

The Witness of the Spirit

by J.W. McGarvey

The sermon emphasizes the importance of knowing we are children of God and provides a clear and certain witness to our relationship with God through the testimony of the Holy Spirit and our own spirit.

Scripture: Nehemiah 9:30, Psalm 22:1, Psalm 23:1, Romans 6:18, Romans 8:16, 2 Corinthians 5:6, Ephesians 1:7, 1 Thessalonians 1:4, Hebrews 10:15, 1 John 3:2

Topics: "Assurance Of Salvation", "Holy Spirit"

Description

J.W. McGarvey preaches about the assurance of being children of God, emphasizing the importance of knowing our status as God's children for both our eternal happiness and joy in this life. He contrasts the uncertainty and doubt experienced by many believers today with the unwavering confidence of the apostles like Paul, who knew without a doubt their relationship with God. McGarvey urges believers to turn to the Bible to find a solid foundation for their faith, highlighting the need to align their character with the standards set by the Holy Spirit's testimony to confidently claim their identity as children of God.

Transcript

"The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are children of God."--ROM. viii: 16.

In order to our eternal happiness, we must become children of God. In order to our happiness in time, we must know that we are such. He who is in doubt on this subject, must be not less unhappy than he who knows he is not a child of God. Indeed, the advantage is on the part of the latter; for he is likely to cast the subject out of his thoughts, and put off the evil day to the last; but the very fact of being in doubt supposes a man to be awakened upon the subject, and to have made some efforts to become a child of God, but such efforts as leave him still uncertain whether his sins, which he mourns, are actually forgiven. His soul hangs in trembling suspense; now thrilled with hope, the more ecstatic from its very uncertainty, and now sunk to the very verge of despair. Such is the experience of thousands of the orthodox worshipers of to-day. They never attain to more than a "hope" that they are born again; and to often entertain serious doubts, is the best evidence that this hope is well grounded. To hear a man express himself with confidence, would be to them a ground for [327] suspicion that he was self-deceived. Their religious enjoyment fluctuates with the phases of their hope; and there are no songs more popular than those which give expression to these fluctuations. What else has given popularity to these familiar lines:

"How tedious and tasteless the hours,

When Jesus no longer I see;

Sweet prospects, sweet birds, and sweet flowers,

Have all lost their sweetness to me.

The midsummer sun shines but dim,

The fields strive in vain to look gay;

But when I am happy in him,

December's as pleasant as May."

Or, why else should men, professing to be Christians, ever sing these doleful strains:

"'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?"

How unutterable must be the distress, at times, of men who can sing these songs with the spirit and the understanding! And yet, so common is this experience, that men look upon it as the common heritage of those who obey Christ. I dropped in one night at a protracted meeting, and heard the preacher addressing a company of some thirty young converts. He was warning them against certain sins and temptations which they must expect to encounter, and, among others, against what he called the "sin of despair." He defined it about thus: "The time will often come, my young friends, when you will seriously doubt whether you have ever been born again. I suppose I can appeal to the experience of every [328] Christian in the house to-night for proof of this. All of us experience seasons when we hang our harps on the willows all the day long, and can not sing the songs of Zion. When these seasons come over you, beware lest you give up in despair, and turn away again to the weak and beggarly elements of the world." I could but feel pain that such a prospect should be held out before young Christians, and I wondered if this is the unhappy lot which our heavenly Father has assigned us.

Turn to the Bible, and let us see whether there is not something better within our reach than this limping and halting gait at which the people go. The experience of David is that which most of all gives shape to our modern religion, and just as you might expect, here you find the very fluctuations of hope and despair which we have described. Hear him, in the Twenty-third Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." What exultation and confidence are here! Who that had listened to these strains, could, for a moment, imagine that the same heart and lips gave utterance to the following plaintive notes: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O, my God, I cry in the day-time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent." Yet, these are David's feelings as expressed in the Psalm next preceding the one just quoted. Truly, our modern experiences have at least one model in the Word of God. But David lived in a darker dispensation, when the sun of righteousness had not yet [329] risen and thrown his bright

light upon the world. When you turn from his to the experience of the apostles, you find all the difference that there is between the uncertain shadows of twilight, and the clear light of noonday. Where do you read of Paul, or Peter, or James, or John expressing any doubt as to their relations to God? Not one single note of uncertainty can be found in all their writings. On the contrary, you hear Paul declare: "We are always confident; knowing that while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." (2 Cor. v. 6-8.) To the Romans he says: "Being then made free from sin, you became the servants of righteousness." To the Ephesians: "In whom we have redemption through his blood; the forgiveness of sins." And to the Thessalonians: "Knowing, brethren, beloved, your election of God." Here all is the language of confidence, of certainty. And so with the other apostles. Peter does not look upon the election of his brethren as a mystery that can not be solved in life, and that never can be certainly known till the judgment; but he writes, in tones of confidence, to strangers scattered throughout the provinces, as being "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Christ." And John exclaims: "Beloved, we are now the sons of God: and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him: for we shall see him as he is."

Now, the secret of all this confidence on the part of the apostles and early Christians, is found in the passage before us: "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." If the spirit of God [330] testified to the fact, how could they doubt it? No wonder, that with such testimony, they were always confident. But, then, you remind me, that our doubters of modern times are the very men with whom this passage is the greatest favorite. In the midst of all their doubts and conflicts, these words are constantly on their lips. Even the preacher, of whom I spoke as addressing some young converts, had, just before that speech, made them all believe that they had the witness of the Holy Spirit itself, bearing witness with their spirits that they were children of God. Yet he was then telling them that they would be certain, in many future days, to doubt this testimony of the Spirit. What was the trouble with the man? Could he and his young converts really doubt what the Spirit of God would testify to? I suppose not. And yet, they are full of doubt while dwelling upon and relying upon the very passage of Scripture which gave the apostles their unwavering confidence. What clearer proof could we possibly have that their understanding of the passage is different from that held by the apostles. And how do they understand it? Why, in the process of their conversion, they have experienced certain emotions, which they are taught to believe are the result of a direct impact of the Holy Spirit upon their spirits, and which they understand as the testimony which the Holy Spirit bears to them that they are children of God. But the trouble is, that they can never be altogether certain that it was the Holy Spirit which they felt. Sometimes they feel as if it certainly must have been; and sometimes they fear that it was merely the workings of their own spirit, mistaken for those of the Holy Spirit. Thus they are tossed to and fro upon the waves of doubt, while the ghostly experience, like a specter in the distance, becomes dimmer and dimmer as time removes farther away, [331] and the shadows of failing memory fall upon it. The Lord deliver us from such uncertainty, and lead us into the clear light that shone upon the path of the early disciples!

It is easy to see the sense in which the apostles understood this passage, or, rather, the sense in which Paul used it. He supposes an individual asking himself the question, "Am I a child of God?" and sitting down deliberately to find the answer. Now, this is a question of fact, and is to be determined, like any other question of fact, by competent evidence. Further, it depends upon two other facts: 1st. What character constitutes a child of God? 2d. What character have I? If I can learn with certainty what a man must do and be, in order to be adopted into the family of God, and then ascertain, with equal certainty, what I have

done and what I am in those particulars, the question is settled. If what I am, and what a child of God is, are the same, then I am certainly a child of God. If they are different, then I am certainly not a child of God, and there is no doubt about the matter either way.

Each of these subordinate questions is to be settled by evidence, and the witnesses are named by the apostle in the passage. The first is the Holy Spirit. He is the only competent witness whose testimony we have on the first question; for the question as to what character a man must have to be a child of God, depends entirely upon the will of God; for "the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God," and "the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God." The apostles had heard Jesus testify; but he had not told them all the truth; nor could they, with certainty, remember all that he had said. It was left for the Spirit to bring to memory all that Jesus [332] had spoken, and to lead them into all the truth. Upon the Spirit, then, they depended for all their knowledge of the will of God. If they wished to know what constitutes one a child of God, they learned it from the testimony of the Spirit. They had no other way to learn it, and no other way was needed, for this was infallible. What they learned thus, they spoke with equal infallibility to the world. "God has revealed these things to us through his Spirit," says Paul; "which things we also speak; not in words which man's wisdom teaches, but in words which the Holy Spirit teaches." Others, then, heard the testimony of the Spirit through the lips of those inspired men, and in this they heard the very words of the Spirit. These words, again, were written down, so that those who had not the opportunity of hearing the living voice of the apostles might have the same words in writing, and suffer no disadvantage, as compared with those who first heard them. We stand in the position of this last class. We have no testimony of the Spirit by inspiration of our own minds, neither have we the living voice of inspired men to inform us; but we have, what is just equal to this in value, the written depositions of the Spirit of God; and these testify, in unmistakable terms, what a man must do to be a child of God.

Lest some one should doubt whether it is scriptural to represent the statements of the Scriptures as the testimony of the Spirit, listen to a few examples of Scripture usage. Nehemiah, in the prayer of the Levites, uses this language in reference to God's dealings with the children of Israel: "Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy Spirit in thy prophets." Peter says the old prophets searched "what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it [333] testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow." And, still more to the point, in the tenth of Hebrews, Paul, after stating that "by one offering Christ has perfected forever them that are sanctified," says: "Of this the Holy Spirit is a witness to us;" and immediately quotes a passage from the 31st chapter of Jeremiah as the Spirit's testimony. These passages show that the Spirit's communications to the inspired men themselves--those made through them to living cotemporaries, and the same when written down for the instruction of future ages--are all alike regarded and treated as the testimony of the Spirit. Paul, in the passage we are discussing, had reference, no doubt, to all these forms of testimony, for his language is unrestricted, and, therefore, includes all the testimony that the Spirit has given on the subject in hand. But to us, the reference must be practically limited to the written testimony, for this is all we have.

The whole matter of the Spirit's testimony resolves itself into this: that the Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures, testifies that men who pass through certain changes, and maintain, afterward, a certain character, are children of God. Whatever may be men's theories of spiritual influence, you will find no believer in the inspiration of the Scriptures who will deny that the Spirit does thus testify, or who will affirm that he communicates ideas on this subject in any other way. And when you come to the details of the testimony itself--whatever may be men's theories of conversion--you will find few to deny that the man who

believes with all his heart in the Lord Jesus Christ, who really repents of his sins, and who is really baptized, becomes a child of God. Some will insist that baptism is no part of the process; but none will deny that [334] the true believer, when truly penitent and truly baptized, is a child of God. Here, then, we have the unquestioned testimony of the Spirit describing a certain character, who, unquestionably, becomes a child of God.

But, when a man has heard this testimony of the Spirit of God, he is not yet quite ready to say whether he himself is, or is not, a child of God. There is another witness yet to be examined before a conclusion can be reached, and though his testimony is given so briefly and so silently as to be sometimes overlooked, it is, on this account, none the less indispensable. This witness is your own spirit. He is the only witness who can tell you, with certainty, whether you have believed with all the heart, or whether you have really, through sorrow for sin, turned away from it. And still further, in the present distracted condition of the public mind on the subject of baptism, your own soul must testify for itself--as it will answer to God in the great day--whether you have been really baptized.

In respect to our own spirit's testimony, especially, have our friends of the religious parties generally misunderstood this passage of Scripture. They understand the text as if it read: "The Spirit itself bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God." This would make but one witness, the Holy Spirit. But Paul has two witnesses, for he says: "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit." This is an exact translation of the Greek. Now, when I testify to my brother, there is but one witness; but when I testify with him, he and I are both witnesses, and my testimony agrees with his. This is just Paul's idea. The Holy Spirit itself bears testimony which agrees with the testimony of our own spirit, that we are children of God. The point of agreement is just this, that the character which the Holy Spirit asserts to [335] be that of a child of God, agrees with what my own spirit asserts to be my own character.

Perhaps some one is ready to object, just here, that it is rather a strange mode of speech, for a man to represent his own spirit as being a witness to himself. But this is not the only passage in which Paul speaks in this way. When speaking of the unbelief of Israel, in the ninth of Romans, he uses this language: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart." In the Greek we have here the same verb as in our text, so that, more exactly translated, it would read, "my conscience also bearing witness with me." Here are two witnesses, himself in the aggregate testifying to the brethren, and his conscience, which does not in every man agree with the spoken words, asserting within him the same thing.

We now have the subject sufficiently before us, to begin to feel the solid ground beneath our feet. When the Holy Spirit testified to Paul what character God would adopt as a child, he could not doubt it; and when he honestly inquired of his own spirit what his own character was, he could not doubt the answer that was given. When these two characters agree, to doubt that you are a child of God is to doubt either your own consciousness, or the words of the Holy Spirit. While you are in your senses, you can not doubt the former; and until you become a skeptic, you can not doubt the latter. This is true, not only of your first becoming a child of God, but also of your continuance in the Father's family. It is of this more particularly that Paul speaks; for the brethren to whom he was writing had all been in the service of God for some length of time. The Holy Spirit testifies what character a man must [336] sustain, in order to continue in the Father's house, and not, like the prodigal son, wander away and squander what the Father has given in riotous living. My own soul testifies at every point whether these are the traits of my own character. And here it is that I feel most called upon to glorify the favor of God; for at almost every point my own spirit testifies that I come short of the character that the Holy Spirit's testimony prescribes, and were it not for

one gracious provision, the answer would always be, I have become a prodigal. That gracious provision is made through the blood of Christ; for a part of the Spirit's testimony is this, that if the children will confess their sins, they have an Advocate with the Father, who is faithful and just to forgive their sins, and to cleanse them from all iniquity. My own spirit leaps with joy at this, while it testifies that in humble penitence I daily confess to God my daily sins, and thus, from day to day, the Spirit itself still bears witness with my spirit that I am even yet a child of God. This is no airy and unsubstantial means of determining this momentous question, such as prevails in the sectarian world. It is incomparably more solid and reliable than that which modern visionaries have blindly substituted for it. It impels a man, by all the force of his desire, to know his prospects of heaven, to study closely the elements of character prescribed in the Word of God for his imitation, and then to look deeply within himself, not for some mysterious whisperings of the Spirit of God, but for those fruits of the Spirit which characterize the child of God. He who intelligently applies this test, can no more doubt his conclusions than he can his own consciousness, on the one hand, or the Word of God, on the other.

It is not usual, in the New Testament, to find these two [337] witnesses brought together in the strict logical connection which Paul, in our text, makes them assume. Usually the writer alludes to but one of them at a time, presuming upon the reader's acquaintance with the other. One or two, out of many instances, will suffice for illustration of this statement. Paul says to the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith." But how could they decide, by examining themselves, without some standard by which to judge themselves? This standard is furnished in the Spirit's testimony, and the disciples were well acquainted with it. Again, John says: "Hereby we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us." But no man knows that he has the Holy Spirit, except by its fruits, as they are developed in his life; and for a knowledge of these he is dependent on the testimony of his own spirit. In every view of the subject, you find a continual necessity for the testimony of both the witnesses, and you always find their testimony sufficient to set the mind at rest, or to make the soul feel the certainty of its orphaned or its alienated estate.

And now, sinner--poor, wandering sinner--would you be a child of God, and an heir of glory? The way is before you. It is no uncertain way. I call you not to dreams and airy visions, but to the highway of the Lord, where your feet, at every step, will tread upon a rock; where the clear light of heaven will shine on your path; or, if the tempest beat upon you, you may never lose your way. You have sinned against heaven, and are no longer worthy to be called a son of God, yet he will receive you, he will fold you to his arms like a tender, forgiving parent, and the tears of your penitence will drown all your sorrow, and melt away into eternal peace. God help you to come, and to come without delay. [338]

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