

the third of the 'Four Alls'

All Can Know They are Saved

BEN PUGH

Assurance: What it is and why it's so important

Cliff College lecturer, Dr Ben Pugh, takes us through the third of the Four Alls: All can know they are saved.

THE PROBLEM OF FEAR

Think of the preacher's question, 'If you got run over by the Number 7 bus on your way home tonight, how can you be sure you'd go to heaven?' I may be wrong, but it seems to me there is now at least a generation of clear water between the days when questions like this still had some resonance, and the kinds of concerns people have now. Today, the question – both for people of faith and otherwise – is 'How can I be free from this constant anxiety?' ... How can I know lasting peace?' All such questions embody the same primal angst. There is something fundamentally disconcerting about being in the world. It can affect all of us, Christian or otherwise, but is especially troubling for us as Christians because we feel that, in a world of unease, we ought to be the ones radiating peace!

WESLEY'S DISTINCTIVE APPROACH

For John Wesley, the lack of assurance in a person's life was a serious issue. Assurance was not just desirable, and people were not told just to ignore their feelings and double down on believing what the Bible says. As I read his sermons, I see in him a real compassion for people, which is perhaps quite surprising in so self-disciplined a figure as Wesley.

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Wesley's approach to assurance was rooted in his distinct concept original sin. The classic view of Augustine had been that sin is concupiscence – out-of-control desires, especially of a sexual nature. These desires have made the will incapable of serving God. Calvin's view had modified Augustine's to define the first sin as a desire for illicit knowledge, leading to spiritual blindness, as well as all other aspects of his famous 'total depravity' doctrine.

For Wesley, the essence of the very first transgression was that it was a failure to love God. Henceforth, sin shows up in all Adam's descendants as a total inability to love God:

No man loves God by nature, any more than he does a stone, or the earth he treads upon. What we love we delight in: but no man has naturally any delight in God. In our natural state we cannot conceive how anyone should delight in him. We take no pleasure in him at all; he is utterly tasteless to us. To love God! It is far above, out of our sight. We cannot, naturally, attain unto it (Sermon 44:II.5. 'Original Sin,' Sermons on Several Occasions. Available here: <https://ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.html>).

For Wesley, the failure to love God as we ought is remedied when we come to know that God first loved us. The whole sanctification project, which centres on being empowered to love God with all our heart, mind and strength, and love our neighbours as ourselves, is made possible by becoming assured of God's love towards us, hence the importance assurance:

... we must love God before we can be holy at all, this being the root of all holiness. Now we cannot love God till we know he loves us: 'We love him because he first loved us.' And we cannot know his love to us, till his Spirit witnesses it to our spirit (Sermon 11.III.5 'The Witness of the Spirit II').

This prior love of God is evidenced in the sending of his Son but also revealed by the Spirit. The Spirit causes each of us to know and experience for ourselves that love with which we were first loved. Assurance can only rest here: in a love that loved us first, a love that did not wait for us to start showing forth the fruits of a redeemed life but loved us before we had so much as a single throb of spiritual feeling for God.

HOW TO EXPERIENCE ASSURANCE

In the age of John Locke, Wesley was keen to construct a spiritual alternative to Locke's scientific method. In response to Locke's insistence that all reliable knowledge comes only via the physical senses, Wesley developed a unique doctrine of the spiritual senses.

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These spiritual senses can be trusted, every bit as much as the physical senses, to provide us with totally reliable access to the assurance of God's love. Such spiritual realities are 'immediately and directly perceived, if our spiritual senses are rightly disposed' (Sermon 10.II.9 'The Witness of the Spirit I'). This is how the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we truly are the children of God (Romans 8:16). The Spirit shows it to our spiritual senses. He causes us to know it at a deep level.

Wesley describes the calming effects of this inner confirmation:

... he works upon the soul by his immediate influence, and by a strong, though inexplicable operation, that the stormy wind and troubled waves subside, and there is a sweet calm; the heart resting as in the arms of Jesus, and

the sinner being clearly satisfied that God is reconciled, and that all his 'iniquities are forgiven, and his sins covered' (Sermon 11.II.4 'The Witness of the Spirit II').

CONCLUSION

'Perfect love casts out fear,' says John (1 John 4:18). It turns it out of doors. God's love filling us, resulting in an overflow of love for God and for others, is the only thing that finally triumphs over fear, over anxiety, over worry. Certain techniques can calm us. I am prone to anxiety myself. I can recommend asking your smart speaker to play 'BBC Radio 3 Unwind'; I can recommend Ashwaghandha tablets; I can recommend breathing through the Jesus Prayer, and walking. Many of the solutions commonly recommended I too have found useful, but there is nothing to compare with the moment in November 2017 when, in an empty office next to mine at Cliff College as I sat before the Lord, I truly saw and knew that God first loved me. He had always loved me and always would. It was the beginning of the end of all fear. My prayer for me and for you is that we would become ever more filled with that love as the Spirit continues to reveal to our spiritual senses its full astonishing reality.

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