience demands perfection or penalty, whereas 1 John 2:3 is a call to gracious obedience because of the penalty Christ has already paid.

Verse 4 presents a logical contrast: "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." That person is making a false claim. "But whoever keeps His Word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected" (v. 5). How can you determine if you are a true Christian? Not by sentiment but by obedience.

If you desire to obey the Word out of gratitude for all Christ has done for you, and if you see that desire producing an overall pattern of obedience, you have passed an important test indicating the presence of saving faith.

Do You Reject This Evil World?

We now come to John's fourth test of what characterizes the true Christian: "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). This love speaks of our deepest constraints, our most compelling emotions and goals. Christians won't feel that way toward anything in this world because they know that until Christ returns, this world is dominated by God's enemy. John said, "We know that we are the children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19 , niv). Satan, for now, is "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4).

The evil one has designed a system that the Bible simply calls "the world." The Greek term (kosmos) speaks of a system encompassing false religion, errant philosophy, crime, immorality, materialism, and the like. When you become a Christian, such things repel you, not attract you. Sometimes you may be lured into worldly things, but it isn't what you love; it's what you hate. That's the way Paul felt when he fell into sin (Rom. 7:15). As frustrating as it is to fall like that from time to time, we who are believers can be grateful that sin is something we hate and not love. That's because our new life in Christ plants within us love for God and the things of God.

"All that is in the world," John specified, "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its

lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:16-17). The world and its fleshly preoccupations are but temporary realities. The true believer, in contrast, has eternal life and will abide forever.

Jesus said those who follow Him are not of the world just as He was not of the world. We still move about in it to do His will as long as we are alive, but we are not of it. That's why Jesus prayed specifically for the Father to keep us from the evil one (John 17:14 -16). We're vulnerable to being sucked into this evil world's system now and then, but our love is toward God. That love is what will draw us out and redirect our focus toward heavenly priorities.

Do you reject the world? Do you reject its false religions, damning ideologies, godless living, and vain pursuits? Instead, do you love God, His truth, His kingdom, and all that He stands for? That doesn't come naturally to any man or woman because the human tendency is to love darkness rather than light to mask evil deeds (John 3:19-20). Unbelievers are of their father the devil, and want to do the desires of their father (John 8:44). If you reject the world and its devilish desires, that is an indication of new life in Christ. And since that new life is forever,

Do You Eagerly Await Christ's Return?

Further along in 1 John, we come across a fifth test of salvation: "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And every one who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (3:2-3). If you're a true Christian, you will have hope in your heart, and your hope will be focused on Christ's return. That hope will purify your life.

Do you love Christ so much that you eagerly await to see Him face-to-face at His return and be made like Him? Scripture tells us that is the Christian's blessed hope and supreme joy. Romans 8 declares that the whole creation groans in anticipation of the glorious manifestation of the children of God. First John 3 says that it involves three things: Christ appears, we see Him, and we're instantly made like Him.

"Our citizenship is in heaven," Paul said, "from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Phil. 3:20-21). Are you waiting for that? Do you despise the sin in your fallen flesh and long to be like Christ? Can you feel the thrill of Paul's saying, "Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly"? (1 Cor. 15:49)

Such a hope has ethical power, for John said it purifies the one possessing it. Paul implied as much to Titus: "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:11-13). This is a sensible hope leading to sensible living. It is not an inordinate kind of anticipation in which you are irresponsible with your earthly responsibilities. Being so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good is a contradiction in terms. The hope of Christlikeness will compel you to act more like Christ in reaching out to others and fulfilling all that God has set out for you to do.

If you find yourself longing for the return of Jesus Christ, that's evidence of salvation. It's an indication of a new nature within, which longs to be delivered from a body of sin while becoming like the perfect Christ. If you have such holy longings and affections, you've passed an important test indicating the reality of your eternal salvation.

Do You See a Decreasing Pattern of Sin in Your Life?

Another manifestation of holy affections is a decreasing pattern of sin. First John 3:4-10 spells out this sixth test:

Every one who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that [Christ] appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God.

Unbroken patterns of sin are characteristic of the unregenerate. No matter what a person claims about being a Christian, if he or she continues in sin, it is only a claim and not a reality. When you became a Christian, the pattern of sin was broken and a new pattern came into existence. Holy affections took over. Does that mean there's no sin in your life? No, because your unredeemed flesh is still there. But the more you pursue those religious affections, the less you will sin.

Sin as a life pattern is incompatible with salvation. That's because to experience salvation is to be saved from something, and that something is sin. If a person could continue in sin after being saved from sin, that would mean salvation is ineffective. John therefore discussed the work of Christ to demonstrate just how effective it is.

He began by noting that there are people who practice sin and lawlessness (v. 4). Then Christ "appeared in order to take away sins" (v. 5). To say someone had the work of Christ applied to him or her, yet continues in the same pattern of sin is to deny the very purpose Christ came for, which was to take away sins. Continuing in sin is not consistent with Christ's work on the cross. If a saved person could keep on sinning, that would mean Christ's death--while having some efficacy in eternity--is in fact useless in time. Perish the thought! Christ's death served the very useful purpose of taking away not only the penalty of sin, but also the pattern of sin in the believer's life.

John went on to talk about Christ's work through the believer's union with Him: "No one who abides in Him sins" (v. 6). That cannot mean true Christians never sin because John just said, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1:8). Rather, the next two verses in chapter 3 explain, "The one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil" (vv. 7-8). John's first epistle is consistent in warning against a pattern of sin.

Now let me clarify something here. I frequently receive letters from anguished Christians who doubt their salvation because they can't seem to break a sinful or unwise habit. They most often write about smoking, overeating, and masturbation. They fear their struggle with such things means they are locked into a pattern of sin. But John is not saying that the frequent occurrence of one particular sin in a person's life means that person is lost. Rather, he clarifies his meaning in saying that a true believer cannot practice lawlessness (1 John 3:4). The Greek term used there (anomia) literally means living as if there were no law. A person who rejects God's authority doesn't care what God thinks about his habits, and is obviously not a Christian.

A Christian, however, has a drastically different way of relating to God. He or she is no longer a slave to sin, but has offered himself or herself as a servant to the Lord (Rom. 6:14, 17-18). A true Christian can still sin, and may even do so frequently, but sinning frequently is not the same as practicing sin. In 1 John we see that a true believer can do the first, but not the second.

Why is that the case? Because the true believer "abides in Him" (1 John 3:6). Not only does Christ's death take away our sin, but also His ongoing life in us breaks the sin pattern. No longer are we perpetual sinners in thought, word, and deed--as we were before we were saved. We now have the option to do good. If we find ourselves sinning, contrary to the good we desire to do inside, we are much like the apostle Paul in Romans 7--and he's a great person to be associated with! Yet because of the abiding presence of Christ, our struggle will decrease as time goes on. We will always be acutely sensitive to sin, for as we have seen, that's one of John's tests of saving faith, but sin will be less of a pattern in our lives. Christ lives in union with us to provide a new pattern--a pattern of righteousness.

A pattern of sin, however, signals a union with the devil: "The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (v. 8). The devil is a sinner and nothing but. Everyone who is associated with the devil is a sinner and nothing but. Christ came to destroy the works of the devil by rescuing people who are in bondage to sin. That means those who've really been rescued will not continue in the state they've been rescued from. A habitual pattern of sin indicates that a rescue has never taken place. To claim otherwise is to denigrate Christ by implying His death didn't accomplish what He set out to do--destroy the works of the devil by rescuing people from sin.

In addition, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: any one who does not practice righteousness is not of God" (vv. 9-10). The believer has been born anew by the Holy Spirit. The seed He plants is a new nature, a new life principle, a new disposition. just as a seed planted in the ground produces a distinct kind of life, God's seed produces a righteous life in us that breaks the pattern of sin. And don't worry: that seed cannot die, for the Word of God tells us it's imperishable (1 Peter 1:23). Born of the Spirit of God, the believer cannot continually sin.

John just provided us with four viewpoints in analyzing the sin in our life: the work Christ accomplished in His death, His ongoing life in the believer, His destruction of the devil's works, and the regenerating work of the Spirit. Every way you look at it, the pattern of habitual sin is broken. What does that mean to you personally? If you see a decreasing pattern of sin in your life, that's evidence of holy affections. The difference between the children of God and the children of the devil is, as John said, "obvious" (v. 10). If you practice righteousness, you're of God. If you don't, you're not. Plain and simple. If you see victory over sin in your life, if you see righteous motives, righteous desires, righteous words, righteous deeds, and if you're not all you ought to be but certainly not what you used to be, then you have eternal life, so enjoy it.

Do You Love Other Christians?

In 1 John 3:10, John mentions two obvious facts. One, as we just saw, is that "anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God." The other is that neither is anyone "who does not love his brother." To amplify that point, let's go back to a key section we missed in our progressive study of John's letter: "The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (2:9-11).

To say you're in the light--or you've seen the light--is to claim to be a Christian. If so, your life would certainly show some of the life patterns of Christ. Loving fellow Christians is one very basic pattern. To be in fellowship with Christ is to experience and express love. If you claim to be a Christian but do not even like Christians, your claim is a sham. You are in fact walking in darkness, not in the light.

Loving fellow Christians comes naturally to the believer. As Paul said to the Thessalonian church, "[Regarding] the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (1 Thess. 4:9). Nevertheless, he went on to encourage them to "excel still more" in their love for one another (v. 10). As believers, we haven't loved as fully as we ought to love, but we have loved. And we don't need to be taught to love because it's instinctive, implicit, and inherent within our new nature. As we learned in Romans 5:5, "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts."

Jesus went so far as to say, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). It is basic to our Christian life that we have the capacity to "fervently love one another from the heart," as Peter expressed it (1 Peter 1:22). And it's a love that goes beyond mere feeling to encompass dutiful responsibility, sacrificial service, and sensitive concern.

So here comes the test: Do you characteristically love other believers? If you claim to be a Christian but have no love in your heart for those in the church or any track record of meeting their needs, then the apostle John says this to you: You're in the dark in spite of your claim to be in the light. Love is a test of divine life. It signifies you have crossed over from darkness to light. This is how 1 John 3:14-15 putsit: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."

Do you honestly care about other believers or are you cold, uncaring, and indifferent? Do you have a desire to reach out and meet their needs? Those who don't care are spiritually dead, characterized by an ongoing hatred. In our sophisticated age, that is manifested not so much in vitriolic hostility as in an utterly self-centered approach to life. People who continually focus on themselves and couldn't care less what happens to anyone else are of their father the devil, who "was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). As believers, however, "we know love by this, that [Christ] laid down His life for us" quite the opposite of the devil's murderous character. Therefore, "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).

John defined love as making sacrifices for others, perhaps even to the point of martyrdom. How do you respond to the opportunities you typically have to sacrifice your time, treasures, and talents? Are you happy when you come across a person or ministry in need, and you're able to provide money, time, prayer, a commodity, a skill, or a sympathetic ear?

What about enjoying the privilege of fellowship in general? Do you look forward to being with fellow Christians and talking with them, sharing with them, discussing the things of God with them, studying the Word with them, and praying with them? Do you have a desire to take the resources God has given you and apply them to someone else in the family of God? That's evidence of love, as John went on to explain: "Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (vv. 17-18).

Note the result of such a practical approach to love: "We will know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God" (vv. 19-21). The assurance that you are a Christian--that your faith is the real thing--will come by your love. The Greek word translated "assure" (peitho) means to pacify, tranquilize, soothe, or persuade. You can soothe yourself as you stand before God that you're a true Christian if you see love in your life.

Now your love won't be perfect, but it will be there. Let that bolster your assurance, for John warned that your heart or conscience may try to incriminate you and make you doubt. The fallen flesh has the capability to play games with your mind. Satan, the accuser of the brethren, may seek to exploit that tendency. In whatever your heart condemns you, you can be assured if you see love in your life. You may doubt your salvation, but God never does because He is greater than your heart and knows all things.

Perhaps you're going through doubt and struggling with your assurance. Do as John said and go back to the love of your life: Examine whether you love other Christians as evidenced by deeds of kindness and sacrifice. If that's characteristic of your life, be soothed, be pacified--for no matter what your heart may do to condemn you, you can be sure of your salvation. A condemning conscience can rob you of your assurance because it looks only at failure. But God is greater than your conscience; He looks at your faith in Christ.

The apostle Peter, after denying Christ three times, had a worse time than any of us can imagine with a condemning heart. Jesus came personally to assure him. Three times in a row He inquired gently about Peter's devotion. In desperation, Peter replied, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You" (John 21:17). We too can appeal to the love God sees in our hearts. It's not perfect but, again, it's there. And it will express itself through deeds of kindness and sacrifice to others. Jesus told Peter to reveal his love by taking care of the church. It's natural for the Christian to "do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10). Your love for fellow Christians is a benchmark of the Christian faith, and solid grounds for assurance. Refuse to let your heart condemn what God does not.

Do You Experience Answered Prayer?

Another source of confidence and assurance is this: Whatever we ask of God "we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:22). You can know you're a believer if God answers your prayers. The only way that can happen is if you keep His commandments, and the only way you can do that is if you belong to Him. As John says in verse 24, "The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him."

In a similar passage John said, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (5:13-15). God always answers prayers that are according to His will. Obedient believers know His will as stated in His Word, and tailor their prayers accordingly. The answers that result bring about confidence and assurance.

God is more eager to answer the prayers of His children than they are to ask. I suspect there's a certain disappointment in God's heart because He would do so much more than we ever ask Him to do. Think of the blessings and assurance we miss out on!

Now there are many people who pray to God, but don't even know the God they're praying to or what His will is. God is under no obligation to answer such prayers. We learn from the Psalms that He doesn't even hear them (cf. Ps. 66:18). But those of us who see answers to our prayers can know we have eternal life. One of the many good reasons to pray fervently and faithfully is to enjoy the assurance that answered prayer brings.

Some believers struggle with being assured of their salvation because they have scant experience concerning answered prayers. That comes from a skimpy prayer life. What a tragedy! If you're in that situation, reverse it immediately. I don't want you to miss out on the blessing and comfort that answered prayer brings. Looking back on my life, one of my greatest sources of assurance is seeing that God has answered many of my prayers through the years. That He answered is evidence that He hears me, which is evi-dence that I abide in Him and He in me.

Have you had your prayers answered? Is that a pattern of life for you? If so, you have eternal life. Have you prayed for an unbeliever and seen that person come to Christ? Have you prayed for someone in great distress and seen God turn the situation around into blessing and joy? Have you sought God about a void in your life and seen Him fill it? Have you prayed for forgiveness in a clear conscience and received it? Have you asked God to enable you to present His truth to an individual

or group and experienced His grace to do so with great clarity? Have you sought power in proclaiming the gospel and experienced it? Have you asked that God would help you lead someone to the Savior, and He did? Have you sought contentment amidst trying circumstances and experienced God's peace as a result? Have you asked the Lord to help you know Him better and experienced greater intimacy with Him after going through some hard lessons? Those are all indications that you belong to Him and He to you.

Do You Experience the Ministry of the Holy Spirit?

First John 4:13 develops that theme of belonging to God: "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit." The first thing the Spirit did was "testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world" (v. 14). If you confess that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and have committed your life to Him, that was the Spirit's doing. Apart from the Holy Spirit, you wouldn't know who Christ is and you certainly wouldn't confess Him as Savior and Lord. Have you experienced that ministry of the Holy Spirit? If so, that's evidence of being a true child of God.

Another vital work of the Spirit is His illuminating your understanding of Scripture. John, speaking of the Spirit, said, "The anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and ... teaches you about all things" (2:27). Paul explained that "the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God ... that we may know the things freely given to us by God" (1 Cor. 2:10, 12). When you read the Word of God, is its meaning illuminated to you? Do you understand what it says? In fact, do you sometimes understand it so well you wish you didn't understand quite that well because of the obvious implications? Is it relatively clear overall? Now I'm not talking about obscure passages that we all struggle with, but consider the effect that reading the Word has on you. Ask yourself, Does it convict me when I'm sinful? Does it make me rejoice when I'm worshiping God and seeking to advance His kingdom? Those are signs of the Spirit's illuminating work in your life.

Let's look at other ministries of the Spirit. What about fellowship with God? It is the Spirit who leads you to cry out "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6) as a sign of your intimacy and communion with God. What about praise? Who is it that lifts your heart to praise and adore God? Who is it that compels you to sing with meaning and devotion? In Ephesians 5:19, Paul explains that the filling of the Spirit leads to "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." What about the fruit of the Spirit, which Paul describes as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control"? (Gal. 5:22-23) Those attitudes are spiritual graces. Have they graced your life as a whole?

Have you ever ministered in a spiritual way through helping someone, giving to someone, or speaking to someone about Christ? Those are evidences of the Spirit of God. Do you actually experience His

ministry in your life? In Romans 8:16, Paul explains that "the Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." Now don't expect Him to whisper into your ear, "You're a Christian, you're a Christian, believe Me you're a Christian!" There's no audible voice, nothing esoteric or mystical, but something very concrete. He bears witness by providing you with evidence of His presence in your life--by illuminating Scripture to you, drawing you into fellowship with God through prayer and praise, producing spiritual fruit to grace your life, and enabling you to minister effectively to others.

If the Spirit is in your life, that's evidence that you abide in God and He in you (1 John 4:13). So be assured. Don't let your heart condemn you, damn you, tell you you're not a believer. Recognize the Spirit's work in you. There's no reason to doubt and be unstable.

Can You Discern between Spiritual Truth and Error?

So far we've taken nine tests for determining the presence of saving faith. In the tenth is the one time John actually used the word test: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:1-3).

Every false religious system in the world violates that test. Adherents of such systems consistently attempt to undermine the biblical truth about who Jesus Christ is and what He accomplished--that He is Savior and Lord, who came in human flesh to be "delivered over because of our transgressions, and ... raised because of our justification" (Rom. 4:25). Can you tell when someone is presenting false teaching about the person and work of Christ? That is the watershed issue of the Christian faith.

False teachers "are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:5-6). John was saying a true believer will listen to the truth and not deviate into error about Christ's glorious person and work. Suppose someone says, "I used to believe in Jesus Christ, but now I've seen the light: Christ really was an angelic being--or an emanation from God, a divine spirit without the human element, or just a man and not divine." Any such heresies reflect an unregenerate heart.

From the moment of your salvation, there's one thing you're clear about and that's who Christ is and what He did, or you wouldn't be saved. It's the Holy Spirit who made that clear to you. This test is not moral or experiential but doctrinal. True believers know truth from error because the Spirit of Truth indwells them. "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ," John says, "is born of God" (1 John 5:1). That's the same doctrinal test again. When you believe the right thing about Christ, you're born of God.

It's good to be a believer, but it's also good to be skeptical. As John says, "Do not believe every spirit" (4:1, emphasis added). For the sake of your spiritual life and health, don't believe everything you hear, see, and read. Instead, "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God." That requires the ability to think biblically. The Greek text implies conducting a rigorous, ongoing examination of whatever and whomever you expose yourself to. Why go to all that trouble? "Because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

The conquering of the city of Troy is one of the most famous stories of antiquity. Greek soldiers had laid siege to the city for over ten years, but were unable to conquer it. In exasperation Ulysses, a brilliant strategist, decided to have a large wooden horse built and left outside the city walls as a supposed gift to the unconquerable Trojans. The Greeks then sailed away in apparent defeat. The curious and proud Trojans brought the wooden horse inside their fortified walls. That night Greek soldiers hidden inside the horse crept out and opened the city gates to let their fellow soldiers into the city. The soldiers massacred the inhabitants, looted the city, and burned it to the ground. Ever since, the Trojan horse has been a symbol of infiltration and deception. Throughout its history, the church has embraced many Trojan horses filled with false prophets.

Satan has effectively used enemies disguised as gifts to lure people away from the truth of God and into destructive error. Today's church is in a particularly severe state of confusion because of its weak doctrine, relativistic thinking, worldly methodology, inaccurate interpretation of Scripture, lax internal discipline, and spiritual immaturity. What is sorely needed is spiritual discernment--the skill of separating divine truth from error (1 Thess. 5:21).

Perhaps you are discerning in the everyday affairs of life. You read nutritional labels because you want to be healthy. You read the fine print of the stock market report before making financial investments. If you need surgery, you carefully select the right doctor. Maybe you're highly analytical about politics and can accurately assess a plethora of domestic and foreign issues. Or maybe you're an armchair quarterback who evaluates offensive and defensive strategies. All that is fine, but can you discern between divine truth and error?

To do that, John said to test for two things: confession of the divine Lord (1 John 4:2-3) and commitment to the divine Word (vv. 4-6). If you study the cults, you'll detect a pattern. Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and the like attack the person of Christ and then postulate a substitute or addition to the Bible, such as Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, The Book of Mormon, or The Pearl of Great Price. True believers won't believe such lies. They have a resident truth teacher in the person of the Holy Spirit (I John 2:27).

I listened to a radio program recently where a man was propagating a religion I never heard of before. It didn't take me long to discover he was not representing the truth. I was immediately put on guard by

the way he skewed one brief biblical statement at the beginning of his message. I continued to listen rather intently until he was finished, whereupon he declared the existence of a great prophet who is the instrument of God to bring great truth to humanity. What he said did not square with Scripture. I knew it was error because the Spirit of God has convinced me about salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone and the veracity of Scripture. I knew I didn't need some prophet of modem times to give me the truth.

You don't have to be a seminary graduate or an expert on cults and world religions to distinguish truth from error. If you aren't swayed from the basic truths of Christ's divine person, work, and Word, that's evidence of genuine saving faith.

Have You Suffered Rejection Because of Your Faith?

This eleventh and last test is painful: "Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you" (1 John 3:13). Cain hated Abel and murdered him. Why did Cain do that? "Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous" (v. 12). Have you experienced animosity, hostility, rejection, bitterness, alienation, ostracism, prejudice, or outright persecution from representing and advocating what is right? If so, that's a sign that you belong to One who suffered the same way for the same reason.

The fact is, to the worldly, you as a Christian "have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things" (1 Cor. 4:13). You're a threat to their belief that this world is all that's worth living for."They are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you" (1 Peter 4:4). However, Scripture says, "[Be] in no way alarmed by your opponents--which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you" (Phil. 1:28). When suffering on account of your faith, don't say, "Can I really be a Christian? Things are going so badly--I wonder if God cares." Rather, if the world is persecuting you, say, "Isn't this truly wonderful! It's pretty clear who I am."

I'll never forget one night many years ago when I was called to the church office to deal with an emergency. I arrived to find one of our elders struggling with a girl who was obviously demon possessed. She was evidencing supernatural strength. She flipped a heavy steel desk over onto its top and the two of us together were unable to restrain her physically. Voices that were not her own were speaking out of her. The first thing they said when I arrived was, "Not him! Get him out! Get him out! We don't want him here." It encouraged me to know that the demons knew I was not on their side.

That was a very confirming night for me. When the world and the spirit of Satan behind it come after you, you too have the right to be confirmed if you're hated because of righteousness. Now, if you're hated because you're obnoxious, there's no virtue in that! "But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God" (1 Peter 2:20). Part of that favor is being

assured of your salvation.

The apostle John gave all the tests that he did to give the true believer a biblical basis for confidence. Let's review his spiritual inventory: Do you enjoy fellowship with God and Christ? Are you sensitive to sin in your life? Do you obey the Scriptures? Do you reject this evil world? Do you love Christ and eagerly await His return? Do you see a decreasing pattern of sin in your life? Do you love other Christians? Do you receive answers to your prayers? Do you experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit? Can you discern between spiritual truth and error? Have you suffered on account of your faith in Christ?

If you pass those tests, you can have confidence before God. After all, John wrote what he did so "you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13). There's no reason for you to go through your spiritual experience in the dumps, yet thousands of Christians do. Please don't be one of them.

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