

The Dissolving of Doubts

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Adapted from one of a seven-part Bible study series preached at the Tabernacle in April-June 2017: 'The Dissolving of Doubts', a phrase taken from Daniel 5.12 meaning the untangling of knots. Other studies in the series addressed Doubts about the Faith, Doubts about God, Doubts about the Bible, and Doubts about the Doctrines of Grace.

There is a verse in *1 John 5* which is written for those who doubt whether they have been forgiven and saved by God. It is directed to those who have trusted in Christ, but do not feel that anything has come of it. It is also written to those who have previously been sure of their salvation, but have lost that certainty to some degree, and may even feel it has been a delusion. The verse reads:

'These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe...' (*1 John 5.13*).

At first sight the verse seems barely logical. It is for those who believe, so that they may know they have life, and believe. But it is clear what the inspired writer means, namely that those who believe may find certainty and then they will be able to exercise their faith more fully.

For many people real conversion occurs some while before they realise it. They genuinely trust and repent, their minds are illuminated, they understand the Gospel, they yield themselves up to God, and yet they say, 'Has anything happened to me? Has the Lord saved me?' The text helps them, as we shall see, to appreciate what God has done in their lives.

Then there are those who, when they come to Christ, experience great wonder and discovery. Their prayers are answered, their nature changes, they understand the Scriptures in a new way, and assurance fills their heart. For a time they seem to be protected from doubts in line with Isaiah's statement – that the Lord bears the lambs in his arms. But soon they are called to stand on their own feet, by faith, and that protective arm of the Lord is lifted a little. The devil begins to assail them with doubts, and their assurance receives a heavy blow.

Very many years ago when I was a boy, my school had a highly successful cross-country team. We considered it world-beating. For several successive years they won a coveted national competition for schools under their renowned coach. Then they

took up a challenge from a school located elsewhere in the country, never having raced there before, and off they went with a contingent of supporters. Their illustrious coach, however, had not carried out due diligence, and knew nothing about their opponents, or their cross-country course. We assumed that our team would win easily, as always, but the first third of the course turned out to be exceptionally steep and they were not trained for that. After that testing ascent came an equally steep descent, and our team slipped repeatedly speed-running down. Our world-beaters returned defeated and humiliated, because they had not known what to expect. No one had known the lie of the land.

This is exactly what can happen at the beginning of the Christian life. You get a protected period, and then things happen that you did not expect, and you may be flooded with doubts and temptations. There are temptations back to old sins, and also to doubt the Word, and you are shocked and winded by them.

You may be a fairly stubborn person, having a tough streak in you, and that may work to your advantage in much of your life. But Satan knows it. He realises that as soon as you have gone a short distance in the Christian life, made great discoveries and proved the Lord with answers to prayer, you will be almost immovable. So the devil will throw everything at you in the opening months of your Christian life to try to demoralise you and take you off track. It is vital for us to know what to expect.

I am not writing to unbelievers, says the apostle John, for they have not found the Lord. I am writing to believers because there are times when assurance needs to be renewed, deepened and strengthened.

Often believers prove the Lord for long seasons without doubts, but then they are suddenly assailed by them. Such an assault may follow a great disappointment in life or some tragedy, trial or sorrow, and Satan will take advantage of it.

Perhaps a believer may have a temperamental tendency to sadness and the devil will take advantage of that. It may be there has been a neglect of devotions, cutting back of prayer or just rushing through those essential times before the Lord. The devil will know it and exploit the void of joy and peace, even in the case of seasoned believers.

Sometimes the Lord will clear the way for the devil to assail us if there is undue pride or self-confidence in us. David seems to refer to this in *Psalms 30*, when he speaks of his mountain standing strong and everything going so well. At that point he was subjected to sore troubles and cried out to the Lord. If we become pleased with ourselves, taking credit for our standing and instrumentality, the Lord may withdraw his arm, leaving us to fend for ourselves.

It is probable that in every congregation there is some dear believer who has the rare problem of almost never being able to feel assurance of salvation. Pastors will usually help such friends on an individual basis. It is not common, but it happens, and used to be referred to as 'the child of light walking in darkness'. As far as most

Christians are concerned, it is our great privilege to know we are saved, and it is a duty to seek that assurance and to embrace the promises of God.

In this review of assurance we will mainly consider the newer Christian, the person who has recently sought (and probably found) the Lord, but who now says to himself or herself, 'I do not feel I am saved; whatever I have experienced I fear it was a delusion. I sin, and repeat sins, and I am not sure I can see the marks of grace in my life. I do not think I could have been sincere.'

Such doubts go round the mind repeatedly, and Satan seems to seal them in the innermost being.

1 A Sense of God's Perfections

Here are the apostle John's signs that spiritual life is in us, the first being found in *1 John 1.5-7* –

'This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.'

It helps us to see the full force of what is meant by being 'in the light' if we think of the recipients' background. Most of those who received this letter of John would have had pagan backgrounds, believing in multiple, mythical gods, all sinful, full of cruelty, meanness and dishonesty. But conversion brought them to believe with all their hearts that God is light, pure, and holy, without a shadow of sin. The true God is light, truth and lovingkindness beyond description.

In our case, whether vague about God in the past, or militantly atheistic, we would have been accommodating toward sin, excusing ourselves and society at large of all but the worst acts, and would even have harboured such ideas as 'the essential goodness of man'.

But something profound has happened to us, and we have seen far, far better things about God. We have realised that he is pure and high above us. He is unblemished and wonderful in all his attributes. We have come to believe with gladness that Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created, came into this world in amazing sympathy and love to take the punishment due to sinners. We have grasped that God is unique, and transcendent above all that we see in this fallen world. Yet we do not believe that this realisation indicates that we are saved.

The apostle John contradicts us. You have seen, he reasons, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. Do you not see that this is a sign of salvation? If you really value and believe this, you evidently walk in the light. You may think you are lost and deluded, and that conversion has not taken place, but if you firmly believe

these things, then it is by the work of the Holy Spirit. Your mind has been opened. You have become a passionate believer in the true and perfect and wonderful God.

The apostle's conclusion is that there has been in your heart, in all probability, a work of grace.

'If we walk in the light,' says John, 'we have fellowship one with another.' You are in the same family as we are, says the apostle, 'and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.' Your belief in him is sincere. You have seen the difference between your pagan gods (or your former atheism) and the true God, and you feel it deeply in your soul. This is only the first word of encouragement that the apostle gives, and he repeats it in the course of the epistle, in chapter 2, verse 27, and in chapter 4, verses 13 and 14.

2 A Sense of Our Own Condition

A second indication that there is, in all likelihood, spiritual life in us is found in *1 John 1.8-9* –

'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If [*on the other hand*] we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

The conclusive point is added in verse 10 – 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.'

The opposite of that last verse is true of us if we are deeply aware that we are sinners. We say – 'I am a lost sinner, guilty and condemned before God, and have repented sincerely before him, relying on Christ's mercy and atoning death for forgiveness.' If we feel unforgiven and unsure of salvation, we need to consider that something very extraordinary and dramatic has happened within us. We have acknowledged ourselves to be sinners, and unsaved people do not generally act or think like that.

When we tell unsaved people they are lost sinners they protest that this is an unfair and extreme charge. They acknowledge that they sin, but insist they are not so bad as to be designated 'sinners'. They object to the idea that you are either a sinner or you are saved. They do wrong, they agree, but would never accept the idea that they are entirely unfit for God, and due for condemnation and rejection. The apostle John declares that the person who has been amazingly humbled so that he acknowledges his hopeless sinfulness does so, normally, only through a work of God in his life.

If we say, 'I am a fallen sinner, and I cannot help myself. I never saw it before but have discovered what a selfish creature I am, what a self-centred creature I am, how bad-tempered I am, how cruel I can be, how covetous and greedy, and how dishonest I can be – and other sins besides' – then we very probably have a work of salvation proceeding in the heart.

By nature, the proud human heart will only accept 'I am sometimes a sinner,' or 'I am a bit of a sinner.' But as soon as we truly (and painfully) acknowledge sin and repent, the evidence is in place that salvation is in process.

You are one of us, says the apostle John, in effect. You are in the family. You have a new attitude to sin. You make no excuses. Your self-righteousness has been broken. You cried out in repentance, and long for some token of acceptance, but you probably have it already, and should marvel and thank your Saviour with wonder and praise.

3 Sin has Acquired Consequences

A third assurance of salvation is enshrined in *1 John 3.6-9*, but at first sight it appears to dash the hopes of a seeker for salvation. It reads:

'Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.'

How can the apostle say this? He has just taught that if we say we have no sin then we are most certainly not saved, and now he seems to say the opposite, that if we are saved we cannot sin. There is no contradiction however, for he obviously means that the born-again person cannot sin comfortably or easily. He cannot sin without consequences for his spiritual peace. He is no longer a natural or an easy sinner. Yes, he still sins, and is guilty before God, but now it strikes and even torments his conscience, and this is what makes him feel he is unsaved. He is now the most uncomfortable, uneasy, unhappy person in the world because he has offended the Lord. That is the effect sin has on him. In that sense, he cannot sin easily or happily.

He cannot sin without repercussions because he has the precious seed of life in his soul and his conscience jars within him and cries out. If we cannot sin comfortably, there is probably life in us, or a work of grace is in train. That is the message of John.

4 The Family Bond

Another comfort in times of doubting salvation is implied in *1 John 2.9*: 'He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.' This is echoed in *1 John 3.14* by the words, 'We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.'

This great comfort we comment on only in passing, as there are powerful but little-known evidences of salvation yet to cover. The words tell us that a child of God has a spiritual-family instinct placed within him at conversion, a bond with others who are the Lord's. It is a new regard for fellow-believers, and a deep sense of closeness. If Satan should tempt us to doubt our salvation, there remains within us a strong realisation that believers are those with whom we belong. It is a great instinct and the apostle holds it up as a mark of grace.

5 Seeing Through the World

Our next strong evidence is that of *1 John 2.15*: 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.'

The opposite is implied as true – if we no longer love the world, the love of the Father is in us, and this is surely confirmed by the very next verses (vv 16-17): 'For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

We may be in doubt about our salvation, but if we have seen through the world something radical has happened to our tastes and perceptions. That world which we unreservedly loved, and was our consuming passion, which we were so optimistic about, has somehow fallen to pieces before our eyes. We have seen that its culture is vain, shallow and godless, set against God, and bent on promoting selfishness, immorality and pride, and that it delights in coarseness and uncleanness.

We may still be tempted to some aspects of the world. Its music, for example, may still have an addictive hold on a part of us. It may take time for the addictive element of longstanding habits to be overcome. The world's rhythms may continue to strum in our heads and maintain a hold for a while. But overwhelmingly we are finished with this godless world system and its ways. We feel for souls, yearning for individuals to be saved, but the world has become John Bunyan's Vanity Fair, and it no longer fools us. We want to do good while in it, and to help people, but the world itself is iniquitous, fallen and against God. All this marks a tremendous change in us, and is a sure sign that there has been a work of God within.

As far as lingering temptations are concerned we may turn to *Proverbs 1* for direction. When tempted to unite with worldlings we listen to Solomon who wrote: 'My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. If they say, Come with us...cast in thy lot among us...my son, walk not thou in the way with them' (*Proverbs 1.10-15*, - selected portions).

'We want you,' the world will say. 'We like you. We are your friends. You are a great person with gifts and abilities that we admire. Fraternise with us; be one with us.' It can be so tempting, especially when we are young, but at all ages if we are lonely. 'Come with us,' calls the world.

We may say, 'I cannot be a Christian because I have been drawn back to worldly friends.' Of course you have. You must know the race you are running in. You will be tempted and drawn away. At the same time, you know that you are no longer a comfortable worldlying, because you have a new view of the world. Satan will ensure that temptations back to the old life will be powerfully attractive, but *James 4.7* will always prove to be true – 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.'

1 John 2.18 reads: 'Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.' We may have, even in the midst of our doubts, a deep sense of the last days. These are the very last times when wrong is made right, and right is made wrong. Evil is making unprecedented progress – the signs of the times. We can see it in all the anti-morality legislation, and the antagonism towards biblical moral teaching. We have seen through it, and this is a great sign of the work of grace within us. So we must reject all temptation to befriend the culture of this world, lying under the condemnation of God.

6 Goodness to Others

Among the lines of reasoning employed by the apostle to show the work of conversion in our lives is an unusual one, taking the form of an exhortation. It is in *1 John 3.18-19*: 'My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.'

The apostle speaks here about compassion and doing good to other believers, colleagues and family, whatever their needs, and shows that this is a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit within. Have we had a mysterious and dramatic change of heart? Has the urge and desire been strangely formed in us to do good and to help other people?

Not long ago, perhaps, someone would ask about our career intentions and we would answer in terms of what we would earn, what we would enjoy, or what status we would secure from a possible line of work. But now all that concerns us is what good it will do. What will be the point of it? Suddenly it is not all for me. A new way of thinking is operating within us – what is best, what is noble, what is worthwhile.

We did not bring this about. We did not accomplish it. We did not change our thinking from selfish to useful, it was the Spirit of God, and now we can say, 'God has put better standards, values and concerns into me.'

We have heard it said many times from a parent about converted offspring, 'He is so different at home.' It may be that he now helps with the dishes and it seems as a miracle. Son and daughter have suddenly become less preoccupied with their own affairs, and have become naturally helpful, and the apostle writes, 'Hereby we know that we are of the truth.'

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We have reviewed some of the apostle's evidences of a work of grace, all of which help us combat doubts about salvation. But we must end where we began, with the exhortation at the end of *1 John 5.13* – '... that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God'. If God has worked in our hearts, we have a duty, an obligation and privilege to actively believe. Our assignment from God is to exercise faith, and to trust him and live for him. A sporting illustration may help.

There was a young man in our congregation years ago who went off to a university renowned for sport. It was not his subject, but he found every opportunity to excel in his chosen game, and I can imagine that he put all his vigour, pace and expertise into it. But being home during a vacation he confessed to me, 'I am a complete failure in the Christian life. I just do not get anywhere. I have not accomplished anything. Where do I start?'

I replied along these lines: Spiritually, it is as if you have gone on to the field of play, the whistle has blown and everything has burst into action, with players rushing about all around you. But you have remained stock still. You are just standing, while team mates shout at you – 'Get on with it! Do this, do that.' People also shout at you from the touchline. But you just stand there, thinking to yourself, most strangely – 'Was I picked for this team? Am I even here? Is this really happening?'

This would never happen in the real world on the field of play. It would be bizarre. But it is precisely what sometimes happens in the spiritual life. Am I really called? Am I truly converted? Am I in this family of God's people? And while we muse, we remain motionless. The most profound advice we can give is what is shouted from the other players – 'Get on with it!' Start living the Christian life. Exercise your faith; trust the Lord, read your Bible, pray to him. Put as much effort into the Christian race as you would on any physical field of play. Discipline yourself; set aside the time for devotions; be determined; ask the Lord for help; give up any pursuit that obstructs your spiritual commitments; never skip worship and study of the Word; repent of foolishness and wrong habits or pursuits; rededicate your life with a solemn vow to the Lord. Your problem is doubts, but alongside these is spiritual inertia.

Here are the encouragements of the apostle John, the signs of spiritual life. Do you have light? Do you believe with all your heart in a perfect God, a holy, sinless, wonderful, unchangeable God? Are you unreservedly convicted of your sinfulness? Do you have a bond with the family of God? Have you seen through the world? Do you have a new burden for doing good? Then you should say:–

*Jesus, all-atoning Lamb,
Thine, and only Thine, I am:
Take my body, spirit, soul;
Only Thou possess the whole.*

*My gracious Lord, I own Thy right
To every service I can pay,
And call it my supreme delight
To hear Thy dictates and obey.*

Get on with the Christian life, dear friend. Your assignment is to trust your Saviour and exercise faith. You must not deny him your praise and thanksgiving for all that he has done for you. You are in the family, the marks are on your heart. So live, now, as a believer. Come inside the house, the kingdom. Do not stand on the outside, but believe and act as a Christian should.

*O, let my life be given,
My years for Thee be spent,
World-fetters all be riven,
And joy with suffering blent:
Thou gav'st Thyself for me;
I give myself to Thee!*

*I would not give the world my heart,
And then profess Thy love;
I would not see my strength depart
And then Thy service prove.*

*O not for Thee my weak desires,
My poorer, baser part!
O not for Thee my fading fires,
The ashes of my heart!*

*O grant me in my golden time,
A zealous servant's part;
For Thee the glory of my prime,
The fulness of my heart!*

*Our souls and bodies we resign
To fear and follow Thy commands:
O take our hearts, our hearts are Thine,
Accept the service of our hands.*

*Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store:
Take myself, and I will be,*

Ever, only, all for Thee.

Lay hold on the promises of God wherever you see them in Scripture. Doubts are attacks of the devil. You should have expected them. Believe only what God says in his Word. When Satan attacks, tell him you believe your Lord, and shut him out. Pledge yourself anew to Christ and take a stand for him. This is how we must deal with temptations to doubt our salvation.

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