

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

Dealing with Doubt

1 John 3:19-24

Rev. Freddy Fritz

August 15, 2021

Dealing with Doubt

Scripture

After completing high school in South Africa, I spent two years in the South African Air Force doing my compulsory military service. Early during my second year in the South African Air Force, I was converted to Jesus Christ. For much of the rest of my second year, I was in the war in northern Namibia where I spent time in the bush. I could not attend worship or fellowship with other Christians. Almost a year later, I begin my studies at the University of Cape Town. I was thrilled to be able to worship with fellow Christians each Lord's Day. I also threw myself into Bible studies on campus, and was actively involved in the fellowship of the campus student ministry.

I don't remember exactly when it was, but twice during my first and second years at the University of Cape Town, I experienced serious doubt about whether or not I was a Christian. On both occasions, my doubt only lasted a few days. But I questioned whether I was truly saved. I wondered if I was somehow deceived. What if I was mistaken about Christianity? What if there was a different way of salvation?

Are you confident that if you were to die today that you will be received into God's presence? Are you sure that you are going to heaven? Have you ever doubted your salvation?

In his First Letter, the Apostle John realizes that some of his beloved flock may be dealing with doubt about their salvation. So, he almost interrupts his train of thought and helps Christians who are dealing with doubt about their salvation.

Let's read about dealing with doubt in 1 John 3:19-24:

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. 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. (1 John 3:19-24)

Introduction

The Apostle John wrote his First Letter to encourage believers regarding their assurance of salvation. John's purpose for writing this letter is given in 1 John 5:13, where he writes, "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 false teachers were throwing John's beloved flock into doubt and confusion about their relationship with God. And so he gave them three tests by which they could know whether they had a relationship with God. They were the tests of obedience (in 1 John 2:3-6; 2:28-3:10), love (in 1 John 2:7-11; 3:11-18), and doctrine (in 1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-6). However, in the midst of his elaboration of these tests, John digresses to write about dealing with doubt.

Lesson

First John 3:19-24 shows us what to do when we doubt

our salvation.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Be Aware That God Knows Everything (3:19-20)
2. Be Confident Before God (3:21)
3. Be Obedient to God's Commandments (3:22-23)
4. Be Attentive to God's Spirit (3:24)

I. Be Aware That God Knows Everything (3:19-20)

First, when we doubt our salvation, let us be aware that God knows everything.

John writes in verses 19-20, **“By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”** Having just elaborated on the test of love as an evidence of new life in Christ (in the previous paragraph), John assures his beloved flock that when they do deeds of love, they can know that they are of the truth. But perhaps they still may have a sense of their hearts (or consciences) condemning them. However, God is greater than their consciences and he knows all things, and he will forgive them and let them know that they are his beloved children.

God has given all people a conscience. However, our conscience is fallible. It is not always correct. Moreover, Satan sometimes troubles our hearts and consciences by his lies and half-truths.

On the other hand, as John says, **“God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”** There is nothing fallible about God at all. He is always correct. He knows us better than we know ourselves. I love what John Stott said regarding God and our hearts. He writes of God:

Indeed, he knows everything, including our secret motives and deepest resolves, and, it is implied, will be more merciful towards us than our own heart. His omniscience should relieve, not terrify, us (*cf.* Psalm 103:14; John 21:17).”¹

There are times when we feel a sense of guilt and even condemnation. That is when we must remind ourselves of the gospel. God sent his son Jesus to deal with all our guilt and condemnation. We have an enemy who prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But Jesus is far greater than our enemy. And he wants to reassure us of his love and compassion and kindness and forgiveness. He wants us to be assured that we are his children and that we belong to him, regardless of what our enemy may say to us.

When I was dealing with doubt about my salvation as a university student, I had all these questions about my salvation: *Was I truly saved? Was I somehow deceived? What if I was mistaken about Christianity? What if there was a different way of salvation?* I had a picture of myself on a river. The river had suddenly become very turbulent and was upsetting my equilibrium. I pictured the far bank of the river as stable and secure. And in my mind’s eye, the bank was the word of God, which I believed to be true. So I threw out a rope onto the far bank and pulled myself toward it. I had so many questions but this I knew: *God knows everything. His word is true. I will trust God and his word.*

Friends, I have to tell you that embracing this truth was an enormous help to me. Yes, I still had many questions. Even today I have many questions. But, I am even more convinced than ever that God knows everything and I can trust my eternal destiny to him.

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 148.

II. Be Confident Before God (3:21)

Second, when we doubt our salvation, let us be confident before God.

John writes in verse 21, **“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.”** John wants his beloved flock to know that God is a good Heavenly Father. They are his children. They belong to him. He delights in them.

But someone may say, “How can I have confidence before God when my heart still condemns me?” I am glad you asked. When I was a student in the School of Architecture at the University of Cape Town, there was a saying that “form follows function.” That means the design of the building must fit the function for which the building is to be used. So, for example, if one wants to build a facility in which people will worship God (the function), one builds a facility with a suitable room in which people are able to worship (the form).

Similarly, spiritually-speaking, feelings must follow facts. Far too often, people are guided by their feelings rather than by facts. Sometimes, we even use language that betrays our thinking. A person may be asked, “What do you think about the Bible?” And the response begins with these words, “I *feel* that the Bible is...” rather than, “I *believe* that the Bible is....” My point is that we get ourselves into difficulty when we allow ourselves to be guided by our feelings rather than to be guided by the facts.

John’s point is that our confidence before God is grounded in the facts about who God is and what he has done for our salvation. We must commit ourselves to the truth that has been revealed in the word of God. We embrace the truth that Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross at Calvary, was

buried in a tomb, and was raised back to life three days after his death and burial.

When we believe these facts, then our feelings will follow. We will discover that our heart does not condemn us. We will feel that we really do belong to God. We will find doubt about our salvation vanishing.

III. Be Obedient to God's Commandments (3:22-23)

Third, when we doubt our salvation, let us be obedient to God's commandments.

John writes in verse 22, **"...and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him."** Keep in mind that John is writing to believers who have doubts about their salvation. He lets them know that obedience to God's commandments results in answered prayer. Disobedience to God's commandments does not result in answered prayer. John wants his beloved flock to know that as they obey God's commandments, they will be encouraged in their walk with God because they will see answers to their prayers.

But there is more than keeping God's commandments that results in answered prayer. It is, as John says, doing **"what pleases him."** What does John mean by using this phrase? Some believe that *keeping God's commandments* and *doing what pleases him* are simply two ways of saying the same thing. It seems to me, however, that John is saying that doing the things that please God refers to any actions that are not commanded.

Let me illustrate. A few weeks ago, we had our two young grandsons staying with us for the week. Parents and grandparents know that a lot of time is spent teaching the household rules and helping the children to obey them. One day, however,

we noticed that our grandsons were each spontaneously sharing their toys with each other. They did not have to be told to share. They just did it. That pleased us because it was a spontaneous action that we had not told them to do. It is in those ways that God is pleased when we serve others or when we help others that brings pleasure to the heart of God. And that will result in answers to our prayer.

Sometimes believers struggle because it does not seem that God is answering their prayers. Some professing believers get extremely disappointed and even angry with God. They have prayed for God to do something and it has not happened. This often happens when asking God for healing. It helps to know that God always answers prayer. His answer may be “Yes,” “No,” or “Not Yet.” Our difficulty is that we expect God always to answer “Yes” to our request. But God is God and we are not God. One of the facets of discipleship is learning to be content with God’s answers of “No” or “Not Yet.”

As we turn back to our text, I want you to see that John clarifies what the commandment is that we are to obey regarding our doubt and our receiving answers to prayer. You may think that it is obedience to the Ten Commandments. Or obedience to the Great Commandments. Instead, John tells us exactly what commandment we are to obey in verse 23a, **“And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ.”** God’s commandment is to believe in Jesus. John wants his readers to know that doubt about salvation is dealt with by examining whether faith is in Jesus alone.

When you doubt your salvation, go back to the first step. Ask yourself, “Am I trusting in Jesus alone for my salvation?”

But then John goes on, as he writes in the second half of the verse. He writes in verse 23b, “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.” God’s commandment is to believe in Jesus and also to love one another. Faith and love go together. These are two of the three tests that John states repeatedly throughout his letter. (The third test is obedience.) Here in this verse, **“believe”** is in the aorist tense, which points to a decisive act of faith in the past that continues into the present. And **“love”** is in the present tense, which signifies an ongoing action.

It is not enough to claim to have faith in Jesus. Many people in this country claim to believe in Jesus. However, while many claim to believe in Jesus, a far fewer number give evidence of love for one another in their lives. What does this kind of love look like in practice? It is sacrificial and it serves others. The best example is perhaps that of the Good Samaritan. He helped someone that considered him to be unworthy of salvation. He gave his time. He gave his money. He made sure that the injured man was looked after. Imagine what a difference would be made if professing believers loved one another with this kind of sacrificial service?

And it is this kind of obedience to God’s commandments that helps us when we doubt our salvation.

IV. Be Attentive to God’s Spirit (3:24)

And fourth, when we doubt our salvation, let us be attentive to God’s Spirit.

John writes in verse 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.”** How does one abide in God? By keeping his commandments. And how does one know that God abides in us? By the Spirit whom God has given to us. John is assuring his

beloved flock that special knowledge is not needed to know God, as the false teachers had been claiming. He wanted to assure his flock that they could be sure that they belonged to God by obeying his commandments. Of course, they don't earn favor with God by obedience. Obedience is the result of having a relationship with God.

Sometimes I meet professing believers who question their salvation. According to John, one test to know whether I belong to God is whether or not I keep his commandments. If I don't pay attention to God's commandments and I don't concern myself with obeying them, then that might be an indication that I don't have a relationship with God. But, if I desire to know God's commandments so that I can walk in obedience to them, then that is an indication that the Spirit is at work in me and he is conforming me to the image of the Son.

During my final year at the University of Cape Town and for a few years after graduation, I shared an apartment with several other committed Christians. One of them was a wonderful, godly Christian who struggled deeply with assurance of salvation. We talked periodically about the doubts he was having about his salvation. He believed that the Bible was God's word. He knew that God knows everything. He believed that Jesus was the only way of salvation. He loved brothers and sisters in Christ. He sought to obey all God's commandments. And yet he still struggled with assurance of salvation. I think that perhaps what was missing for my dear friend, and perhaps it is for you too, is attentiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit in his life. Now this is not something that we can manufacture or produce. It is a work of the Spirit of God. But I do believe it is appropriate to ask the Lord to enable us to be attentive to the work of the Spirit in our lives to deal with our doubt about our salvation.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the topic of doubt in 1 John 3:19-24, let us stand firm on the principles listed.

In his commentary on this section in John's First Letter, James Montgomery Boice writes:

How does a Christian deal with doubt? Although there are many causes for it, there is only one answer: by knowledge. The Christian must simply take himself in hand and confront himself with what he knows to be true concerning God and God's work in his life. In other words, faith (which is the opposite of doubt), being based on knowledge, must be fed by it. This is the point that John develops at the close of this third chapter.²

When we doubt our salvation, let us feed our faith with the knowledge John gives us in this chapter. Let us:

1. Be aware that God knows everything;
2. Be confident before God;
3. Be obedient to God's commandments; and
4. Be attentive to God's Spirit.

And as we do so, we will be encouraged in our relationship with God and our doubts about our salvation will dissipate. Amen.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 99.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can
be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
3. www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred-dyFritz.

Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org