

HOW CAN I BE SURE OF MY FAITH?

When a person becomes committed to the Lord Jesus, having accepted him to be their Saviour they are in for a new adventure!

Paul wrote: "When someone becomes a Christian he becomes a brand new person inside. He is not the same anymore. A new life has begun" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

For some people they know immediately a difference. Experiences vary, for others it is more gradual. What matters more than our experience is the fact that when we receive Christ we become a child of God. It is the start of a new relationship.

As the apostle John wrote, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gives the right to become the children of God". (John 1:2)

The New Testament makes it clear that it is possible for us to be sure that we are Christians and that we have life.

John's words, "I write these things unto you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life". (1 John 5:3)

Imagine a three legged stool, relying on each leg for its stability. Each leg can represent three components upon which our faith can be firmly based.

1. The Word of God
2. The Work of Jesus
3. The Witness of the Holy Spirit

1. The Word of God

If we were to rely on our feelings we could never be sure of anything. Our feelings go up and down depending on all sorts of factors. They are changeable and can lead us astray. The promises in the Bible which is the Word of God do not change and are totally reliable.

A pilot who has no visibility at all and has to fly 'on instruments' can easily be fooled by what he feels. He 'feels' as if he is at times going in the wrong direction or upside down. The temptation is strong to ignore your instruments and follow your feelings. Yet to abandon what the instruments say and rely on feelings has spelled doom for many pilots.

There are many great promises in the Bible. They are there for us to 'steer' our course by and to grow in our knowledge of God and his ways.

Our faith is strengthened as our understanding deepens.

A good illustration of this is the story of a man who was needing to get back to his village as dusk was falling. The weather was bitterly cold and it was important for him to get home the quickest way possible. A frozen lake separated him from home and he decided to risk crossing it. Unsure whether the ice was thick enough to hold him, he got down on his stomach and began slowly creeping across the ice, feeling ahead of him to check the strength of the ice. After a while he had made some slow progress, but the lights of the village were still a long way off. The sound of bells met his hearing and as it got louder he turned around. Here was a horse-drawn sleigh pulling a laughing bunch of people over the ice towards home. They sped past the man on his stomach who felt very foolish. If the ice could support all the weight of the horse and sleigh, he had nothing to worry about!

Jumping to his feet he continued confidently. You see, what had happened, his new **understanding** had given rise to his new found confidence (faith the ice would not break).

Jesus never forces His way into our lives, but when we ask Him in, He promises He will never leave us. He says to his disciples, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). We may not always be in direct conversation with him, but he will always be there. If you are working in a room with a friend, you may not be speaking to him directly but, you are nevertheless aware of his presence. This is how it is with the presence of Jesus. He is always there.

"Here I am, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). Jesus 'enters' our lives by the Holy Spirit. This is what this verse pictures.

The pre-Raphaelite artist Holman Hunt (1827-1910) was inspired to paint a picture titled '*The Light of the World*'. Jesus is standing at a door overgrown with ivy and weeds. The door clearly represents the door of someone's life. He is knocking and awaiting a response. Someone told the artist he had made a mistake by leaving off a handle on the door. "Oh no," replied Hunt, "that is deliberate, There is only one handle and that is on the inside." Jesus comes in to share his life with us (entering a sign of friendship and fellowship).

He gives us His word that whoever comes to him in a right heart for forgiveness and new life He will not reject (John 6:37).

There are times when doubts may arise, but for every doubt there is an answer amongst the many promises Jesus has given us in his word.

2. The Work of Jesus

It is not uncommon to come across people who are trying to 'earn' favour with God. This is a typically religious response that is often demonstrated by people seeking to notch up enough 'points' to be in 'credit' with God. In heathen nations people will do horrendous things -to themselves to 'please' their gods (lie on beds of nails, put hooks in their flesh, cut their bodies, burn themselves and on it goes). Yet this religious bent is not restricted to heathen lands. People hope that by going to church, doing good deeds, helping charities etc. will place them in God's good books! Of course these things in themselves are good, if they are done out of a heart motivation that is right, but they will never earn us sufficient brownie points to get the "nod" from God!

The wonderful news about what Jesus has done for us is that it does not depend on me. It depends on what Jesus has done for me. It depends not on what I do or achieve but on his work on the cross. What He did on the cross, enables Him to give us eternal life as a gift (John 10:28).

We DO NOT earn a gift. We accept it with gratitude.

It all starts with God's love for us: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). We all deserve to 'perish'. God, in his love for us, saw the mess we were in and gave his only Son, Jesus, to die for us. As a result of his death, everlasting life is offered to all who believe. On the cross, Jesus took all our wrong doing upon himself. This had been clearly prophesied in the Old Testament hundreds of years beforehand. The prophet foresaw what the 'suffering servant' would do for us and said: "We all like sheep have gone astray, each of

us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him (i.e. Jesus) the iniquity of us all!" (Isaiah 53:6).

What the prophet is saying is that we have all done wrong -we have all gone astray. He says elsewhere that the things which we do wrong cause a separation between us and God (Isaiah 59:1-2). This is between us and him which prevents us from experiencing his love.

On the other hand, Jesus never did anything wrong. He lived a perfect life. There was no barrier between him and his Father.

On the cross, God transferred our wrong doings onto Jesus ('the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all'). That is why Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). At that moment he was cut off from God - not because of his own wrong-doing, but because of ours. This made it possible for the barrier between us and God to be removed - for all who accept for themselves what Jesus has done for them. As a result, we can be sure of God's forgiveness. Our guilt has been taken and we can be sure that we will never be condemned.

As Paul puts it, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!" (Romans 8:1).

This, then, is the second reason that we can be sure that we have eternal life - because of what Jesus achieved for us on the cross by dying for us. The fact is our acceptance before God is guaranteed by what Jesus has done. We can stand with confidence before him with the gift of 'righteousness' that he has given to us. If we seek to establish or earn our own righteousness we will be rejected by God. But if we receive his gift, he declares us righteous. (See 2 Corinthians 5:21).

3. The Witness of the Spirit

When someone becomes a Christian, God's Holy Spirit comes to live within them. There are two ways in which the Holy Spirit helps us to be sure of our faith in Christ. First, he transforms us from within. He produces the qualities and character of Jesus in our lives. This is called 'the fruit of the Spirit' -'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.' (Galatians 5: 22-23). These 'fruits' begin to grow when the Holy Spirit comes to live within our lives.

Changes do not occur in our character overnight - but they will begin to become evident to those around us. As well as changes in our character there should be changes in our relationships - both with God and with other people. We develop a new love for God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, For example, hearing the word 'Jesus' has a different emotional impact.

Our attitudes towards others also changes. Many new Christians will observe that they suddenly start to 'notice' in a new way the faces of people in the street and on the bus. Before they had little interest but are aware of a new concern for those who look sad and lost. Many also notice a new desire to "hang out' with Christians - something they probably would have avoided before!

Secondly, the Holy Spirit also brings an inner experience of God. He creates a deep, personal conviction that we are the children of God (Romans 8:15-16). This experience is different for everyone.

Carl Tuttle was an American pastor who came from a broken home. He had a very unhappy childhood in which his father abused him. After he became a Christian, on one occasion he particularly wanted to hear what God was saying to him. He decided to go out into the country where he could pray for a whole day without being interrupted. So he arrived and began to pray. But after fifteen minutes he felt he was not getting anywhere. So he drove home again feeling very depressed and disappointed.

He told his wife that he would go to see Zachary, his two month old baby. He went into the room and picked him up. As he was holding him he felt an incredible love welling up within him for this baby boy and he started crying and talking to him.

“Zachary”, he said, “I love you. I love you with all my heart. No matter what happens in this life, I will never harm you, I'll always protect you. I'll always be your father, I'll always be your friend, I'll always care for you, I'll always nurture you and I'll do this, no matter what sins you commit, no matter what you do, and no matter whether you turn from me or from God.”

Suddenly Carl sensed that he was in God's arms and that God was saying, “Carl, you are my son and I love you. No matter what you do, no matter where you go, I'll always care for you, I'll always provide for you, I'll always guide you.”

In this way, the Spirit witnessed to his spirit that he was a child of God (Romans 8:16). This is the third way in which we are assured of our relationship with God. We know it because the Holy Spirit gives us an inner conviction -a solid 'knowing' who we belong to.

In these ways (the Word of God, the Work of Jesus, and the Witness of the Spirit), those who believe in Jesus can be sure that they are children of God and that they have eternal life. It is possible to be sure on the basis of what God has promised. This confidence is not an arrogant thing, but the outcome of a humble receiving of what God has provided for everyone.