

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH Part IV 16. ITS HINDRANCES

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Transcript

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Part IV

16. ITS HINDRANCES

"Question: Are all true believers at all times assured of their present being in the estate of grace, and that they shall be saved? Answer: Assurance of grace and salvation not being of the essence of faith (2 Pet. 1:10), true believers may wait long before they obtain it (1 John 5:13); and, after the enjoyment thereof, may have it weakened and intermitted, through manifold distempers, sins, temptations, and desertions (Ps. 77:7-9; 31:22, etc.); yet are they never left without such a presence and support of the Spirit of God, as keeps them from sinking into utter despair" (Ps. 73:13-15, 23; 1 John 3:9; Isa. 54:7-11).—Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism. Just as the absence or loss of bodily health is not always attributable to the same cause or occasion, neither is the absence or diminution of assurance always to be accounted for in the same way; and just as any doctor who used only one medicine for the healing of all diseases would exhibit his crass incompetency, so any "Christian worker" who prescribes the same treatment to all soul-diseases at once declares himself a physician "of no value" (Job 13:4). There are degrees of health, both of body and soul; and this is to be ascribed, in the first place, to the high sovereignty of God, who distributes His gifts, both natural and spiritual, as He pleases. Yet, while we cannot impart health to ourselves, we should use legitimate means which, under God's blessing, are conducive thereto. So too we may, through our sinful folly, undermine and destroy our health. The same holds good in the spiritual realm. In many cases lack of Christian assurance, or a very low degree thereof, is due to a poor state of health. Bodily infirmities react on the mind. Low physical vitality is usually accompanied by lowness of spirits. A sluggish liver produces depression and despondency. Many a person whose soul is now "cast down" would be greatly benefited by more open-air exercise, a change of diet, and a few doses of castor oil. Yet we are far from saying that this course would result in the recovery or increase of assurance, for spiritual effects cannot be produced by material agents. Nevertheless, the removal of a physical hindrance is often an aid. Who can read the Word to profit while suffering from a nerve-racking headache! What we wish to make clear is that, in some instances at least, what is regarded as a lack of assurance is nothing more than physical inability to enjoy the things of God. Nor do we mean by this that none are blest with the joy of the Lord while their bodily health is at a low ebb. Not so: there are striking cases which show the contrary. But it still remains that many are missing much spiritual good

through their disregard for the elementary laws of physical well-being. The assurance of some of God's dear children has been hindered by a defective ministry. They have sat under teaching which was too one-sided, failing to preserve a due balance between the objective and the subjective aspects of the Truth. They have been encouraged to be far more occupied with self than with Christ. Knowing that many are deceived, fearful lest they also should be, their main efforts are directed to self-examination. Disgusted too by the loud boastings of empty professors, perceiving the worthlessness of the carnal confidence voiced by the frothy religionists all around them, they hesitate to avow the assurance of salvation lest they be guilty of presumption or be puffed up by the Devil. Yea, they have come to regard doubtings, fears, and uncertainty as the best evidence of spiritual humility. Now while we are by no means prepared to sanction the idea last named, yet we have no hesitation whatever in saying that we much prefer it to the presumptuous claims now being made by so many. Far rather would we cast in our lot with a company of lowly, pensive, self-distrustful people, who exclaim, "'Tis a point I long to know, Oft it causes anxious thought, Do I love the Lord or no, Am I His, or am I not?," than fraternize with those who never have a doubt of their acceptance with Christ, but who are self-complacent and haughty, and whose daily walk compares most unfavorably with the former. Better far to be weighed down by a sense of my vileness and go mourning all my days over lack of conformity to Christ, than to remain ignorant of my real state and go about light-hearted and light-headed, wearing a smile all the time. But surely there is a happy medium between spending most of my days in Doubting Castle and the Slough of Despond so that I am virtually a stranger to "the joy of the Lord," and experiencing a false peace from Satan which is never disturbed by the voice of conscience. Holy assurance and lowly heartedness are not incompatible. The same apostle who cried, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24), also declared, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him" (2 Tim. 1:12). "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10) summed up his dual experience. We too are "sorrowful" daily if God has opened our eyes to see something of the mass of corruption which still indwells us; "sorrowful" too when we perceive how far, far short we come of the example which Christ has left us. Yet we also "rejoice" because God has not left us in ignorance of our dreadful state, that He has planted within us deep yearnings after holiness, and because we know these yearnings will be fully realized when we are freed from this body of death. The assurance of other saints is greatly dampened by the assaults of Satan. There are three principal things which our great enemy seeks to accomplish: incite us to sin, hinder the exercise of our graces, and destroy our peace and joy. If he fails largely in the first two, he is often very successful in the third. Posing as an angel of light, he comes to the soul preaching the holiness of God and the exceeding sinfulness of sin, his object being to overwhelm the conscience and drive to despair. He presses upon the Christian the awfulness and prevalency of his unbelief, the coldness of his heart toward God, and the many respects in which his deportment and actions are un-Christ-like. He reminds him of numerous sins, both of omission and commission, and the more tender be his conscience, the more poignant are Satan's thrusts. He challenges him to compare his character with that given of the saints in Scripture, and then tells him his profession is worthless, that he is a hypocrite, and that it is mockery to take the holy name of Christ upon his polluted lips. So many succumb to Satan's efforts to disturb their peace and destroy their assurance through not knowing how to meet his attacks, and through forgetting that Scripture is very far from representing the earthly lives of God's children as flawless and perfect. As a general rule it is the best thing to acknowledge the truth of Satan's charges when he declares that I am still a great sinner in myself. When he asks me if such and such a lusting of the flesh be consistent with a heart in which a miracle of Divine grace has been wrought, I should answer, Yes, for the "flesh" in me has neither been eradicated nor refined. When he asks, How can such doubtings consist with a heart to which God has communicated saving faith? remind him how Scripture

tells us of one who came to Christ saying, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24). But the commonest hindrance to assurance is the indulgence of some known sin. When a Christian deliberately follows some course which God's Word forbids, when he lives in some unwarranted practice, and God has often touched him for it, and his conscience has been sorely pricked, and yet he perseveres in the same—then no wonder if he be destitute of assurance and the comfort of the Spirit. The cherishing of sin necessarily obscures the evidences of Divine sonship, for it so abates the degree of our graces as to make them indiscernible. Allowed sin dims the eye of the soul so that it cannot see its own state, and stupefies the heart so that it cannot feel its own condition. But more: it provokes God, so that He withdraws from us the benevolent light of His countenance: "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear" (Isa. 59:2). The sad history of David presents a solemn case in point. His fearful fall brought with it painful consequences: "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long: for day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer" (Ps. 32:3,4). But, blessed be God, his earthly life did not end while he was in this lamentable state: "I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32:5). Further light on the deep exercises of soul through which David passed is given us in Psalm 51. There we hear him crying, "Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clear heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation" (vv. 9-12). This leads us to consider the maintenance of assurance.

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