

THE
WORKS
OF
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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SERMON XX.

OF THE ASSURANCE OF FAITH.

And we know that we are of God. 1 JOHN V. 19.

A WELL-GROUNDED and abiding persuasion, not only that the doctrines of the gospel are true in themselves, but that we, through grace, are surely and unchangeably interested in them, is highly desirable. If we may be safe, we cannot be happy and comfortable without it, when once we have received an experimental knowledge of the deceitfulness of our own hearts, and the variety, subtlety, and force of Satan's temptations: and he who knows our frame and situation has, in his holy word, made a full provision for us in this respect, and declared it to be his intention, that those who flee for refuge to the hope he has set before them, might have strong consolation (Heb. vi. 18.); not be left at an uncertainty in a concern of the highest importance, but be rooted, grounded, established, and settled in the knowledge of his love, and be enabled to maintain it as an unshaken principle through every change of dispensation and frame, "that he who hath begun a good work in them will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ," Phil. i. 6.

This animating confidence, so well suited, and so necessary to render the soul superior to all the trials of life, to inspire a noble disdain of the sinful pleasures and vain pursuits of the present evil world, and to engage the grateful exertion of every faculty and power in the service of God, is generally expressed by the word Assurance. But though the word is in frequent use, the thing itself has been, and still is, a subject of much dispute and controversy amongst professors of the gospel. Many not being conscious of such a cheering persuasion in themselves, and too hasty in supposing their attainments must be a standard to others, have ventured to deny the possibility of such an assurance, and treated every claim to it as visionary and enthusiastic. On the other hand, some have maintained the opposite extreme, and held assurance so essential to faith, that without it no person has a scriptural warrant even to hope that a work of grace is begun in his heart. This sentiment, especially when asserted by persons of undoubted character for gifts, graces, and usefulness, has greatly startled and discouraged weak and feeble-minded souls, and been too often an occasion of adding to the distress of those who rather ought to have been comforted.

Great differences of judgment have likewise obtained concerning the means whereby, the manner in which, and the persons to whom, this assurance is communicated, supposing it attainable. It is not needful to insist on particulars. Perhaps the best way to prevent or remove mistakes, is to pro-

pose the truth simply, which, so far as it takes place, will necessarily prevent the entertainment of error. I only mention in general, that there is a variety of sentiments on this point, and the most of them supported by respectable names, in order to caution you against paying too great a deference to human authority, and to urge you to praise God for your Bibles, and to be diligent in the perusal of them. If you search the scriptures, and pray for the Spirit, you may arrive to a clear satisfaction for yourselves, no less than if all the learned were of one mind, and all of your side.

My text assures us that this assurance was possessed in the first ages of the church. There were some who could say without hesitation, "We know that we are of God;" and though they are an apostle's words, he uses them not exclusively as an apostle, but generally as a believer. The greatest part of the chapter, and indeed of the epistle, shows that he considers those to whom he was writing as partakers with him in the common privileges of Christians. So likewise St. Paul joins the believing Corinthians with himself, when he says, "We know, that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," 2 Cor. v. 1. And elsewhere he takes it for granted, that they (some of them at least) had this assurance, and presses them to a lively discharge of their duty upon that consideration: "for as much as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord," 1 Cor. xv. 58.

And we need make no scruple of affirming from the fullest evidence, that this precious privilege was not confined, or designed by God to be so, to the first ages of the gospel. There have been in all periods of the church, where the word and ordinances of Christ have been faithfully administered, many who could say, "We know that we are of God and we trust there are more than a few who can say so, and give a solid scriptural evidence of the hope that is in them, even in this degenerate day. But because arguments from facts, which must depend upon a person's testimony in their own cases, are not allowed to be fully conclusive, and because the greater part of those who we hope sincerely love the Lord Jesus, live far below their just right and privilege, and are perplexed with doubts and fears, which dishonour their profession, weaken their hands, and make their lives uncomfortable, I shall endeavour at this time to state and explain the nature of assurance, to prove that it is attainable, to point out the means by which we are to expect it, and to take notice of the hindrances which keep so many who are interested in the gospel-salvation from enjoying their privilege, and make them unwilling or afraid to say, "We know that we are of God." What I have to offer on these particulars, will occur under one or other of the following propositions:—

I. Assurance is not essential to the being of faith. It is a strong faith, but we read likewise of a weak faith (Rom. xiv. 1), a little faith (Matth. iv. 31), and

faith like a grain of mustard-seed, Matth. xvii. 20. True saving faith in Jesus Christ is only distinguishable by its different degrees; but in every degree, and in every subject, it is universally of the same kind, and produces (according to its degree) the same uniform effects. It purifies the heart from the love and practice of sin (Acts xv. 9); it works by love to the Lord Jesus Christ, his ordinances, ways, and people (Gal. v. 6); and it enables the possessor to overcome the world (1 John v. 4), to stand fast against its frowns, and to resist the more pleasing, but not less dangerous, influence of its smiles. Each of these effects is beyond the power, and contrary to the inclination of the natural man. "No man can say that Jesus Christ is the Lord" (1 Cor. xii. 3), that is, can give him the honour due to his name, renounce every other hope of salvation, and count all things but loss and dung that he may win Christ (Phil. iii. 8), "but by the Holy Ghost." Yet thus far many have undoubtedly attained, who have not assurance; but while they give sufficient evidence by their conduct that they have received precious faith in their hearts, they go mourning all the day long, and almost pass sentence against themselves as unbelievers. Now, what these mourners want, in order to their establishment and assurance, is not some new principle, which they have not yet received, but only a stronger degree of that faith which they already possess. Some good writers speak of a faith of reliance, a faith of adherence, a faith of assurance, and of the direct and reflex acts of faith, &c.; but these are not scriptural modes of expression, nor do they appear to me to throw light upon the subject, but rather to increase the perplexity of plain people, who are apt to imagine these are so many different kinds of faith. The scriptures mention only two kinds, a *living* and a *dead* faith, James ii. 17. True faith is faint and weak in its beginnings, like the life of a new-born infant, but it is growing up to maturity, and shall increase with the increase of God, "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ," Eph. iv. 13. From thence it follows,

II. The grounds and principles of faith and assurance are exactly the same. The first and lowest act of saving faith necessarily includes three things:

1. An apprehension of the sufficiency and authority of Christ to save. Men that live in their sins will rest upon a slender hope! but a conscience truly awakened must have sure grounds to go upon, and, without the discovery of such a Saviour as is revealed in the gospel, would sink into despair. It is afraid of being deceived, and is so far enlightened that it cannot be easily imposed upon; a sense of the sinfulness of sin, an impression of the majesty of God, will not suffer it to rest in anything short of a perfect atonement and a perfect righteousness. But when the eyes of the mind are opened, and Jesus is seen as revealed by the word and Spirit of God, all scruples of this sort are silenced, and the soul perceives and feels, that he is fully equal to the mighty-

undertaking.

2. An application to him. This of course follows a persuasion of his ability to save; for who will sit down and perish, when there is a possibility of relief? There is, perhaps, a great questioning of Christ's willingness; but still, since there is a peradventure, a sense of distress on the one hand, and a view of his power and grace on the other, will extort a cry, "Lord, save me, or I perish" Matth. viii. 25; and xiv. 30.

3. From hence there arises a hope in his mercy, which is fainter or stronger according as the knowledge of Jesus is more or less distinct, and the surrender unto him more or less simple and unreserved, and therefore, in general, it is very faint at first; for the knowledge of Christ in a measure depends upon our knowledge of the scriptures, which testify of him, and on the proofs we have had of his wisdom, grace, and love to ourselves; but the young convert, in whom the seed of faith is but lately sown, has but little acquaintance with the word; for he has but just begun to know the value of it, and he has but little experience; though his eyes are opened, his sight is not yet confirmed, nor his spiritual senses exercised.

Farther, though he was sincerely convinced of his need of a Saviour, there is still much of a legal bias, and a principle of self-righteousness in his heart, which, so far from being removed, is not yet discovered to himself; and while he thinks he looks to Christ alone, he is looking in himself for qualifications to recommend him, and afraid to draw near with confidence, because he cannot find them. These things discourage his hopes, and demonstrate his faith to be but weak.

But the strongest and most lively assurance that we can conceive attainable in the present life, is wrought and maintained by the very same principles which have so faint an influence in the infancy of faith. Let us hear the great champion St. Paul, in the close of an exemplary, laborious life, giving an account to a dear and intimate friend of the hope that was in him. He had been honoured and distinguished for grace, gifts, and usefulness, in a peculiar manner; he had laboured more abundantly than all the apostles; he had fully preached the gospel, and gathered churches throughout a very large part of the Roman empire (1 Cor. xv. 10; Rom. xv. 19); his first call was extraordinary, by the Lord's appearing to him in glory; and some of his succeeding experiences had been no less singular, for he had been caught up into the third heavens (Cor. xii. 2): finally, his suffering for the gospel had been as great and remarkable as his services. But when he expresses his assurance of support and salvation, he says not a syllable of these things, but rests the whole upon such points as were common to him with all believers: "I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day," 2 Tim. i. 12. We see there St.

Paul's assurance was founded on, 1st, A knowledge of Jesus Christ, the object of his faith; 2dly, A consciousness of transactions which had passed between him and his Saviour,—he had committed something to him, that was, his soul with all its interests; 3dly, A persuasion of his ability, willingness, and faithfulness, to secure and preserve what he had taken charge of. And these are the very same principles which are necessary to the first act of weak faith, only here they exert themselves with their proper power and efficacy. From hence,

III. Assurance is equally open to all believers. It is not the exclusive privilege of great services or sufferings; it is not confined to apostles, ministers, or martyrs, but is a prize set before all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, being no other than the growth and establishment of that faith which they have already received. The reasons why all who believe are not happy in this assurance of hope, are to be sought, not in the will of God, who hath made abundant provision for our comfort, but in the perverseness, ignorance, and misapprehensions of our own hearts, and from inattention to his revealed word. We are not straitened in him, but in ourselves. It is not easy to enumerate the many ways in which our depravity works to keep this good thing from us. A few of the principal are these:—

1. Insincerity. Where grace is really implanted by the Holy Spirit, it will surely prevail at length, and subdue the whole soul to the obedience of faith. But in too many there is, for a long time, not only a great opposition from indwelling corruption, but a secret cleaving of the will to evil; a double-mindedness (James i. 8), a kind of halting between two opinions (1 Kings xviii. 21), so that, while the desire and prayer of the soul seems expressed against all sin universally (Prov, xxiii. 26), there is still an allowed reserve of something inconsistent with light received, Psal. ix. 1. An habitual indulgence of known or suspected evil, or an habitual neglect of any known duty, will certainly prevent the growth of grace and consolation. For the Lord claims (what is his just due) the whole heart, and will not afford the strengthening light of his countenance, while any idol is deliberately set up in his presence. "Then," says David (and not till then), "shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments," Psal. cxix. 6. And our Lord Jesus, when asked, "How wilt thou manifest thyself unto us?" answered, "If a man love me, he will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him," John xiv. 22, 23. Till the pride and naughtiness of our spirits are conquered, and we are made willing to give up all, to renounce whatever is contrary to his precepts, though pleasing as a right eye, and seemingly necessary as the right hand, it is in vain to expect a full and abiding assurance of his love.

2. Indolence. With respect to this valuable blessing, it may be often said,

“Ye receive not, because ye ask not,” James iv. 2. It is too common for those who were earnest in crying for mercy, while they thought themselves under the curse and power of the law, to grow slack and remiss in prayer soon after they obtain some hope of salvation from the gospel, and particularly they do not “give all diligence to make their calling and election sure” (2 Pet. i. 10), in the careful use of every means appointed for their establishment in the truth as it is in Jesus. Therefore that word is fulfilled in them, “The slothful soul desireth, and hath nothing,” Prov. xiii. 4. They go on for months or years in a complaining, unsettled state, and deservedly, because they are not earnest in seeking, asking, waiting, knocking at the gate of wisdom, and at the throne of grace, for that blessing which the Lord has promised to those who persevere in wrestling prayer, and will take no denial.

3. Misapprehensions. These arise from a neglect of examining the scriptures, and an undue deference to the decisions of men. If assurance is supposed unattainable, it will consequently not be sought after. If it is expected as an instantaneous impression of the Spirit of God upon the mind, independent of his word, or to arise from some sudden, powerful application of a particular text of scripture, this persuasion will end in disappointment. For, though it must be allowed that the Lord does at times favour his people with peculiar manifestations of his goodness, and perhaps seal some promise especially suited to their present circumstances, with a remarkable sweetness and evidence upon their minds, yet these do rarely produce the assurance we are speaking of. These are but visits seldom vouchsafed, and quickly suspended; and those who depend chiefly on such impressions, instead of endeavouring to grow in the scriptural knowledge of Christ, are generally as changeable in their hopes as in their frame. While their affections are thus engaged, “their mountain stands strong, and they think they shall never be moved (Psal. xxx. 7); but when the cause is withdrawn, the effect ceases, and they presently relapse into their former fears and inquietudes. Not to say that expectations of this sort have a tendency to great inconveniencies, and often open a door to the delusions of enthusiasm and dangerous impositions; for Satan, when permitted, knows how to transform himself into an angel of light, 2 Cor. xi. 14. If inherent sanctification, or a considerable increase of it, is considered as the proper ground of assurance, those who are most humble, sincere, and desirous of being conformed to the will of God, will be the most perplexed and discouraged in their search after it. For they of all others will be the least satisfied with themselves, and have the quickest sense of the innumerable defilements and defects which the scriptures assure us are inseparable from our best tempers and best actions. These mistakes, with others that might be mentioned, prevent many from seeking after assurance at all, and bewilder many more, by putting them upon a wrong pursuit. But

what then is assurance? and how is it to be attained? I shall attempt an answer to these questions together in the next proposition.

IV. “Assurance is the result of a competent spiritual knowledge of the person and work of Christ as revealed in the gospel, and a consciousness of dependence on him and his work alone for salvation.” What I apprehend necessary to make my meaning plain, will occur from a brief explanation of the terms I have made use of in this description.

1. By the term *spiritual knowledge*, I would ascribe it to the influence and teaching of the Holy Spirit of God, and distinguish it both from that speculative knowledge of divine things which natural men may acquire from books and human instruction, and likewise from that knowledge which a real believer may obtain in the same way, beyond the limits of his present experience. Those who are favoured with great outward advantages, particularly the light of a clear gospel-ministry, may very soon arrive to a notional apprehension of the most important truths; but with respect to the spiritual and abiding perception of those truths, there is no effectual teacher but the Spirit of God; and we often find, that what we think we have learned of men, we have occasion to be taught again by the Lord the Spirit, for our acquisitions fail us when we have most need of them, and will not stand the trial of an hour of temptation. But, so far as we have received our views of Jesus, his person, offices, mediation, and promises, from him, we possess them, and should be able to defy an angel, if he were to propose to us any other doctrine than that which we have surely known and believed, Gal. i. 8.

2. I use the word *competent*, because there is not, that I know of, any determinate standard where to fix. When our knowledge is so far increased as to overpower the objections arising from inward corruptions, defects of obedience, unbelieving fears, and the temptations of Satan; when we can cut them short with that question of the apostle, “Who is he that condemneth? it is Christ that died” (Rom. viii. 34), assurance follows of course. For I do not understand assurance in the strictest sense for the highest degree of certainty imaginable. Assurance itself is capable of increase; and will be so continually, while there is any darkness in our understandings, or any remaining propensity to a self-righteous spirit. Then only will our assurance be perfect, when we shall see Jesus as he is, and be completely freed from all our infirmities. For these, in whatever degree they prevail, will so far affect the strength and steadiness of our confidence in God.

3. This knowledge is wrought in us by the Spirit, through the medium of the written word. He teaches no unrevealed truths. We are not to expect that he will assure us by a voice from heaven, or by a sudden impulse upon our hearts, that our names in particular are written in the book of life; but he opens our understandings to understand the scriptures (Luke xxiv. 45), to

assent to, and feel, that we are such sinners as are there described, to see the dignity and sufficiency of Christ Jesus, as God-man, the Mediator, the suitableness of his offices, the value of his atonement and righteousness, and the harmony and glory of the divine attributes, in the adorable methods of redeeming love, which renders it just, righteous, and worthy of God to justify and save the believing sinner, Rom. iii. 26. He likewise gives us to understand the freedom and security of the gospel-promises confirmed by the oath of God, and sealed with the blood of his Son. He shows us the establishment and immutability of the covenant of grace; convinces us, that there is a fullness of wisdom, grace, life and strength, treasured up in Christ, for the use and support of those who in themselves are poor, miserable, and helpless, and to be freely communicated in measure and season, as he sees necessary to support, nourish, and revive the believing soul, and to lead him in the path of perseverance to everlasting life. Such a discovery of almighty power, and unchangeable love, engaged for the infallible salvation of every believer, which they cannot lose by their own unworthiness, nor be deprived of by all the opposition which earth or hell can raise against them (John x. 28), produces a suitable assurance in the soul that receives it. And we can confidently say, "We know that we are of God," when we can in this manner know in whom we have believed.

4. Such discoveries of the person and grace of Christ are connected with a heart-felt consciousness, that the believer's dependence for all the great hopes and ends of salvation are fixed on him and his work alone. They draw forth acts of surrender and trust, and keep the mind from forming any vain scheme of hope or refuge, either in whole or in part, from any other quarter. Indeed, from the very first dawning of faith, as I have observed, the soul is led to commit itself into the hands of Jesus; but while knowledge was weak, and the heart very imperfectly humbled, there was a secret, though unallowed, dependence upon self, upon resolutions, frames, and duties. But as Jesus rises more glorious in the eye of faith, self is in the same degree depressed and renounced; and when we certainly see that there is no safety or stability but in his name, we as certainly feel that we expect them from him, and from him only, and the Holy Spirit assists here likewise, bears a comfortable witness with our spirits (Rom. viii. 15, 16), by drawing us to a throne of grace, pleading in us as a spirit of adoption, and prompting us to renew the renunciation of ourselves, and to glory in Jesus, as made unto us, of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. i. 30), from day to day. And from hence arises a solid, permanent assurance. The believer, though weak and unstable as water in himself, and though continually assaulted by a powerful combination against his peace, can look through all to Jesus, and say, "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor

principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate me from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord," Rom. viii. 38, 39.

What remains then, but to animate and press every sincere believer to strive, in God's appointed way, for a comfortable assurance, that they are accepted in the Beloved, passed from death unto life, and infallibly freed from all condemnation. Though this knowledge is not absolutely necessary to our safety, it is exceeding useful to make us unwearied, cheerful, and evangelical, in a course of holy obedience, to the exertion of all our powers and faculties in the service of him who has loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and to give us courage to endure and surmount the many difficulties and oppositions which we are sure to meet with in the course of our profession. Unbelief and distrust weaken our hands, "and make our knees feeble," Heb. xii. 12. The more steadily we confide in God, the better we shall serve him; we shall be enabled to cast all our cares upon him, to rely on his promise, that he will make our strength equal to our day; and having a well-grounded expectation of receiving the end of our hope, even the salvation of our souls, we shall stand fast in the evil day, and say, "None of these things move me; neither count I my life dear, so that I may finish my course with joy," Acts xx. 24. I would only subjoin two cautions to those who are thus minded.

1. Remember that the progress of faith to assurance is gradual. Expect it not suddenly, but wait upon the Lord for it in the ways of his appointment. As it depends upon the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, let this engage you to constancy and earnestness in prayer; and as it arises from a knowledge of Jesus, be assiduous in searching the scriptures, which testify of him. The blessing of the Lord and the hand of the diligent concur in the attainment of this benefit, Prov. x. 4, 22. If you persevere in this path, you will be helped forward by the experience of every day; and every dispensation of providence, as well as every exercise and frame of mind you pass through, will be sanctified, to give you an increasing conviction, that you are nothing, and that Jesus is all in all.

2. As you cannot see or maintain a sight of your interest in the covenant, but by the light of the Spirit, beware of grieving him, Ephes. iv. 30. If you indulge a careless, trifling disposition, or venture upon known sin, you will find dark clouds raised between the Sun of righteousness and your souls. Assurance is not so invariable, but that it may be affected, weakened, and perhaps for a season quite suspended, by unfaithfulness and backsliding on our part. If you have a persuasion of your interest in the love of God, that remains always the same, though prayer is restrained, the ordinances slighted, and watchfulness intermitted, take heed, lest this instead of assur-

ance, should be vain confidence and presumption. The hope that maketh not ashamed, endears every precept and ordinance to the soul, weans the affections from low and trivial pursuits, and strengthens the exercise of every gracious principle.

As it is thus possible and desirable for a believer to “know that he is of God;” so a concern for many here present will not suffer me to close, without desiring you to consider if you have not cause to conclude, from scripture-testimony, that you are not of God. See the cause determined by an apostle: “Whosoever doeth not righteousness, is not of God,” 1 John iii. 10. And again, by another, “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his,” Rom. viii. 9. Are not these decisions plain and absolute? If your love and dependence are not fixed on the Lord Jesus Christ, if your tempers and practice are not governed by his commands, you are not of God. Who, then, do you belong to? The whole world is divided between two masters, and ranged under opposite banners. A neutrality is impossible. If you are not of God, you belong at present to Satan; you are his captives (2 Tim. ii. 26.); he leads you blindfold; and he meditates your destruction, when you shall have worn out your lives in his miserable service. And will you continue fond of your bondage, and follow him like an ox to the slaughter? There is a redemption-price paid, there is an arm of power revealed in favour of such helpless perishing prisoners. Jesus, whom we preach, “is able to take the prey out of the hand of the mighty, and to deliver the lawful captive,” Isaiah xlix. 24. The Lord help you to apply to him before iniquity is your ruin. O may he incline you to believe and be saved! Acts xvi. 81. If you reject him, you seal yourself to an aggravated condemnation, and must perish without mercy: but if you hear his voice, and call upon his name, he is able to save to the uttermost, and to bless you, in turning every one of you from your iniquities,” Heb. vii. 25.; Acts iii. 26.