

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH Part IV 12. ITS NATURE

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Transcript

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Part IV

12. ITS NATURE

Let us begin by asking the question, Assurance of what? That the Holy Scriptures are the inspired and infallible Word of God? No, that is not our subject. Assured that salvation is by grace alone? No, for neither is that our immediate theme. Rather, the assurance that I am no longer in a state of nature, but in a state of grace; and this, not as a mere conjectural persuasion, but as resting on sure evidence. It is a well-authenticated realization that not only has my mind been enlightened concerning the great truths of God's Word, but that a supernatural work has been wrought in my soul which has made me a new creature in Christ Jesus. A scriptural assurance of salvation is that knowledge which the Holy Spirit imparts to the heart through the Scriptures, that my "faith" is not a natural one, but "the faith of God's elect" (Titus 1:1), that my love for Christ is sincere and not fictitious, that my daily walk is that of a regenerated man. The assurance of the saints is, as the Westminster divines said, "by the Spirit enabling them to discern in themselves those graces to which the promises of life are made." Let us seek to amplify that statement. At the commencement of Matthew 5 we find the Lord Jesus pronouncing blessed a certain class of people. They are not named as "believers" or saints," but instead are described by their characters; and it is only by comparing ourselves and others with the description that the Lord Jesus there gave, that we are enabled to identify such. First, He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." To be "poor in spirit" is to have a feeling sense that in me, that is, in my flesh, "there dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7:18). It is the realization that I am utterly destitute of anything and everything which could commend me favorably to God's notice. It is to recognize that I am a spiritual bankrupt. It is the consciousness, even now (not years ago, when I was first awakened), that I am without strength and wisdom, and that I am a helpless creature, completely dependent upon the grace and mercy of God. To be "poor in spirit" is the opposite of Laodiceanism, which consists of self-complacency and self-sufficiency, imagining I am "rich, and in need of nothing." "Blessed are they that mourn." It is one thing to believe the theory that I am spiritually a poverty-stricken pauper, it is quite another to have an acute sense of it in my soul. Where the latter exists, there are deep exercises of heart, which evoke the bitter cry, "my leanness, my leanness, woe unto me!" (Isa. 24:16). There is deep anguish that there is so little growth in grace, so little fruit to God's glory, such a wretched return made for His abounding goodness unto me. This is accompanied by

an ever-deepening discovery of the depths of corruption which is still within me. The soul finds that when it would do good, evil is present with him (Rom. 7:21). It is grieved by the motions of unbelief, the swellings of pride, the surging of rebellion against God. Instead of peace, there is war within; instead of realizing his holy aspirations, the blessed one is daily defeated; until the stricken heart cries out, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). "Blessed are the meek." Meekness is yieldedness. It is the opposite of self-will. Meekness is pliability and meltedness of heart, which makes me submissive and responsive to God's will. Now observe, dear reader, these first three marks of the "blessed" consist not in outward actions, but of inward graces; not in showy deeds, but in states of soul. Note too that they are far from being characteristics which will render their possessor pleasing and popular to the world. He who feels himself to be a spiritual pauper will not be welcomed by the wealthy Laodiceans. He who daily mourns for his leanness, his barrenness, his sinfulness, will not be courted by the self-righteous. He who is truly meek will not be sought after by the self-assertive. No, he will be scorned by the Pharisees and looked upon with contempt by those who boast they are "out of Romans 7 and living in Romans 8." These lovely graces, which are of great price in the sight of God, are despised by the bloated professors of the day. We must not now review the additional marks of the "blessed" named by the Redeemer at the beginning of His precious Sermon on the Mount, but at one other we will just glance. "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake.. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you. . .for My sake" (Matt. 5:10, 11). Observe that this antagonism is not evoked by wrongdoing, or by a well-grounded offence. They who are morose, selfish, haughty, evil speakers, cruel, have no right to shelter behind this beatitude, when people retaliate against them. No, it is where Christ-likeness of character and conduct is assailed; where practical godliness condemns the worldly ways of empty professors, that fires their enmity; where humble but vital piety cannot be tolerated by those who are destitute of the same. Blessed, said Christ, are the spiritual, whom the carnal hate; the gentle sheep, whom the dogs snap at. Now dear reader, seek grace to honestly measure yourself by these criteria. Do such heavenly graces adorn your soul? Are these marks of those whom the Son of God pronounces "blessed" stamped upon your character? Are you truly "poor in spirit"? We say "truly": for it is easy to adopt expressions and call ourselves names—if you are offended when someone else applies them to you, it shows you do not mean what you say. Do you "mourn" over your lack of conformity to Christ, the feebleness of your faith, the coldness of your love? Are you "meek"? Has your will been broken and your heart made submissive to God? Do you hunger and thirst after righteousness?—do you use the means of grace, your searching of the Scriptures, your prayers, evince it? Are you "merciful," or censorious and harsh? Are you "pure in heart"? grieved when an impure imagination assails? If not, you have no right to regard yourself as "blessed"; instead you are under the curse of a holy and sin-hating God. It is not, Are these spiritual graces fully developed within you—they never are in this life. But are they truly present at all? It is not are you completely emptied of self, but is it your sincere desire and earnest prayer to be so. It is not do you "mourn" as deeply as you ought over indwelling sin and its activities, but have you felt at all "the plague" of your own heart (1 Kings 8:38). It is not is your meekness all that can be desired, but is there unmistakable proof that the root of it has actually been communicated to your soul? There is a growth: "first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear." But that which has no existence can have no growth. Has the "seed" (1 Pet. 1:23) of grace been planted in your heart: that is the point which each of us is called upon to determine—not to assume, or take for granted, but to make "sure" (2 Pet. 1:10) of. And this is done when we faithfully examine our hearts to discover whether or not there is in them those spiritual graces to which the promises of God are addressed. While Gospel assurance is the opposite of carnal presumption and of unbelieving doubts, yet it is far from being opposed to thorough self-examination. But alas, so many have been taught, and by men highly reputed for their orthodoxy, that

if it is not actually wrong, it is highly injurious for a Christian to look within. There is a balance of truth to be observed here, as everywhere. That one might become too introspective is readily granted, but that a Christian is never to search his own heart, test his faith, scrutinize his motives, and make sure that he has the "root of the matter" within him (Job 19:28), is contradicted by many plain Scriptures. Regeneration is a work which God performs within us (Phil. 1:6), and as eternal destiny hinges on the same, it behooves every serious soul to take the utmost pains and ascertain whether or not this miracle of grace has been wrought within him. When Paul stood in doubt of the state of the Galatians, he said, "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (4:19). So to the Colossians he wrote, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). "For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in (or "by") God" (John 3:20, 21). Here is one of the vital differences between the unregenerate and the regenerate, the unbelieving and the believing. Unbelief is far more than an error of judgment, or speculative mistake into which an honest mind may fall; it proceeds from heart-enmity against God. The natural man, while left to himself, hates the searching light of God (v. 19), fearful lest it should disquiet the conscience, expose the fallacy of his presumptuous confidence, and shatter his false peace. But it is the very reverse with him who has been given "an honest and good heart." He who acts sincerely and conscientiously, desiring to know and do the whole will of God without reserve, welcomes the Light. The genuine Christian believes what Scripture says concerning the natural heart, namely, that it is "deceitful above all things" (Jer. 17:9), and the surest proof that he does believe this solemn fact is that he is deeply concerned lest "a deceived heart hath turned him aside" (Isa. 44:20), and caused him to believe that all is well with his soul, when in reality he is yet "in the gall of bitterness, and the bond of iniquity." He believes what God's Word says about Satan, the great deluder, and trembles lest, after all, the Devil has beguiled him with a false peace. Such a possibility, such a likelihood, occasions him much exercise of soul. Like David of old (and every other genuine saint), he "communes with his own heart" (Ps. 4:4), and his "spirit (makes) diligent search" (Ps. 77:6). He turns to the light of Holy Writ, anxious to have his character and conduct scrutinized by the same, desiring to have his deeds made manifest, as to whether they proceed from self-love or real love to God. It is not that we are here seeking to foster any confidence in self, rather do we desire to promote real confidence toward God. It is one thing to make sure that I love God, and it is quite another for me to find satisfaction in that love. The self-examination which the Scriptures enjoin (in 1 Cor. 11:28, for example), is not for the purpose of finding something within to make me more acceptable to God, nor as a ground of my justification before Him; but is with the object of discovering whether Christ is being formed in me. There are two extremes to be guarded against: such an undue occupation with the work of the Spirit within, that the heart is taken off from the work of Christ for His people; and, such a one-sided emphasis upon the imputed righteousness of Christ that the righteousness imparted by the Spirit is ignored and disparaged. It is impossible that the Third Person of the Trinity should take up His abode within a soul, without effecting a radical change within him: and it is this which I need to make sure of. It is the Spirit's work within the heart which is the only infallible proof of salvation. It is perfectly true that as I look within and seek to faithfully examine my heart in the light of Scripture, that the work of the Spirit is not all I shall discover there. No, indeed: much corruption still remains. The genuine Christian finds clear evidence of two natures, two contrary principles at work within him. This is brought out plainly, not only in Romans 7 and Galatians 5:17, but strikingly too in the Song of Solomon: "What will ye see in the Shulamite? As it were the company of two armies" (6:13). Hence it is that in her present state, the Bride says, "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon" (1:5). And again, "I sleep, but my heart waketh" (5:2)—strange language to the natural man, but quite intelligible to the spiritual. And therefore is it also

that the renewed soul so often finds suited to his case the prayer of Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." It is because the real Christian finds within himself so much that is conflicting, that it is difficult for him to be sure of his actual state. And therefore does he cry, "Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try my reins and my heart" (Ps. 26:2). They who are filled with a carnal assurance, a fleshly confidence, a vain presumption, feel no need for asking the Lord to "prove" them. So completely has Satan deceived them, that they imagine it would be an act of unbelief so to do. Poor souls, they "call evil good, and good evil"; they "put darkness for light, and light for darkness" (Isa. 5:20). One of the surest marks of regeneration is that the soul frequently cries "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23, 24). Perhaps some of our readers are still ready to say, "I do not see that there needs to be so much difficulty in ascertaining whether one is in a lost or saved condition: I am resting upon John 5:24, and that is sufficient for me." But allow us to point out, dear friend, that John 5:24 is not a promise which Christ gave to an individual disciple, but instead, a doctrinal declaration which He made in the hearing of a mixed multitude. If the objector replies, "I believe that verse does contain a promise, and I am going to hold fast to it," then may we lovingly ask, Are you sure that it belongs to you? That John 5:24 contains a precious promise, we gladly acknowledge, but to whom is it made? Let us examine it: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." That promise is given to a definitely defined character, namely, "He that heareth my word." Now dear reader, can it be truthfully said that you are one that "heareth" His Word? Are you sure? Do not be misled by the mere sound of words. The reference here is not to the hearing of the outward ear, but to the response of the heart. In the days that He sojourned on earth, there were many of whom the Lord Jesus had to say that "hearing (with the outward ear), they hear not" with the heart (Matt. 13:13). So it is still. To "hear" spiritually, to "hear" savingly, is to heed (Matt. 18:15), is to obey (Matt. 17:5; John 10:27; Heb. 3:7). Ah, are you obedient? Have you searched the Scriptures diligently in order to discover His commandments? And that, not to satisfy an idle curiosity, but desiring to put them into practice? Do you love His commandments? Are you actually doing them? Not once or twice, but regularly, as the main tenor of your life—for note it is not "hear" but "heareth." Does someone object, "All of this is getting away from the simplicity of Christ: you are taking us from the Word, and seeking to get us occupied with ourselves." Well, does not Scripture say, "Take heed unto thyself" (1 Tim. 4:16)? But it may be answered, "There cannot be any certainty while we are occupied with our wretched selves; I prefer to abide by the written Word." To this we have no objection at all: what we are here pressing is the vital necessity of making sure that the portions of the Word you cite or are resting upon, fairly and squarely belong to you. The reader may refer me to "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31) and ask, Is not that plain enough? But have you ever noted, dear friend, to whom the apostles addressed those words, and all the attendant circumstances? It was neither to a promiscuous crowd, nor to a careless and unconcerned soul, that the apostles said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. Rather was it to an awakened, deeply exercised, penitent soul, who had taken his place in the dust, and in deepest anguish cried, "What must I do to be saved?" However, what is the use you are making of Acts 16:31? You answer, "This: those words are divinely simple, I believe in Christ, and therefore I am saved; God says so, and the Devil cannot shake me." Possibly he is not at all anxious to; he may be well content for you to retain a carnal confidence. But observe, dear friend, the apostles did not tell the stricken jailor to "believe on Jesus" nor "believe in Christ"; but to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." What does it mean to savingly "believe"? We have sought to answer this question at length in our recent articles on "Saving Faith." But let us now give a brief reply. John 1:12 makes it clear that to "believe" is to "receive," to receive "Christ Jesus the Lord" (Col. 2:6).

Christ is the Saviour of none until He is welcomed as Lord. The immediate context shows plainly the particular character in which Christ is there viewed: "He came unto his own" (John 1:11); He was their rightful Owner, because their Lord. But "his own received him not"; no, they declared, "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). Ah, dear friend, this is searching. Have you received "the Lord Jesus Christ"? We do not ask, "Are you resting on His finished work," but have you bowed to His scepter and owned His authority in a practical way? Have you disowned your own sinful lordship? If not, you certainly have not "believed on the Lord Jesus Christ," and therefore the promise of Acts 16:31 does not belong to you. "Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Rom. 8:9). This is just as much a part of God's Word as is Acts 16:31. Why do we not hear it quoted as frequently! And how can anyone know that he is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ? Only by discovering within him the fruits of His regenerating and sanctifying grace. Not that either these "fruits" or the "good works" of the Christian are in any wise or to any degree meritorious. No, no; but as the evidence of his Divine sonship.

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