

Introduction

Personal Doubts

When I was a teenager (and even in college), I struggled with doubts about my salvation. Like many of you, I heard mixed messages about the gospel. Some explained the gospel thoroughly to me. I was separated from God because of my sin and I could not restore that relationship because my sin remained. By God's grace, Jesus became a human, bore my sin, and died for me. Through faith in Jesus, God would forgive me of sins, restore me to a relationship with Him, and give me eternal life. This is the gospel message I believed and devoted myself to.

However, I often heard others say that I needed to ask Jesus into my heart. I also heard people say that I should know the day and the place when I was saved. In other words, salvation was a singular, identifiable event. That gospel message did not reflect my experience at all. Therefore, I struggled with doubts about my salvation.

Assurance

What is the basis for our assurance? I am not the only person who has struggled with doubts about my relationship with God. Many people have shared with me similar struggles and I suspect many of you have struggled with such doubts. There are many things that contribute to our doubts, such as our own imperfections. It can be difficult to discern if I continue in sin because I lack saving faith or because I have faith, but am currently unfaithful.

A major reason that these doubts about our relationship with God continues is that we look to the wrong thing for assurance. We look back to a prayer or walking to the front of the church during an altar call. Ironically, those who falsely profess faith in Jesus often look to these events as the basis for their confidence. Know this, a prayer and a response during an altar call can be just as much a work as trying to be saved by obeying God's commands.

Main idea

How can you have confidence before God? Confidence before God does not come from looking back to something you did in the **past**. In fact, confidence before God does not come from something you **did**.

The letter of 1 John has a dual purpose. For one, it was written to call out false professions of faith. That is, true faith always results in a changed heart, changed mind, and changed life. If you are unchanged by the Holy Spirit, you do not know God.

However, 1 John was also written to reassure those who have genuine faith. 1 John 5:13 "13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may **know** that you have eternal life." The letter was not written so that you would live in fear. It was written to define what genuine faith is and how genuine faith is shown.

So, how can those who know God have confidence in their relationship with Him? 1 John 3:19-24 addresses the issue of doubts and reassures us that we can indeed have confidence before God. These verses point us to two things that gives confidence to those with faith. ***We can have confidence before God by trusting in God's grace and by abiding in Him.***

Trusting God

First, verses 19-22 directs us to look to **God** as the basis of our assurance. That is, **we can have confidence before God by trusting in God's grace.** 1 John 3:19-22 "19 By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; 20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he

knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”

Main Point

Because of his burden for caring for orphans, **George Muller**, a Christian preacher opened numerous orphanages in England, caring for more than 10,000 orphans. Muller refused to ask for financial support; he merely prayed and trusted that God would provide. One morning, his orphanage had no food. Muller gathered the children for breakfast and they prayed. While they prayed, a local baker knocked on the door and told Muller that he had felt compelled early that morning to bake bread to bring to the orphanage. During breakfast, a milkman’s cart broke down outside the orphanage. The milkman offered the milk to the orphanage, expecting it to spoil before his cart was fixed.

George Muller once said, “The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety.” 1 John 3 addresses our assurance because the letter anticipates doubt. However, these verses point us to **God** as the basis for our confidence. **We can have confidence before God by trusting in God’s grace.**

God versus our heart

Why do we have doubts about our relationship with God? Notice the source of our doubts in 1 John 3:20 “... whenever **our heart** condemns us ...” There are definitely outside sources that push us toward doubt. For the church in 1 John, there were false teachers within the church that had gathered a following and caused division in the church. But ultimately, these doubts discussed in 1 John 3 come from our own heart. We see the same point in 1 John 3:19 “By this we shall know that we are of the truth and **reassure our heart** before him;” Our doubts come from our own hearts, so our need is reassurance for our hearts.

Why might a true believer have doubts about his relationship with God? Think of all that has been said in this letter about evidence of genuine faith. Those who know God repent of sin, obey God, love other believers, believe true doctrine about Jesus, abide in the Spirit, live in righteousness. It is quite natural to read this letter and say, ‘I don’t live up to **any** of those things.’

This letter acknowledges imperfection. 1 John 1:8-10 says that anyone who claims sinlessness is a liar, including Christians. 1 John 2:1-2 says that we should not sin ... but **when we sin**, we can trust in Jesus’s death that atoned for our sins.

How do true believers confront our doubts? First, we cannot sugarcoat the teaching throughout 1 John. If you profess faith in Jesus, but don’t have a changed life, you **should** question your salvation. The Holy Spirit fills those who have genuine faith and they are new creations.

Second, if our faith is genuine, **we should trust God’s grace.** 1 John 3:20 “20 for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.” **God’s grace, not our works, is the basis for our confidence.**

Our culture (and Christians) say we should “**follow our hearts.**” If you want to do something, just follow your heart. If you believe something to be true, just follow your heart. Listen to Jeremiah 17:9 “9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” There is no telling where following my heart will lead me. **Stop following your heart; follow God.**

The following verse says in Jeremiah 17:10 “10 “I the Lord search the heart and test the mind ...” *Who can know my heart?* Not me, my heart is deceitful. But God knows my heart. If I want assurance before God, I must **trust God’s grace**, not my own heart or my own works. I must submit my heart to God’s grace

Confidence before God

What is the result of trusting God’s grace in our imperfection and doubts? First, **we have confidence before God.** 1 John 3:21 “21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God;”

To some degree, I think this refers to confidence before God in our daily lives. But I think this particular verse refers to confidence in the **day of judgment**. That is primarily how the word “**confidence**” is used in this letter. 1 John 2:28 “28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have **confidence** and not shrink from him in shame at his **coming**.” 1 John 4:17 “17 By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have **confidence** for the **day of judgment** ...”

The point of 1 John 3:21 is that **when we trust God’s grace, we can have confidence when we stand before God in judgment**. This confidence is based completely on atonement of sin through Jesus’s blood. 1 John 2:1–2 “1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an **advocate** with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the [**atonement**] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Second, **we have confidence in prayer**. 1 John 3:22 “22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”

This verse can be so misunderstood in two different directions. One way we might misunderstand this verse is to **overly qualify it**, meaning, we may add too much to this verse. ‘God will answer my prayers, but only within His will; therefore, I should only pray for things that I **know** are in His will.’ That is a poor understanding of God’s grace. Without a doubt, I want God’s will over my own; He is wise and I am not. But God loves His people and we should express our hearts to Him in complete humility and submission, but also in complete faith.

Another way we might misunderstand this verse is to **under-qualify it**, meaning, we take it as a blanket statement that God grants every prayer. This is the claim of charismatic theology - name it and claim it. ‘Whatever I ask in Jesus’s name **will** be done.’ However, Scripture qualifies God’s answers to our prayers. Here are two examples. 1 Peter 3:7 “7 Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.” **Men**, if you cannot maintain fellowship with your wife, do not expect God to answer your prayers. James 4:3 “3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” If you pray **selfishly**, do not expect God to answer your prayers.

One guiding verse for our prayers should be Psalm 37:4 “4 Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” If you delight in the Lord, your desires and your prayers will be for the glory of God, not for the glory of self. 1 John 3:22 does not mean that God will be your genie or Santa Claus. It means that when you trust God’s grace, you can have confidence that He hears and cares about your prayers.

Conclusion

George Muller had confidence in prayer because **he had confidence in God**, not himself or others. He said, “Faith does not operate in the realm of the possible. There is no glory for God in that which is humanly possible. Faith begins where man’s power ends.”

It is natural to doubt our relationship with God because of our imperfections. However, **when we trust God’s grace, we can have confidence before God ... on the day of judgment and when we pray**.

Abide in God

Verses 19-22 encourage us to look to God’s grace for assurance. Verses 23-24 encourage us to look to our **relationship** with God for assurance. **We can have confidence before God by abiding in Him**. 1 John 3:23–24 “23 And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.”

Main idea

In the early 4th century, a false teacher named **Arius** began teaching that Jesus was not eternal; He was a created being. Arius said, “there was a time when the Son was not.” This is the same teaching we see today in the Jehovah’s Witnesses. A theologian from Alexandria, Egypt named **Athanasius** stood against Arius’s false teaching. He argued that Jesus was the eternal God who became a man, without sacrificing His deity.

Unfortunately, at the time, Arius convinced many people and Athanasius found himself in the minority. He was sent to **exile** 5 times (a total of 17 years) for defending Jesus’ deity. **Athanasius’ personal slogan** became, “Athanasius against the world.” Yet, this was no problem for Athanasius. He was not concerned what people thought of him; he was only concerned with what God thought of him. He wrote, “the Lord knows who are His, even though the whole world be against them.”

Just as our eternal life comes from our relationship with God, so also our confidence before God grows through our fellowship with Him. **We can have confidence before God by abiding in Him.**

God’s Commands

How can we grow in our confidence before God? Notice that verse 24 says that **those who abide in God keep His commands.** 1 John 3:24 “24 Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him ...”

Verse 23 gives two specific examples (primary examples) of keeping God’s commands. First, **we must live by faith in Jesus.** 1 John 3:23 “23 And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ ...”

Gospel: The only way that we come into a relationship with God is through faith in Jesus. We are sinners, separated from God and hopeless. Yet, in God’s mercy, Jesus became a human to bear the guilt of our sins in His death. Jesus’s death does not atone for everyone’s sins. His death atones for the sins of those who have faith in Him.

Faith is also the only way that we can rightly live for God. Listen to Paul’s rebuke of the churches in Galatians 3:2-3 “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

Genuine faith is belief in the truth of Jesus that leads to love for God and devotion to Him. We obey God by faith in Jesus.

Second, **we must love one another.** 1 John 3:23 “23 And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and **love one another**, just as he has commanded us.”

This point was the focus of the previous section (1 John 3:11-18). God’s people should love one another, not like Cain who hated his brother, but like Jesus who sacrificed Himself for his brother. Jesus said that people would know His disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35).

How do these things give us confidence before God? I think the point here is that (1) failure to live by faith in Jesus and to love others is the source of our doubts and (2) if you want to grow in your confidence before God, pursue living by faith in Jesus and loving others.

Live by the Spirit

Verse 24 also says that **those who abide in God have the Holy Spirit.** 1 John 3:24 “2... And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.”

God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden where they could **dwell** with Him. They sinned and God drove them away from the Garden. God commanded Moses to build the tabernacle as a place for His people to **dwell** with Him (Exod 25:8) and the temple was built for the same purpose (1 Kgs 6:13).

At Jesus's birth, God came to earth and **dwelt** among us (John 1:14). The temple of God was not a building, it was a person. Now, Jesus has ascended into heaven at the right hand of God on the throne. Yet, God still **dwells** with His people. 1 Corinthians 3:16 “16 Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” 1 Corinthians 6:19 “19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? ...”

When a person comes to faith in Jesus, God gives us the Holy Spirit, who is the eternal God (the Triune God). The Holy Spirit cleanses us, makes us new creations (Titus 3:5-6), and **dwells** within us.

1 John 2:24 says that “we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.” *How do we know that we have the Holy Spirit?* The answer is in verse 23. First, *do you have faith in Jesus?* 1 Corinthians 12:3 “... no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.” Conviction and true faith is a work of the Holy Spirit. Second, *do you love other believers?* Remember 1 John 3:11-18 ... those who don’t know God don’t love other believers AND we can only love other believers if God’s love abides in us. If we have the Holy Spirit and live by the Spirit, we will have faith in Jesus and love other believers.

Conclusion

Athanasius once said, “If the world is against the truth, then I am against the world.” One of the greatest contributors to doubts about our standing before God is living an **adulterous faith**, loving God and loving the world. *Do you want to grow in your assurance before God?* **We can have confidence before God by abiding in Him.** That is, we come into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus and being made alive by the Holy Spirit. We grow in our relationship with God and our assurance by **living by faith in Jesus and living in the Holy Spirit.**

Conclusion

Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21 “21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” All the time I struggled with doubts about my standing before God, I could not say, ‘to die is gain.’ After all, to die is gain **if I know God ... but what if I didn’t.**

How can you have confidence before God? Confidence before God is never based on pride or self-assurance. Instead, our confidence is based on God’s grace that He shows us through Jesus’s atoning death.

As you read Scripture and see your own imperfection, your heart may condemn you. But 1 John 3:19-24 teaches us that **We can have confidence before God by trusting in God’s grace and by abiding in Him.**