

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH Part IV 13. ITS BASIS

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

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Part IV

13. ITS BASIS

The task which these articles set before us is by no means easily executed. On the one hand, we wish to be kept from taking the "children's" bread and casting it to the "dogs"; on the other, it is our earnest prayer that we may be delivered from casting a stumblingblock before any of God's "little ones." That which occasions our difficulty is the desire to expose an empty profession and to be used of God in writing that which, under His free Spirit, may be used in removing the scales from the eyes of those who, though unregenerate, are resting with carnal confidence on some of the Divine promises given to those who are in Christ—for while a sinner is out of Christ none of the promises belong to him: see 2 Corinthians 1:20. Notwithstanding, it behooves us to seek wisdom from above so that we may write in such a way that any of Christ's who are yet not established in the faith may not draw the conclusion they are still dead in trespasses and sins. Having before us the twofold objective named above, let us ask the question, Is a simple faith in Christ sufficient to save a soul for time and eternity? At the risk of some readers turning away from this article and refusing to read further, we unhesitatingly answer, No, it is not. The Lord Jesus Himself declared, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). Repentance is just as essential to salvation as is believing. Again, we read that, "wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead" (James 2:20). A "simple faith" which remains alone, a faith which does not purify the heart (Acts 15:9), work by love (Gal. 5:6), and overcome the world (1 John 5:4), will save nobody. Much confusion has been caused in many quarters through failure to define clearly what it is from which the sinner needs saving. Only too often the thought of many minds is restricted to Hell. But that is a very inadequate conception, and often proves most misleading. The only thing which can ever take any creature to Hell is unrepented and unforgiven sin. Now on the very first page of the N. T. the Holy Spirit has particularly recorded it that, the incarnate Son of God was named "Jesus" because "he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Why is it that that which God has placed at the forefront is relegated to the rear by most of modern evangelists? To ask a person if he has been saved from Hell is much more ambiguous than to inquire if he has been saved from his sins. Let us attempt to enlarge on this a little, for thousands of professing Christians in these days have but the vaguest idea of what it means to be saved from sin. First, it signifies to be saved from the love of sin. The heart of the natural man is wedded to

everything which is opposed to God. He may not acknowledge it, he may not be conscious of it, yet such is the fact nevertheless. Having been shapen in iniquity and conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5), man cannot but be enamoured with that which is now part and parcel of his very being. When the Lord Jesus explained why condemnation rests upon the unsaved, He declared "men loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). Nothing but a supernatural change of heart can deliver any from this dreadful state. Only an omnipotent Redeemer can bring us to "abhor" (Job 42:6) ourselves and loath iniquity. This He does when He saves a soul, for "the fear of the Lord is to hate evil" (Prov. 8:13). Second, to be saved from our sins is to be delivered from the allowance of them. It is the unvarying tendency of the natural heart to excuse evil-doing, to extenuate and gloss it over. At the beginning, Adam declined to acknowledge his guilt, and sought to throw the blame upon his wife. It was the same with Eve: instead of honestly acknowledging her wickedness, she attempted to place the onus on the serpent. But how different is the regenerated person's attitude toward sin! "For that which I do, I allow not" (Rom. 7:15): Paul committed sin, but he did not approve, still less did he seek to vindicate, it. He disclaimed all friendliness toward it. Nay, more; the real Christian repents of his wrongdoing, confesses it to God, mourns over it, and prays earnestly to be kept from a repetition of the same. Pride, coldness, slothfulness, he hates, yet day by day he finds them reasserting their power over him; yet nightly he returns to the Fountain which has been opened "for sin and for uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1), that he may be cleansed. The true Christian desires to render perfect obedience to God, and cannot rest satisfied with anything short of it; and instead of palliating his failures, he mourns over them. Third, to be saved from our sins is to be delivered from the reigning power or mastery of them. Sin still indwells the Christian, tempts, annoys, wounds, and daily trips him up: "in many things we offend all" (James 3:2). Nevertheless, sin is not the complete master of the Christian, for he resists and fights against it. While far from being completely successful in his fight, yet, on the other hand, there is a vast difference between him and the helpless slaves of Satan. His repenting, his prayers, his aspirations after holiness, his pressing forward unto the mark set before him, all witness to the fact that sin does not have "dominion" over (Rom. 6:14) him. Undoubtedly there are great differences of attainment among God's children: in His high sovereignty, God grants more grace unto one than to another. Some of His children are far more plagued by constitutional sins than others. Some who are very largely delivered from outward transgressions are yet made to groan over inward ones. Some who are largely kept from sins of commission have yet to bewail sins of omission. Yet sin is no longer complete master over any who belong to the household of faith. The last sentence may perhaps discourage some who have a sensitive conscience. He who is really honest with himself and has had his eyes opened in some degree to see the awful sinfulness of self, and who is becoming more and more acquainted with that sink of iniquity, that mass of corruption which still indwells him, often feels that sin more completely rules him now than ever it did before. When he longs to trust God with all his heart, unbelief seems to paralyze him. When he wishes to be completely surrendered to God's blessed will, murmurings and rebellion surge within him. When he would spend an hour in meditating on the things of God, evil imaginations harass him. When he desires to be more humble, pride seeks to fill him. When he would pray, his mind wanders. The more he fights against these sins, the further off victory seems to be. To him it appears that sin is very much the master of him, and Satan tells him that his profession is vain. What shall we say to such a dear soul who is deeply exercised over this problem? Two things. First, the very fact that you are conscious of these sins and are so much concerned over your failure to overcome them, is a healthy sign. It is the blind who cannot see; it is the dead who feel not—true alike naturally and spiritually. Only they who have been quickened into newness of life are capable of real sorrow for sin. Moreover, such experiences as we have mentioned above evidence a spiritual growth: a growth in the knowledge of self. As the wise man tells us, "he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Eccl. 1:18). In God's light we see light (Ps. 36:9). The more the

Holy Spirit reveals to me the high claims of God's holiness, the more I discover how far short I come of meeting them. Let the midday sun shine into a darkened room, and dust and dirt which before were invisible are now plainly seen. So with the Christian: the more the light of God enters his heart, the more he discovers the spiritual filth which dwells there. Beloved brother, or sister, it is not that you are becoming more sinful, but that God is now giving you a clearer and fuller sight of your sinfulness. Praise Him for it, for the eyes of the vast majority of your fellows (religionists included) are blind, and cannot see what so distresses you! Second, side by side with sin in your heart is grace. There is a new and holy nature within the Christian as well as the old and unholy one. Grace is active within you, as well as sin. The new nature is influencing your conduct as well as the old. Why is it that you so desire to be conformed to the image of Christ, to trust Him fully, love Him fervently, and serve Him diligently? These longings proceed not from the flesh. No, my distressed brother or sister, sin is not your complete master; if it were, all aspirations, prayers, and strivings after holiness would be banished from your heart. There are "as it were the company of two armies" (Song of Sol. 6:13) fighting to gain control of the Christian. As it was with our mother Rebekah—"the children struggled together within her" (Gen. 25:22)—so it is with us. But the very "struggle" shows that the issue is not yet decided: had sin conquered, the soul would no longer be able to resist. The conqueror disarms his enemy so that he can no longer fight back. The very fact that you are still "fighting" proves that sin has not vanquished you! It may seem to you that it soon will: but the issue is not in doubt—Christ will yet save you from the very presence of sin. Having sought in the above paragraphs to heed the injunction found in Hebrews 12:12, 13 to "lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees," and to make "straight paths" for the feet of God's little ones, "lest that which is lame be turned out of the way," let us again direct our attention unto those who "have not a doubt" of their acceptance in Christ, and perhaps feel no personal need for what has been said above. The Lord declared that a tree is known by its fruits, so there cannot be anything wrong in examining the tree of our heart, to ascertain what kind of "fruit" it is now bringing forth, and discover whether it be such as may proceed from mere nature, or that which can only issue from indwelling grace. It may at once be objected, But nothing spiritual can issue from ourselves. From our natural selves, No; but from a regenerated person, Yes. But how can an evil tree ever be any different? Christ said, "Make the tree good, and his fruit good" (Matt. 12:33). This is typed out by grafting a new slip on an old stock. All pretensions unto the present enjoyment of the assurance of faith by those whose daily lives are unbecoming the Gospel are groundless. They who are confident of entering that Eternal Happiness which consists very much in a perfect freedom from all sin, but who now allow themselves in the practice of sin (persuading themselves that Christ has fully atoned for the same), are deceived. None truly desire to be free from sin in the future, who do not sincerely long to forsake it in the present. He who does not pant after holiness here is dreadfully mistaken if he imagines he desires holiness hereafter. Glory is but grace consummated; the heavenly life is but the full development of the regenerated life on earth. Neither death nor the second coming of Christ will effect any radical change in the Christian: it will only perfect what he already has and is. Any, then, who pretend unto the assurance of salvation, boast of their pardon and present possession of eternal life, but who have not an experience of deep sorrow for sin, real indignation against it, and hatred of themselves because of transgressions, know nothing at all of what holy assurance is. In considering the basis of the Christian's assurance we must distinguish sharply between the ground of his acceptance before God, and his own knowledge that he is accepted by Him. Nothing but the righteousness of Christ—wrought out by Him in His virtuous life and vicarious death—can give any sinner a perfect legal standing before the thrice holy God. And nothing but the communication of a new nature, a supernatural work of grace within, can furnish proof that the righteousness of Christ has been placed to my account. Whom God legally saves, he experimentally saves; whom He justifies, them He also

sanctifies. Where the righteousness of Christ is imputed to an individual, a principle of holiness is imparted to him; the former can only be ascertained by the latter. It is impossible to obtain a scriptural knowledge that the merits of Christ's finished work are reckoned to my account, except by proving that the efficacy of the Holy Spirit's work is evident in my soul. "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure" (2 Pet. 1:10). Why that order of "calling" before "election"? Here it is the converse of what we find in Romans 8:29, 30, "whom he did (1) predestinate, them he also (2) called"; but here in Peter the Christian is bidden to make sure (1) his "calling" and (2) his "election." Why this variation of order? The answer is simple: in Romans 8:29, 30, it is the execution of God's eternal counsels; but in 2 Peter 1 it is the Christian's obtaining an experimental knowledge of the same. I have to work back from effect to cause, to examine the fruit so as to discover the nature of the tree. I have no immediate access to the Lamb's book of life, but if I obtain clear proof that I have been effectually called by God out of the darkness of sin's enmity into the light of reconciliation, then I know that my name is written there. And how am I to make my "calling and election sure"? The context of this passage tells me very plainly. In verses 5-7 we read, "And besides this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love." There we have a summary of those graces which make up the Christian character. The word "add" signifies "supply in connection with," just as in a choir a number of parts and voices unite together in making harmony; or, as in a rainbow the various colors, side by side, blend into one beautiful whole. In the previous verses the apostle had spoken of the grace of God manifested toward His elect: by regeneration they had "escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." Now he adds, Rest not satisfied with a negative salvation, but press forward unto perfection: be in thorough earnest to "add to your faith" these virtues. Faith is not to be alone, but the other spiritual graces must supplement and adorn it. In verses 8, 9 the Spirit moved the apostle to set before us the consequences of a compliance or a non-compliance with the duties specified in verses 5-7. The "these things" in verse 8 are the seven graces of the previous verses. If "all diligence" be devoted to the acquiring and cultivating of those lovely virtues, then a certain consequence is sure to follow: as cause stands to effect, so is fruitfulness dependent on Christian diligence. Just as the neglect of our daily food will lead to leanness and feebleness, just as lack of exercise means flabby muscles, so a disregard of the Divine injunction of verse 5 issues in soul-barrenness, lack of vision, and loss of holy assurance. This brings us now to verse 10. The "Wherefore the rather, brethren," of verse 10 points to a contrast from the sad tragedy presented in verse 9. There we see the pitiful results of being in a backslidden state of soul. There is no remaining stationary in the Christian life: he who does not progress, retrogrades. He who does not diligently heed the Divine precepts, soon loses the good of the Divine promises. He who does not add or conjoin with his "faith" the graces mentioned in verses 5-7, will soon fall under the power of unbelief. He who does not cultivate the garden of his soul, will quickly find it grown over with weeds. He who neglects God's exhortations will lose the joy of His salvation, and will lapse into such a state of doubting that he will seriously question his Divine sonship. To prevent this the apostle says, "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure." The obvious meaning, then, of this exhortation in 2 Peter 1:10 is, Bestir yourselves, take pains to secure satisfactory evidence that you are among the effectually called and elect of God. Let there be no doubt or uncertainty about it: you profess to be a child of God, then justify your profession by cultivating the character and displaying the conduct of one. Sure proof is this that something more than a mere resting upon John 5:24 or Acts 16:31 is demanded of us! It is only in proportion as the Christian manifests the fruit of a genuine conversion that he is entitled to regard himself and be regarded by others as one of the called and elect of God. It is just in proportion as we add to our faith the other Christian graces that we have solid ground on which to rest the assurance we belong

to the family of Christ. It is not those who are governed by self-will, but "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). "In times so critical to the interests of vital religion, and amidst such awful departures from the faith as we are daily called upon to behold, it becomes a very anxious inquiry in the breasts of the humble—Is there no method under Divine grace by which the believer may arrive to a well-grounded assurance, concerning the great truths of the Gospel? Is it not possible for him to be so firmly settled in those great truths, as that he shall not only be ready 'to give an answer to every one that asketh him a reason of the hope that is in him,' but to find the comfort of it in his own mind, that his faith 'doth not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God'? To this inquiry I answer, Yes, blessed be God, there is. An infallible method is discovered, at once to secure from the possibility of apostasy, and to afford comfort and satisfaction to the believer's own mind, concerning the great truths of God; namely, from the Spirit's work in the heart; by the sweet influences of which he may find 'joy and peace in believing, and abound in hope through the power of the Holy Spirit'" (Robert Hawker, 1803). Christian assurance, then, is a scripturally-grounded knowledge that I am in the Narrow Way which leadeth unto life. Thus, it is based upon the Word of God, yet consists of the Holy Spirit's enabling me to discern in myself a character to which the Divine promises are addressed. We have the same Word to measure ourselves by now as God will judge us by in the Day to Come. Therefore it behooves every serious soul to prayerfully and carefully set down the scriptural marks of God's children on the one side, and the characteristics of his own soul and life on the other, and determine if there be any real resemblance between them. We will close this section by quoting from the saintly Samuel Rutherford (1637). "You may put a difference betwixt you and reprobates if you have these marks: If ye prize Christ and His truth so as you will sell all and buy Him, and suffer for it. If the love of Christ keeps you back from sinning more than the law or fear of hell does. If you be humble, and deny your own will, wit, credit, case, honour, the world, and the vanity and glory of it. Your profession must not be barren and void of good works. You must in all things aim at God's honour; you must eat, sleep, buy, sell, sit, stand, speak, pray, read, and hear the Word with a heart purpose that God may be honoured. Acquaint yourself with daily praying; commit all your ways and actions to God by prayer, supplication and thanksgiving; and count not much for being mocked, for Christ Jesus was mocked before you."

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