

Blessed Assurance

In the name of him in whom we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, dear friends in Christ: Living as a faithful Christian in this fallen world isn't easy. Nor should we expect it to be. Jesus never said, "Sit back, take it easy, and enjoy the ride." No, he said "Take up your cross and follow me." And a cross, by definition, isn't easy.

We have examples of such crosses in two of today's Scripture readings. In the Old Testament lesson, the prophet Amos is sent by the Lord to denounce the illegitimate worship established by the king of Israel by which he was leading his people away from the truth and the one true God. For his trouble Amos is accused of high treason and effectively exiled from the country. In the Gospel we see that John the Baptizer had it even worse. Jailed for daring to call King Herod to repent for having taken and married his brother's wife, he is later executed because of Herod's foolish oath and his new wife's wicked spite.

We see examples in our time as well. Witness the cake bakers, florists, and photographers who are being insulted, fined, and forced to give up their chosen professions for being unwilling to use their talents to help celebrate so-called marriages that are contrary to nature and God's good design; or the doctors, nurses, and medical specialists who suffer similar treatment for refusing to use their skills to take life rather than to preserve it as they have sworn to do. We'll see it again shortly as the president's nominee for the Supreme Court faces a veritable gauntlet of attack and character assassination if he so much as suggests that murdering babies in the womb is something that he is morally opposed to.

And while this tide of anti-Christian activity is steadily rising in our country, we know that compared to our brothers and sisters in the Lord living in other parts of the world, we have it pretty easy. No one here is bombing our churches, destroying our homes, putting us in prison, or threatening us with death – at least, not yet; and probably not for the foreseeable future.

But it raises the question: what if it did? Ask yourself, what if I were called to suffer for the faith or for my biblical morality? How would I hold up under persecution? What would I be willing *or able* to endure? Or, ask it a different way: what would it take for me to compromise, to cave in, or to renounce my faith altogether? Not terribly long ago I heard about a Christian man in Iraq. ISIS terrorists were holding guns to the heads of his four children telling him that unless he denied Christ and embraced Islam, they would be killed. To save his children, he said what they wanted him to. The terrorists promptly killed the children anyway because *they* refused to convert to Islam. This story was told by the man's priest to whom he had gone afterward, asking if he had committed an unpardonable sin. He sinned, yes. Under the circumstances, it would have been better for him to set the example for his children. But his sin was not unforgivable. But, ask yourself, what would I have done? Do I really believe that to die confessing Christ is better than living while denying him? If you are a confirmed member of the church, that's what you've sworn to do: to suffer all, even death, rather than turn from the faith.

But so many who have taken that oath do precisely that – they do turn from the faith. And no one is holding a gun to their heads or threatening to kill their loved ones. No, they turn for other reasons; some because they suffer a tragedy or disappointment of some kind. Things didn't turn out like they thought they should. And they blame God for it. They're angry with him. They end up following the advice of Job's wife who, seeing her husband in distress very

unsympathetically advised that he curse God and die. I for one would not want to stand before the Lord in the judgment with that as my final act in life. It wouldn't bode well for the future.

Others fall from the faith for other reasons; some because they are offended. The pastor or someone else at the church said or did something that angered them, so they stay away. Others fall into temptation or into lifestyles that are incompatible with the faith. Others are seduced by false doctrines or the wisdom and philosophies of the world. And still others (most perhaps) fall away through apathy and neglect of the means of grace. They don't feed their faith and eventually it starves to death.

We see it happen to people all the time. It's a sad and tragic sight to behold. We pray for their restoration and do what we can to encourage them to repent and return to the Lord. But that people can and do fall away from the faith ought to raise another issue in your mind: namely, if it can happen to them, it can happen to me too. The promise of Christ is "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." How do I know that I will remain faithful? Knowing my weakness, knowing my capacity to stray, knowing as I do my sinful, rebellious will, how do I know for sure that I am going to make it to the end and be awarded the crown of life? I know I believe *today*. The question is how do I know that I will keep on believing *tomorrow* and the *next day* and the rest of my life on this earth? If that thought has not occurred to you and if it doesn't trouble you to some extent, it should.

What we are dealing with here is the question of assurance. And we find the Lord's answer to it in today's Epistle lesson, which is the opening of Paul's letter to the Christian Church at Ephesus. They are words of pure comfort to souls struggling with the question "How can I know for sure that in the end I will be saved?"

The simple answer is that salvation is entirely the work of God. Just as you did not create yourself, just as you did not redeem yourself by suffering and dying on the cross for your sins, so also the work of sanctifying you and keeping you in the true faith is God's work, not yours. If any part were left up to you, if you could mess it up, you would. But everything that pertains to your final salvation is in the hands of your heavenly Father, and you can trust him because he won't mess it up.

Listen to what Paul says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." Every blessing. Everything you need to remain faithful has been and will continue to be provided by the Lord.

Nor is this a day by day, "let's see how it goes" kind of operation. This is the Father's eternal plan for you. As Paul says, the Father "chose us in [Christ] from the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Christ Jesus, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." This is the truth of your eternal election: you were chosen by God who preordained your salvation and saw you standing before him in the righteousness of Christ before he called any part of the created order into existence. Why? Because he is gracious, that is, he is merciful, kind, and good to you even though you in no way deserve it. It's who God is. He is love. And in Christ, he loves you. He always has. And he always will.

What's more, he has made all of this known to you precisely so that you can be sure of it. He made it known to you in your Baptism by which you were united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, and through whom he adopted you and made you an heir of all that is

his. He continues to make it known to you by reminding you of the redemption Jesus achieved for you by shedding his blood on the cross, and even more by giving you the sacrificed body and blood of the Savior under bread and wine for you to eat and drink.

And finally, as a guarantee of all his good intent toward you, he has placed upon you the seal of his Holy Spirit that marks you as one of his own and by whom he sanctifies and keeps you in the truth faith. From the first to the last, God has you covered. Find your blessed assurance in him.

Now, all of that applies and needs to be said to someone who is struggling with the question of assurance, who is concerned and fearfully pondering whether or not in the end they will be saved. But we want to distinguish between faithful assurance and carnal self-security – the person who says, “Oh, since I am one of the chosen, since the Lord has me covered, then nothing I do matters. Why, I can sin to my heart’s content and neglect the means of grace. Who needs any of that? I’m one of the elect and nothing can change it.”

Such a person has no fear of the Lord, nor do they recognize how thoroughly he hates sin. They treat the sacrifice of Jesus with contempt, failing to appreciate how much he suffered, and using the blood-bought forgiveness of the Savior as a license to go on sinning. Together this would indicate that the Holy Spirit *is not* operating in the person’s life, for it is the work of the Spirit that causes us to see our sin, fear God’s wrath, repent, and receive forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Such a person needs to be told that their sense of assurance is false. They need to hear that they are in full blown rebellion and that if they do not repent they will not be saved. The truth of our election in Christ from before the foundation of the world is comfort for the troubled soul. It is not meant to bolster the proud and sinful one.

One final thought on God’s election of grace is this: our election is always in Christ. In some theological circles election is presented as the ultimate cause of salvation. God chooses you, and then sort of as an afterthought, he sends his Son as Savior to redeem you. So the big question is not, what did Jesus do for me; but rather, am I one of the chosen? That’s the wrong way to look at it. The focus of saving faith must be Jesus and his work. That’s where we must always seek and find the guarantee of salvation – in the death of Jesus for sin and his victorious resurrection. It’s in him, and in him alone, that we have blessed assurance. And in humble gratitude we do, to the praise of God’s glorious grace. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!