

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 10: ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Can I Know That I Am Saved?

Lesson 30

Can I Know That I Am Saved?

The Doctrine of Assurance — Grounds, Means, and Experience

Not Merely Hoping, Not Merely Wishing, But Knowing

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life”

Key Texts: 1 John 5:13; 2 Peter 1:10; Romans 8:15–16; Hebrews 6:11; 10:22; John 6:37; 1 John 2:3; 3:14, 24

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

1 John 5:13, NASB 1995

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Introduction

The soteriology series enters its tenth unit with one of the most practically pressing questions a human being can ask about her own spiritual condition: Can I know that I am saved? Not “Am I saved?”, that is the question of whether the saving work has been accomplished, and the preceding nine units have established the comprehensive answer from the divine side. The question of Unit 10 is the more personal, more experiential, more daily-life-shaping question: can I know, with the personal conviction of the first-person singular, that the salvation the doctrine has described is genuinely mine? Not merely hoping that it is. Not merely wishing it were. Knowing.

The pastoral urgency of the question is not abstract. The Christian life is lived in the daily experience of a person who brings her whole, honest, self-aware inner life to the question of whether she genuinely belongs to the God whose gospel she has received and whose lordship she has confessed. The specific experiences that press the question most urgently are the ones that every congregation produces: the believer whose specific sins are persistent enough to raise the question of whether the regenerating work was ever genuine; the believer whose emotional experience of the divine presence is too infrequent or too thin to provide the felt certainty she imagines genuine Christians should have; the believer who has watched others apparently apostatize and wonders whether the same could happen to her; the believer who measures her spiritual life against the New Testament’s evidences of genuine faith and finds the measurement consistently discouraging. For each of these people, and they are in every congregation, the doctrine of assurance is not an academic addition to the soteriology syllabus but the specific pastoral word the Spirit has inspired to address the specific question they are asking.

The lesson will proceed through seven major sections: the question itself and why it is urgent; the Reformed answer (assurance is possible, privileged, and in some sense a duty); the critical distinction between assurance and security; the first ground of assurance (the promises of God in Scripture); the second ground of assurance (the inward evidences of grace); the third ground of assurance (the witness of the Spirit with our spirit); and the pastoral wisdom for communicating and cultivating assurance in the congregation. Throughout, the governing text is 1 John 5:13, the most explicit statement of the apostolic purpose for the production of assurance in the New Testament: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (NASB 1995). The “so that you may know” is John’s specific, purpose-indicating declaration that the assurance of eternal life is both possible and intended for every genuine believer who engages the testimony John has provided.

I. The Question and Its Urgency

Can I Know, Not Merely Hope, That I Am Saved?

A. *Why the Question Is Pastorally Indispensable*

The question “Can I know that I am saved?” is pastorally indispensable because the answer shapes everything about how the believer lives the Christian life. The person who is genuinely uncertain whether she is saved lives the Christian life in a fundamentally different key from the person who has the specific, well-grounded, Spirit-attested assurance that she belongs to Christ: the spiritual disciplines are practiced with a different motivation (merit-seeking anxiety versus grateful response), the approach to prayer is characterized by a different quality of access (the uncertain suppliant versus the confident child), the experience of suffering is interpreted through a different lens (possible divine punishment for possibly not being saved versus the Father’s formative discipline of His adopted child), and the prospect of death is faced with a different emotional character (dread of the uncertain outcome versus the peace of the one who knows where she is going).

The history of Christian pastoral care reveals that the question of assurance has been among the most persistently troubling in the experience of genuine believers across every era. The Puritans of the seventeenth century, who gave the doctrine of assurance its most sustained and most practically developed treatment in the whole history of the church, recognized that the failure to cultivate genuine assurance in the congregation was one of the most common and most damaging pastoral failures of their era, producing either the anxiety of those who could never be sure they were saved or the complacency of those who assumed their nominal religious identity was sufficient evidence of the saving relationship. Both failures persist in the contemporary evangelical congregation, and both are addressed by the precise, well-grounded, three-legged doctrine of assurance that the Westminster Confession establishes in Chapter XVIII.

The question must be distinguished from two related but distinct questions that are sometimes confused with it. The question “Am I objectively in a saved condition?” is the question of security, Unit 9’s territory, answered by the doctrine of the perseverance and preservation of the saints. The question “Do I feel saved?” is the question of subjective emotional experience, a question that the doctrine of assurance addresses but does not reduce to, because the assurance the doctrine describes is not primarily an emotional experience but a Spirit-grounded, evidence-supported, promise-resting conviction. The question of this unit is the question that lies between the two: given that I may be objectively saved whether I feel it or not, can I have the personal, intellectually honest, emotionally real conviction that I am genuinely among those for whom the salvation has been accomplished?

B. *The Distinction Between Assurance and Security*

The most important single distinction for understanding the doctrine of assurance is the distinction between security and assurance, which the lesson’s outline names explicitly: security is an objective reality (you are safe in Christ whether you feel it or not); assurance is a subjective experience (the personal confidence that you are indeed in Christ). Security cannot be lost: the doctrine of the perseverance and preservation of the saints established that the genuinely regenerate believer cannot fall out of the grace in which she has been placed, regardless of the quality of her spiritual performance or the intensity of her spiritual experience. Assurance can

fluctuate: the personal, subjective conviction of the saved standing can be stronger in some seasons and weaker in others, more vivid in some experiences and more obscure in others, without any change in the objective security that the fluctuating assurance is intended to reflect.

This distinction is the pastoral key to the entire doctrine. The person who confuses security with assurance will conclude, when the assurance is low, that the security has been diminished or lost, which produces the specific anxiety of the one who believes the salvation is slipping away whenever the felt certainty of it becomes less vivid. The person who understands the distinction knows that the low assurance is a problem (it is a privilege and in some sense a duty to cultivate the full assurance), but it is a pastoral problem to be addressed by the means through which the Spirit produces and strengthens the assurance, not a soteriological crisis indicating that the salvation itself has been jeopardized. The security is the constant, objective foundation; the assurance is the fluctuating, subjective appropriation of that foundation in the specific experience of the specific believer at a specific moment.

II. The Reformed Answer

Assurance Is Possible, Privileged, and a Duty

A. *The Westminster Confession's Account*

The Westminster Confession of Faith's Chapter XVIII provides the Reformed tradition's most carefully formulated account of the doctrine of assurance, and its formulation is characterized by the specific balance between the accessibility of assurance and the proper humility about the conditions under which it is attained. WCF XVIII.1: "Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation, which hope of theirs shall perish: yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured of their estate of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, not upon uncertain conjectures, but upon an infallible assurance of faith."

The Confession's formulation contains several elements of pastoral importance. First, the distinction between genuine assurance and false assurance: the "vain deceit" of the hypocrites and unregenerate is not the genuine assurance the doctrine commends; the false assurance of those who are confident they are saved without the specific grounds that genuine assurance requires is itself the pastoral danger that the doctrine of assurance is designed to address. Second, the specific qualifications on those who may attain the genuine assurance: those who "truly believe in the Lord Jesus", who "love Him in sincerity", and who are "endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before Him", the genuine assurance is not the blanket declaration available to every person who claims to be a Christian, but the specific privilege of those who are genuinely exercising the specific marks of genuine faith. Third, the specific character of the assurance: "not upon uncertain conjectures, but upon an infallible assurance of faith", the genuine assurance is not merely the hopeful wish of the pious but the intellectually honest, Spirit-grounded, evidence-supported conviction of the genuinely regenerate.

B. *Assurance as Privilege and Duty*

The New Testament's specific calls to the full assurance establish that the assurance is not merely available (a privilege the believer may pursue) but specifically enjoined (a duty the believer is called to pursue). Hebrews 6:11: "And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end" (NASB 1995). The "full assurance" (plērophoran tēs elpidos) is the specific aspiration and the specific call: not the mere assurance of the half-convinced but the full, complete, comprehensive assurance of the one who has engaged the evidences, the promises, and the Spirit's testimony with the diligence that the full assurance requires. Hebrews 10:22: "let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (NASB 1995). The full assurance of faith is the specific character of the approach to God that the completed atonement makes possible and that the genuine believer is called to inhabit.

Second Peter 1:10's "be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you" (NASB 1995) establishes the diligent, evidence-confirming, pursuit-of-holiness character that the genuine assurance requires and that the Spirit uses to produce it. The diligence to make certain is not a self-torturing introspection that produces more anxiety than assurance; it is the specific, active, evidence-pursuing engagement with the marks of genuine regeneration (the moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love of verses 5–7) that confirms the genuine character of the calling and election. The assurance is a duty not in the sense that the failure to achieve it is a sin against God but in the sense that the means by which it is cultivated, the diligent engagement with the promises, the evidences, and the Spirit's testimony, are the proper, expected, Spirit-honoring response of the genuinely regenerate to the salvation they have received.

Finally, WCF XVIII.3 makes explicit the important point that assurance is not of the essence of faith, that a person can be genuinely saved without the full, vivid, untroubled assurance of the saved standing. The genuinely regenerate believer who lacks the full assurance is not thereby revealed to be non-regenerate; she is the person who has the Spirit's saving work in her life without the full, clear, Spirit-attested awareness of what that work has accomplished. The assurance is the aspired-to state, the Spirit-cultivated privilege, the diligently-pursued confirmation of the regenerate standing, but its absence does not void the standing it is designed to confirm.

III. Ground One, The Promises of God

The Objective Foundation of All Assurance

A. The Promise as the Non-Fluctuating Ground

The first and most foundational ground of assurance is the promises of God in Scripture, the specific, written, divinely-guaranteed declarations of what God has committed to do for those who trust Christ. The promises constitute the objective ground of the assurance: they do not fluctuate with the quality of the believer's spiritual experience, do not diminish in the seasons when the felt sense of the divine presence is low, and do not require the believer's own spiritual achievement as the condition of their applicability. They are the specific, verbally-expressed, Spirit-inspired record of what God has committed Himself to accomplish for those who are in Christ, and the assurance built on them is as stable as the character of the God whose promises they are.

John 6:37 provides the most personally-addressed and most assurance-producing promise in the entire Gospel narrative: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast

out” (NASB 1995). The specifically assurance-producing application of this promise is the specific, logical, personally-directed syllogism: Christ’s promise is that the one who comes to Him will certainly not be cast out. I have come to Christ (the evidence of this coming is the genuine faith that the Spirit has produced and through which I have received and trusted Christ). Therefore I will certainly not be cast out. The assurance is not based on a feeling; it is based on the promise of the One whose “certainly not” (ou mē) is as absolute as His own character and whose self-consistency requires that He keep what He has promised.

John 5:24 provides the second great assurance-promise: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (NASB 1995). The present-tense “has eternal life” establishes the assurance of the current possession of the eternal life rather than the merely hopeful future expectation of it: the one who hears and believes has eternal life now, in the present tense of the faith-possession. The “has passed out of death into life” is the perfect-tense description of the accomplished, irreversible character of the transition: the believer is not in the process of moving from death to life; the transition has been made. And “does not come into judgment” is the specific assurance against the condemnation-anxiety that troubles the believer whose conscience is most active: the one who has believed does not come under the condemnation that the judgment administers, because the justification has already administered the verdict that the judgment would otherwise pronounce.

Romans 8:1’s “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995) is perhaps the most powerfully assurance-producing single verse in the entire Pauline corpus, and its assurance-producing force lies precisely in the specific, unqualified, present-tense character of the “now.” Not “there will be no condemnation at the final judgment” (though that is also true), but “there is now no condemnation”, in the present moment, in the current condition, for the one who is in Christ Jesus. The condemnation-anxiety that the conscience produces when it honestly confronts its own failures is answered not by the improvement of the spiritual performance that would make the condemnation less deserved, but by the specific, present-tense, in-Christ-grounded declaration of the non-condemning status that the justification has established and that the “now” preserves against every subsequent failure.

B. How to Use the Promises

The practical use of the promises as the ground of assurance requires the specific, personally-directed, faith-receiving application of the promise to the specific person in the specific moment of assurance-need. The promise is not assurance-producing when it is received as a general theological truth about the category of believers; it is assurance-producing when it is received as the specific, personally-addressed word of the God who made it to the specific person who needs it: “The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out”, addressed to you, in this moment, in this season of low assurance, as the specific word of the God whose character makes the promise as permanent as His own faithfulness. The Reformers’ account of saving faith as not merely intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions but personal trust (fiducia) in the person of Christ, the specific, first-person, personally-receiving trust of the individual soul in the specific Savior, is precisely the act of receiving the promise as personally addressed and personally applicable.

IV. Ground Two, The Evidences of Grace

The Fruits That Demonstrate the Reality of the Root

A. *The Purpose and the Limits of the Evidence-Ground*

The second ground of assurance is the inward evidences of grace, the specific, observable, Spirit-produced fruits of the genuine regeneration that confirm the reality of the regenerating work in the life of the genuinely regenerate person. The evidence-ground is the subjective dimension of the three-legged doctrine of assurance: unlike the promise-ground (which is entirely objective, resting on the divine character and the inspired word) and the Spirit's testimony (which is the direct, Spirit-to-spirit communication that cannot be manufactured by human effort), the evidences of grace are the observable fruits of the regenerate life that the believer can examine, recognize, and build assurance upon.

The purpose of the evidence-ground is the confirmation of the reality of the root that the fruit demonstrates. The logic of the evidence-ground is the logic of the tree and its fruit: the fruit does not produce the tree; the tree produces the fruit; but the presence of the fruit provides the evidence that the tree is alive and bearing. Applied to the assurance of salvation: the evidences of grace do not produce the salvation; the salvation produces the evidences; but the presence of the evidences provides the confirmation that the salvation is genuinely present and genuinely operating in the specific life being examined. The evidences are therefore never the ground of the salvation itself (which rests entirely on the imputed righteousness of Christ) but the evidence of the salvation's presence (which is confirmed by the observable fruits of the regenerate life).

The limits of the evidence-ground must be acknowledged with the same care as its purpose. The evidence-ground is the most susceptible of the three grounds to the pastoral dangers of either false assurance (the person who has sufficient religious behavior to satisfy a superficial evidence-examination but lacks the genuine regenerate root) or excessive anxiety (the person who examines the evidences with an excessive introspection that produces more consciousness of the failing than of the fruit). Lesson 31 will address both dangers specifically in the context of the counsel for diminished assurance; the present lesson establishes the evidence-ground in its proper use as the second leg of the three-legged doctrine rather than as the sole or primary ground of assurance.

B. *The Evidence-Texts of 1 John*

The most sustained single-text account of the evidences of genuine regeneration available in the entire New Testament is the First Epistle of John, whose entire structure is organized around the three major evidence-tests that John applies to the life of the genuine believer: the doctrinal test (the confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God come in the flesh, 4:2–3), the moral test (the keeping of the commandments and the habitual direction of the life away from sin, 2:3–6; 3:6–9), and the relational test (the love for the brethren, 3:14; 4:7–8). First John 5:13's "so that you may know that you have eternal life" is the specific, purpose-indicating declaration that the entire epistle was written to produce the assurance of eternal life in the genuine believer who engages the evidence-tests John provides.

The three specific evidence-texts are each worth examining carefully. First John 2:3: "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments" (NASB 1995). The keeping of the commandments is not the condition of the saving knowledge; it is the evidence of it. The person who genuinely knows God keeps His commandments, not perfectly (which 1 John 1:8 has established is impossible in the present age) but genuinely, habitually, in the overall orientation of the life toward the divine will rather than away from it. The specific

assurance-producing question the evidence-text generates: does the overall direction and habitual orientation of my life reflect the genuine desire to know and to obey God? Not “Do I keep the commandments perfectly?” but “Does the desire to keep them characterize my genuine inner life?”

First John 3:14: “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death” (NASB 1995). The love for the brethren is the relational evidence-test: the genuine believer has the Spirit-produced, new-nature-expressing love for other genuine believers that the unregenerate nature does not produce. The love is not the affection for the agreeable that natural inclination generates; it is the specific, agape-character, self-giving love for the community of those who share the same Spirit and the same Lord that the new birth produces as its relational fruit. First John 3:24: “the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us” (NASB 1995). The Spirit’s presence as the One given to abide in the believer is itself the ultimate ground of the assurance, which points to the third leg of the doctrine, developed in Section V below.

The practical pastoral application of the evidence-ground requires the honest, Spirit-directed, neither-excessive-nor-superficial examination of the genuine spiritual life. The question is not whether the evidences are present in their complete or perfect form (which 1 John 1:8 has established they will never be in the present age) but whether they are present genuinely and habitually in the overall direction of the life. The believer who examines her life and finds the genuine, Spirit-produced desire to know God, the genuine, Spirit-produced love for the brethren, and the genuine, Spirit-produced orientation of the life toward holiness rather than toward sin has the specific, first-John-grounded evidence that the regenerating root is genuinely present and genuinely producing the fruits that genuine regeneration produces. The evidences are not perfect; they are genuine. And the genuineness of the imperfect evidences is the specific confirmation the evidence-ground provides.

V. Ground Three, The Witness of the Spirit

The Internal Testimony That Cannot Be Manufactured

A. *Romans 8:15–16 and the Symmartyrei*

The third and most immediately experiential ground of assurance is the witness of the Holy Spirit with the believer’s spirit, the direct, internal, Spirit-to-spirit testimony that the believer is a child of God. Romans 8:15–16: “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” (NASB 1995). Lesson 22’s treatment of the Abba cry and the double-witness of Romans 8:16 established the character of the Spirit’s testimony in the context of the adoption doctrine; the present lesson returns to the same text and the same testimony in the context of the assurance doctrine, where its specific contribution to the three-legged doctrine is the direct, experiential, cannot-be-manufactured dimension of the assurance.

The Spirit’s testimony is described as the symmartyrei, the co-testimony, the testifying alongside, which Lesson 22 showed is the Spirit’s testimony in conjunction with the believer’s own spirit’s awareness rather than the Spirit’s unilateral, external declaration received by a passive listener. The Spirit testifies with the believer’s spirit; the result is the double-witness conviction of the adopted standing. The assurance that this double-witness produces is neither purely objective (a detached awareness of doctrinal facts about the saving relationship) nor

purely subjective (an emotional experience that might be self-generated or confused with other emotional states); it is the specifically Spirit-generated, humanly-participated, inner conviction of the filial relationship that is the most personally warm and the most experientially vivid dimension of the assurance.

The characteristic of this ground of assurance that most sharply distinguishes it from the other two is the impossibility of manufacturing it by human effort. The promise-ground can be deliberately appropriated: the believer can consciously, intentionally take the promise and apply it personally. The evidence-ground can be deliberately cultivated: the believer can pursue the holiness and the love that produce the evidences, and the pursuit produces the evidences that the assurance builds upon. But the Spirit's direct testimony cannot be produced by human effort, however sincere or however sustained. It is the Spirit's sovereign gift, given when and as He wills, to the believing heart that is in the posture of receiving it, but not subject to the believer's own control or production. The believer can position herself to receive it (through prayer, through the Word, through the fellowship, through the means of grace) but she cannot generate it herself.

B. The Testimonium and Its Relationship to the Other Grounds

The Westminster Confession places the three grounds in a specific logical relationship: the promise-ground is the objective foundation; the evidence-ground is the subjective confirmation; and the Spirit's testimony is the direct, experiential communication that does not replace the first two but operates through and alongside them. Calvin's account of the testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum (the internal witness of the Holy Spirit) is the most developed treatment of the Spirit's testimony in the Reformed tradition, and it emphasizes that the Spirit's testimony is not an independent, evidence-bypassing, promise-ignoring direct line to certainty, but the Spirit's own sovereign illumination and application of the promises and the evidences to the specific believing heart.

The practical pastoral implication of the Spirit's testimony as the third ground is the specific humility it requires in the production and the cultivation of assurance: the believer who has examined the promises and found them applicable and has examined the evidences and found them genuinely present can still lack the full, vivid, Spirit-attested assurance, because the full assurance requires the Spirit's own testimony alongside the promise-appropriation and the evidence-recognition. The believer who is in this condition is not thereby failing at the assurance-cultivation; she is at the end of what the first two grounds can accomplish by human effort and waiting for the Spirit to add His own direct testimony to what the promises and the evidences have already provided. The appropriate posture at this point is the prayer of the one who is ready to receive the testimony, not a demand that the Spirit deliver the testimony on the believer's schedule, but the expectant, means-engaging, persistently-seeking openness of the one who knows that the Spirit testifies and is positioning herself in the path of His testifying work.

First John 4:13 provides the specific connection between the Spirit's testimony and the assurance of the abiding relationship with God: "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit" (NASB 1995). The Spirit's presence, the direct, experiential, Spirit-given awareness of His indwelling, is the specific, third-ground assurance of the abiding in God that the believer desires to confirm. The Spirit has been given; the giving is the assurance; and the believer's awareness of the Spirit's presence and work within her is the specific, cannot-be-manufactured dimension of the assurance that the Spirit alone provides and that neither the promises alone nor the evidences alone can generate in the same form.

VI. 1 John 5:13 as the Goal

Written So That You May Know

A. The Apostolic Purpose and the Assurance It Aims At

First John 5:13 is the key that unlocks the entire epistle's pastoral purpose and the entire doctrine of assurance's goal: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (NASB 1995). Every element of the verse is pastorally significant. "These things I have written to you": the entire epistle, with its threefold evidence-tests, its explicit assurance-formulas ("By this we know" appears seven times in the epistle), and its specific theological content, was written with the specific, intentional, pastoral purpose of producing the assurance of eternal life in the genuine believer. The assurance is not a theological byproduct of the epistle's content; it is its specific, stated, apostolically-intended purpose.

"To you who believe in the name of the Son of God": the assurance is addressed to genuine believers, not to the general religious community. The epistle is not a call to all people to examine whether they might be saved; it is a specific word to those who already believe, those who have already trusted Christ, telling them that the believing they have already done is the basis of the knowing John is calling them to. The "believe" is the present active participle (tōs pisteuousin), the currently-exercising, actively-ongoing, genuinely-engaged belief of those who are in a real and living relationship with the Son of God in whose name they believe. The assurance is the appropriate, apostolically-intended, Spirit-produced development of the genuine faith that already characterizes the people John is addressing.

"So that you may know that you have eternal life": the "know" (eidēte, perfect subjunctive of oida, the knowledge-by-direct-acquaintance or by-settled-perception word) is the specific kind of knowing John is aiming at, not the tentative, hope-based, uncertain knowledge of the half-convinced, but the settled, direct, personally-appropriated knowledge of the one who has come to know something with the confidence that the evidence and the testimony warrant. The "have eternal life" is the present-tense possession, not "will have eternal life" (though that is also true) but "have", the current, present-moment, already-received possession of the eternal life that the faith in the Son of God has already secured. The assurance John is aiming at is the knowledge of the present possession: I have it now; the faith by which I trust the Son of God is the faith through which the eternal life is presently mine.

B. The Pastoral Vision of Full Assurance

The pastoral vision that John 5:13 embodies, the vision of a congregation whose genuine believers know that they have eternal life, is the specific pastoral goal toward which the doctrine of assurance points and which the diligent, three-grounded cultivation of assurance is aimed at producing. It is not a congregation of the naively confident, whose assurance is the unexamined assumption of those who have never seriously confronted the New Testament's evidences of genuine faith. It is not a congregation of the paralyzed-by-uncertainty, whose assurance is so thin and so fragile that every spiritual failure threatens to dissolve it entirely. It is a congregation of those who have engaged the promises and received them personally, who have examined the evidences and found the genuine, imperfect, Spirit-produced fruits of the regenerate life genuinely present, and who have received the

Spirit's own testimony to the filial standing, and who therefore know, with the settled, direct, Spirit-attested knowledge that John is aiming at, that they have eternal life.

This pastoral vision requires the specific, ongoing, pastoral investment of those who preach, teach, and shepherd the congregation toward the assurance John's epistle is designed to produce. The preaching of the specific promises, with the personal, first-person, you-who-believe application that John's epistle models. The pastoral engagement with the specific evidence-tests, leading the congregation through the honest, neither-superficial-nor-paralyzingly-introspective examination of the genuine marks of regeneration that 1 John's structure provides. The prayerful, Spirit-inviting cultivation of the openness to the Spirit's direct testimony that the means of grace provide and that the Spirit employs to add His own dimension to the assurance that the promises and the evidences have grounded. The pastoral vision of 1 John 5:13 is attainable; the path to it is the three-legged doctrine of assurance pursued with the diligence that 2 Peter 1:10 commends and the expectancy that the Spirit's faithful testimony warrants.

VII. The Pastoral Cultivation of Assurance

How Preachers and Pastors Build the Three-Legged Doctrine in Their People

A. The Three-Legged Doctrine in Pastoral Practice

The pastoral cultivation of assurance in the congregation requires the intentional, ongoing, three-dimensional engagement with the three grounds that the Westminster Confession has identified. The preacher who consistently preaches the specific promises of the gospel, the John 6:37 and John 5:24 and Romans 8:1 specific, personally-addressed, present-tense declarations of what God has committed to those who are in Christ, is producing the first-leg assurance in the congregation week by week. The pastor who leads the congregation through the honest, structured, 1-John-grounded examination of the evidences of genuine faith, the love for the brethren, the keeping of the commandments, the Spirit's abiding, is helping to produce the second-leg assurance. And the spiritual director who leads the individual believer in the specific prayer-posture and means-of-grace engagement that positions the soul to receive the Spirit's direct testimony is cultivating the third-leg assurance.

The specific pastoral danger in the cultivation of assurance is the imbalanced deployment of the three legs, the pastoral culture that cultivates one leg at the expense of the others. The culture that cultivates only the promise-ground produces the shallow assurance of those who rest on the promises without the examination of the evidences, the "I said the sinner's prayer, so I am saved" assurance that provides false comfort to those who have no genuine regenerate fruit while withholding the proper, honest challenge that the evidence-examination would provide. The culture that cultivates only the evidence-ground produces the anxious assurance of those who are never certain their evidences are sufficient, the assurance that fluctuates with the quality of the morning's devotions and that cannot rest in the promise-ground's objective stability. The balanced, three-legged cultivation produces the full assurance that Hebrews 6:11 commends: the promise-grounded stability, the evidence-confirmed honesty, and the Spirit-testified warmth that together constitute the genuine, full, and sustainable assurance of the genuinely regenerate believer.

B. Three Pastoral Words for Three Pastoral Situations

Three specific pastoral situations require three specific applications of the three-legged doctrine. The first is the person who lacks assurance because she has never genuinely engaged the specific promises of the gospel as personally addressed to her. For this person, the pastoral word is the promise-ground: “Take John 6:37 and receive it as addressed to you specifically. You have come to Christ, the very fact that this question troubles you, the very fact that you desire the assurance of the relationship, is the evidence of the coming. And the one who comes to Christ will certainly not be cast out. Not conditionally. Not tentatively. Certainly not. This is the specific, Son-of-God-backed, character-of-God-supported promise that is your specific ground. Rest on it. Not on the quality of your spiritual performance. On the promise.”

The second pastoral situation is the person who lacks assurance because the examination of the evidences has produced more awareness of the failing than of the fruit. For this person, the pastoral word begins with the honest acknowledgment that the imperfection of the evidences is expected and is itself consistent with the regenerate condition (1 John 1:8), moves to the careful and honest examination of the evidences in their genuine rather than their perfect form (the genuine desire for holiness, the genuine love for the brethren, the genuine orientation toward God rather than away from Him), and invites the person to receive the genuine, imperfect, Spirit-produced fruit as the specific evidence of the genuine, Spirit-accomplished root. The question is not “Are the evidences perfect?” but “Are they genuine?” And the genuine fruit of the genuine root is the specific second-leg assurance that the honest evidence-examination provides.

The third pastoral situation is the person who has engaged the promises and examined the evidences but still lacks the full, vivid, Spirit-attested assurance of the first-person knowledge that 1 John 5:13 describes. For this person, who is at the end of what the first two grounds can accomplish by human effort and who is waiting for the Spirit to add His own testimony, the pastoral word is the prayer-posture and the means-of-grace engagement that positions the soul to receive the Spirit’s testifying work. Not a demand that the Spirit deliver the testimony on the believer’s schedule, not the escalation of the introspective effort that the Spirit’s absence is taken to warrant, but the patient, Word-abiding, prayer-sustained, fellowship-embedded, expectant openness of the one who knows the Spirit testifies and is in the path of His testifying. The Spirit will not be silent forever to the heart that is genuinely seeking His testimony; Hebrews 11:6 establishes that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him, and the earnest seeking of the Spirit’s own assuring testimony is precisely the posture that the genuine, promise-grounded, evidence-confirmed, Spirit-awaiting believer inhabits.

“The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”

Romans 8:16–17, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Assurance of Salvation	The personal, subjective conviction of the genuinely regenerate believer that she is truly among those for whom the saving work has been accomplished, not a vague religious hope but the settled, direct, Spirit-grounded knowledge that she has eternal life. Distinguished from security (the objective reality of the saved standing that does not depend on the believer's awareness of it) and from false assurance (the vain confidence of the hypocrite or the unregenerate who mistakes outward religious activity for genuine regeneration). Attained through the three grounds identified by the Westminster Confession (WCF XVIII): (1) the promises of God in Scripture, (2) the inward evidences of grace, and (3) the witness of the Spirit with the believer's spirit. A privilege and in some sense a duty of the genuinely regenerate (Hebrews 6:11; 10:22; 2 Peter 1:10), though not of the essence of faith (a person can be genuinely saved without full assurance).
Security vs. Assurance	The critical distinction at the heart of the doctrine of assurance. Security is the objective reality of the saved standing: the fact that the genuinely regenerate believer is in Christ, sealed by the Spirit, kept by the Father's omnipotent hand, and cannot finally fall away from the grace in which she has been placed (Unit 9's subject). Security does not fluctuate with the quality of the believer's spiritual experience; it is as constant as the divine faithfulness. Assurance is the subjective experience: the personal, experiential conviction that the believer is indeed the person to whom the security applies. Assurance can fluctuate, stronger in some seasons, weaker in others, affected by sin, neglect of the means of grace, spiritual attack, and physical illness (Lesson 31's subject). The security is the constant objective foundation; the assurance is the fluctuating subjective appropriation of that foundation.
Three Grounds of Assurance	The Westminster Confession's (XVIII.2) threefold account of the grounds on which the assurance of salvation rests: (1) the divine truth of the promises of salvation (objective, the specific, written, divinely-guaranteed declarations of what God has committed to do for those who trust Christ, which do not fluctuate with the believer's spiritual experience); (2) the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made (subjective, the observable, Spirit-produced fruits of the regenerate life that confirm the reality of the regenerating root); and (3) the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God (experiential, the direct, internal, Spirit-to-spirit testimony that cannot be manufactured by human effort). The three grounds are complementary: each addresses a different dimension of the assurance-question and together constitute the full, stable, Spirit-attested assurance.
Plērophoria	Greek: "full assurance," "complete conviction," "plenitude of certainty", used in Hebrews 6:11 ("full assurance of hope") and Hebrews 10:22 ("full assurance of faith") for the specific, complete, comprehensive assurance that the New Testament's calls to assurance are aimed at. Plērophoria is not the partial, half-convinced, hope-without-certainty that characterizes the person who has not yet engaged all three grounds of assurance; it is the complete, settled, Spirit-attested, promise-grounded, evidence-confirmed conviction of the one who has fully appropriated what the doctrine provides. Hebrews 6:11's call to show "the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end" establishes the plērophoria as both the aspiration and the Spirit-honored pursuit of the genuinely regenerate believer.
Testimonium Spiritus Sancti Internum	Latin: "the internal witness of the Holy Spirit", the third ground of assurance described in Romans 8:15–16 ("The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God"). The Spirit's direct, internal, Spirit-to-spirit testimony that produces the specific, cannot-be-manufactured assurance of the adopted standing that neither the promises alone nor the evidences alone can generate in the same form. Developed most fully by Calvin in the Institutes (I.7.4–5) in relation to the assurance of biblical authority and applied equally to the assurance of personal salvation. The testimonium is not an independent, evidence-bypassing

	direct line to certainty but the Spirit's own illumination and application of the promises and evidences to the specific believing heart, adding the directly experiential, warmly personal, cannot-be-generated-by-effort dimension to the assurance that the first two grounds provide.
Oida	Greek: "to know," specifically the knowledge-by-direct-acquaintance or by-settled-perception (as opposed to ginōskō, which is more the knowledge gained through ongoing experience or process). Used in 1 John 5:13 ("so that you may know that you have eternal life", eidēte, the perfect subjunctive of oida) for the specific kind of knowing that John's epistle is designed to produce: not the tentative, uncertain, hope-based knowledge of the half-convinced but the settled, direct, personally-appropriated knowledge of the one who has come to know something with the full confidence that the evidence and the testimony warrant. The perfect subjunctive form (eidēte) carries the sense of a settled state of knowing, not the continual process of coming to know but the arrived-at, resting-in state of knowledge that the doctrine of assurance aims to produce.
Assurance Not of the Essence of Faith	The Westminster Confession's (XVIII.3) explicit recognition that a person can be genuinely saved without the full, vivid, untroubled assurance of the saved standing: "This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it." The distinction guards against two errors: (1) the denial of genuine salvation to those who lack full assurance (which would make the assurance a condition of the salvation rather than its confirmation); and (2) the denial of pastoral urgency to those who lack full assurance (which would make the absence of assurance an acceptable permanent condition rather than a pastoral challenge to be addressed). A person can be genuinely saved without the full assurance; the full assurance is the privileged, aspired-to, Spirit-cultivated development of the genuine salvation.
Inward Evidences of Grace	The specific, observable, Spirit-produced fruits of the genuine regeneration that constitute the second ground of assurance: the keeping of the commandments (1 John 2:3), the love for the brethren (1 John 3:14), the desire for holiness, the hatred of sin, the submission to God's Word, and the consistent orientation of the life toward God rather than away from Him. These evidences do not produce the salvation (which rests entirely on the imputed righteousness of Christ); they evidence the salvation's presence (confirming that the regenerating root is genuinely present and genuinely producing its characteristic fruit). The examination of the evidences is neither superficial (assuming that outward religious behavior is sufficient confirmation) nor excessively introspective (scrutinizing every spiritual movement for the presence or absence of genuine motivation), but honest: are the evidences genuinely present, however imperfectly?
False Assurance	The confidence of the hypocrite or the unregenerate that they are in a saved condition when the genuine marks of regeneration are absent from their spiritual life. Westminster Confession XVIII.1 warns that "hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God." False assurance is the specifically pastoral danger that the careful, honest application of the three grounds of assurance is designed to prevent: the preaching of the promises without the examination of the evidences can produce the false assurance of those who rest on the promises without the genuine regenerate root; the examination of the evidences without the honest acknowledgment of their imperfect character can produce the false assurance of those who mistake the externally moral life for the genuinely regenerate life.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the assurance of salvation is both possible and apostolically intended for every genuine believer, that 1 John 5:13's "so that you may know" is not a pious aspiration for the spiritually advanced but the specific, purpose-indicating, Spirit-inspired declaration of what the apostolic testimony was written to produce in every person who believes in the name of the Son of God. This means that the believer who lacks assurance is not in a condition the gospel has no word for; she is in the condition that the epistle of 1 John was specifically written to address. And the specific, three-legged, promise-evidence-testimony doctrine of assurance is the specific response the Spirit has provided through the apostolic word for the specific question that the lack of assurance is asking.

We must believe the security-assurance distinction with the pastoral precision it requires. The person who lacks assurance has not thereby lost the security, the objective, divine-preservation-grounded, perseverance-producing security that Unit 9 established is as constant as the character of the God who maintains it. The fluctuation of the assurance does not affect the constancy of the security; the absence of the felt certainty does not change the objective reality of the saved standing. This means that the pastoral response to the person who lacks assurance is never the response that treats the assurance's absence as evidence that the security has been lost; it is always the response that treats the assurance's absence as the pastoral challenge that the three-legged doctrine is specifically designed to address, directing the person toward the promises, the evidences, and the Spirit's testimony, not toward the anxiety of one who fears her salvation has been jeopardized.

We must believe that the three grounds of assurance are each genuinely necessary and that the imbalanced cultivation of one at the expense of the others produces the specific pastoral distortions that the balanced, three-legged doctrine is designed to prevent. The promise-ground alone produces the false assurance of those who rest on the promises without the evidence-examination. The evidence-ground alone produces the anxious assurance of those who can never be certain their evidences are sufficient. The Spirit's-testimony alone produces the emotionally-dependent assurance of those who can only be certain in the vivid seasons and who fall into doubt in the spiritually quiet ones. The three together produce the full, stable, honest, Spirit-attested assurance that 1 John 5:13 and Hebrews 6:11 together describe as the goal.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Desire the specific, settled, oida-quality knowledge that 1 John 5:13 describes, not the tentative, hope-based, uncertain awareness of the half-convinced but the direct, Spirit-attested, personally-appropriated conviction that you have eternal life. This is not an arrogant certainty that fails to take seriously the New Testament's warnings and evidences; it is the humble, honest, Spirit-produced, apostolically-intended knowledge of the one who has engaged the promises and received them personally, who has examined the evidences and found the genuine, imperfect, Spirit-produced fruits of the regenerate life genuinely present, and who has received the Spirit's own testimony alongside those first two grounds. Desire this knowledge not as a theological achievement to display but as the daily, spiritually-sustaining, joy-producing reality of the person who knows whose she is and where she is going.

Desire the pastoral sensitivity to distinguish the three specific pastoral situations that the three-legged doctrine addresses: the person who needs the promise-ground (who has never personally appropriated the specific, addressed-to-you promises of the gospel), the person who needs the evidence-ground (who needs the honest, 1-John-structured examination of genuine rather than perfect evidences), and the person who needs the Spirit's testimony (who has engaged the first two grounds and is waiting for the Spirit to add His own direct assurance). The ability to identify which leg of the three-legged doctrine is most urgently needed by the specific person in the specific moment of their assurance-crisis is one of the most practically important pastoral skills that the doctrine of assurance requires and that the careful, three-legged, balanced engagement with the doctrine develops.

Desire the courage to preach the specific promises with the personal, addressed-to-you, present-tense, first-person application that the assurance-producing preaching of the promises requires. The promise of John 6:37 is assurance-producing when it is preached as specifically addressed to the person who has come to Christ, not as a general theological claim about the category of believers but as the specific, personally-directed, you-who-believe word of the God who made it. The preacher who consistently invites the congregation to receive the specific promises as personally addressed, to hear the "certainly not cast out" as said to them, in this pew, in this season, in this specific struggle, is the preacher who is producing the first-leg assurance week by week.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read 1 John from beginning to end in a single sitting, attending specifically to the "by this we know" formulas (which appear at 2:3, 2:5, 3:14, 3:16, 3:19, 3:24, 4:13, 5:2) and to the specific evidence-test that each "by this we know" introduces. Map the three evidence-tests (doctrinal confession, moral obedience, love for the brethren) across the epistle and note the specific way each test is formulated in each occurrence. Then apply each test to your own life honestly: (a) Do you confess Jesus Christ as the Son of God come in the flesh? (b) Does your life evidence the genuine, habitual, direction-of-life orientation toward the keeping of the commandments? (c) Do you genuinely love the brethren, not merely the agreeable or the useful, but the community of those who share the Spirit and the Lord? Note: the test is for genuine presence, not perfect performance.
- Engage John 5:24 and Romans 8:1 as specific, personally-directed promise-receptions. For each verse: read it slowly, then receive it as personally addressed to you, substituting your own name in the address: "[Name], truly, truly I say to you: you have heard My word and believed Him who sent Me; you have eternal life; you do not come into judgment; you have passed out of death into life." Then: "There is therefore now no condemnation for [Name], who is in Christ Jesus." Ask: what specific form of the condemnation-anxiety or the assurance-lack does each promise most directly address in your own experience? And what specific change in the quality of your daily spiritual life would follow from genuinely inhabiting each promise as personally addressed to you rather than as a general theological claim about believers?
- Pray specifically for the Spirit's testimony, the third-leg assurance that cannot be manufactured by human effort. Not a demand that the Spirit deliver the assurance on your schedule, not the escalation of the introspective examination that his apparent silence seems to warrant, but the specific, Romans-8:15-informed, Abba-crying, Spirit-inviting prayer of the one who knows the Spirit testifies and is positioning herself to receive His testimony. Pray: "Holy Spirit, You have been given to testify with my spirit that I am a child of God. I am in the posture of receiving Your testimony. Not generating it; not manufacturing the feeling of assurance by the effort of my own introspection; but genuinely, expectantly, openly available to the testimony You give when You will. Testify with my spirit. Let the Abba cry be more vivid in me than the

condemnation-anxiety. Let the assurance You produce be the settled, direct, oida-quality knowledge that John wrote so that I might have.”

- Use the Westminster Confession’s Chapter XVIII structure as a pastoral tool for a specific conversation with a person in your congregation who is currently struggling with assurance. (1) Ask which of the three grounds is most urgently needed: have they received the specific promises as personally addressed? Have they examined the evidences for genuine rather than perfect presence? Have they prayed for and positioned themselves to receive the Spirit’s direct testimony? (2) Address the most urgently needed ground with the specific, targeted, text-grounded pastoral word that the ground provides. (3) Name the security-assurance distinction clearly: the assurance’s absence does not mean the security has been lost. (4) Point toward 1 John 5:13 as the apostolically-intended destination: John wrote so that you might know. The knowing is possible, it is intended for you, and the path to it is the three-legged doctrine faithfully engaged.
- Read Hebrews 10:19–25 as the fullest integration of the assurance doctrine with the corporate life of the community: the full assurance (v. 22) is cultivated in the context of drawing near (to God, with the full assurance of faith), holding fast (to the confession without wavering, grounded in the faithfulness of the One who promised), and stimulating one another to love and good deeds (the mutual-encouragement that prevents the hardening that diminishes assurance). Ask: how do the three movements of the passage, drawing near, holding fast, and stimulating one another, correspond to the three grounds of assurance (drawing near grounds the promise-reception; holding fast grounds the evidence-confirmation; stimulating one another grounds the community-embedded Spirit’s testimony)? And what specific practices in the community’s common life most directly produce the full assurance that Hebrews 10:22 commends?

Key Texts: 1 John 5:13; 2 Peter 1:10; Romans 8:15–16; Hebrews 6:11; 10:22; John 5:24; 6:37; Romans 8:1; 1 John 2:3; 3:14, 24; 4:13; Hebrews 11:6

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before studying this lesson, where would you locate yourself on the assurance spectrum? At the one end is the person whose assurance is vivid, stable, and consistent: she knows she is saved in the specific, oida-quality, Spirit-attested way that 1 John 5:13 describes. At the other end is the person whose assurance is thin, fragile, and highly fluctuating: she hopes she is saved but cannot sustain the settled conviction against the specific challenges that her own spiritual life produces. Most believers are somewhere between the two. Where are you? Which of the three grounds of assurance is most active in your current experience (the promises, the evidences, or the Spirit's testimony)? And which is most urgently needed?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read 1 John 5:1–13. In verses 1–5, what are the three marks of the genuine believer that John identifies (believes that Jesus is the Christ... loves the Father and His children... keeps His commandments...)? In verse 6, what is the specific testimony that John introduces (the Spirit, who is the truth)? In verses 7–12, how does John develop the triple testimony (Spirit, water, blood) and its specific relationship to the believer's assurance ("The one who believes... has the testimony in himself", v. 10)? In verse 13, what is the specific stated purpose of the epistle, the specific audience to whom it is addressed, and the specific content of the knowledge it aims to produce? And how do the three testimony-dimensions of verses 6–12 connect to the three grounds of assurance that the lesson has developed?
- Read Hebrews 6:9–12. In verse 9, what is the specific distinction the author draws between the people described in verses 4–6 and his actual readers ("But, beloved, we are convinced of better things... things that accompany...")? In verse 10, what is the first ground of the author's confidence about the readers ("God is not unjust so as to forget...")? In verses 11–12, what specific call to diligence does the author extend ("we desire... to realize the full assurance of hope until the end..."), and what is the Greek word for "full assurance" (plērophoria)? And how does the author's confident address to his readers in verse 9 ("beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you") model the pastoral voice that the cultivation of assurance requires?
- Read Romans 8:14–17. In verse 14, what is the description of those who are sons of God ("all who are being led by the Spirit...")? In verse 15, what is the contrast between the two "spirits" (slavery and adoption), and what specific address does the Spirit of adoption produce ("by which we cry out, 'Abba!'...")? In verse 16, what is the specific grammatical structure of the Spirit's testimony (sym-martyrei, co-testifies, or testifies alongside, what does the prefix sym establish about the character of the testimony)? In verse 17, what is the content of the knowledge that the Spirit's testimony produces, and how does the inheritance-dimension of the verse ("heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ") establish the assurance's eschatological grounding?
- Read 1 John 2:3–6; 3:14–15; 3:24; 4:13. For each passage, identify the specific evidence-test introduced by the "by this we know" formula and the specific content of what is known. In 2:3–6: what is the test (keeping the commandments) and what is the known content (we have come to know Him)? In 3:14–15: what is the test (love for the brethren) and what is the known content (we have passed out of death into life)? In 3:24: what are the two tests (keeping His commandments, the Spirit whom He has given us) and what is the known content (He abides in us)? In 4:13: what is the test (the Spirit whom He has given us) and what is the

known content (we abide in Him and He in us)? How do these four passages together establish the three-test structure of 1 John's evidential argument for the assurance of eternal life?

- Read 2 Peter 1:3–11. In verses 3–4, what is the divine provision that grounds the call to the evidences (His divine power has granted to us everything... by these He has granted to us...)? In verses 5–7, what seven qualities are to be added to the faith, and how does each build upon the preceding one (faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, love)? In verse 8, what is the consequence of these qualities being present and increasing (“not useless or unfruitful...”)? In verse 10, what is the specific call to diligence (“be all the more diligent to make certain...”), and what is the consequence of the diligence (“as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble”)? And in verse 11, what is the eschatological destination toward which the evidence-cultivating diligence is aimed (“the entrance into the eternal kingdom... will be abundantly supplied...”)?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson presents the security-assurance distinction as the pastoral key to the entire doctrine: security is the objective reality that does not fluctuate; assurance is the subjective experience that can fluctuate. Evaluate the adequacy of this distinction for the pastoral situation of the genuine believer who lacks assurance. Does it adequately guard against the misuse in either direction, the misuse that treats the absent assurance as evidence of the absent security (producing unnecessary soteriological anxiety) and the misuse that treats the assured standing as making the cultivation of assurance unnecessary (producing pastoral complacency about the absent assurance)? And does the Westminster Confession's explicit statement that assurance is “not of the essence of faith” adequately prevent both misuses?
- The lesson presents the evidence-ground as the most susceptible of the three grounds to the pastoral dangers of false assurance (the superficial examination that produces the wrong kind of confidence) and excessive anxiety (the too-thorough examination that produces more awareness of failure than of fruit). Evaluate the practical difference between the appropriate evidence-examination (honest, neither-superficial-nor-paralyzingly-thorough, looking for genuine rather than perfect evidences) and the excessive introspection that produces anxiety rather than assurance. What specific pastoral or practical guidance would help a person distinguish between the appropriate evidence-examination and the excessive introspection that the lesson warns against?
- The lesson argues that the Spirit's testimony is the dimension of assurance that cannot be manufactured by human effort and that must be received rather than generated. Evaluate the relationship between the Spirit's sovereign freedom in giving the testimony and the believer's responsibility to position herself to receive it. Is there a tension between the Spirit's sovereignty (He gives the testimony when and as He wills, not on the believer's schedule) and the believer's responsibility (she must position herself through the means of grace and the prayer-posture to receive it)? And how does the channels-not-causes principle of Lesson 25 (the means of grace are channels, not causes, the Spirit works through them but is not compelled by them) resolve or describe this tension?
- First John 5:13's “so that you may know that you have eternal life” uses the verb *oida* (settled, direct knowledge) rather than *ginōskō* (knowledge through ongoing experience or process). Evaluate the significance of this word choice for the character of assurance John is aiming at. Does the use of *oida* establish that the assurance John is producing is a once-for-all, permanently settled state? Or is the perfect subjunctive form (*eidēte*, that you may have come to know and continue knowing) compatible with the fluctuating character that the lesson acknowledges assurance can have? And how does the relationship

between the oida-quality knowledge John aims to produce and the fluctuating character of assurance that both WCF XVIII.3 and pastoral experience acknowledge illuminate the nature of the full assurance as the aspired-to destination rather than the invariable possession?

- The lesson presents the full assurance as both a privilege (available to every genuine believer who engages the three grounds) and a duty (to be diligently cultivated through the means the Spirit provides). Evaluate the adequacy of the duty-framing for the person whose assurance is thin or absent not from lack of diligence but from legitimate causes, clinical depression, chronic illness, the aftermath of abuse, or other circumstances that produce the emotional unavailability that makes the felt assurance difficult to attain. Does the “duty” language create an inappropriate burden for such persons? And how would the doctrine of assurance need to be applied with pastoral sensitivity for the person whose thin assurance reflects circumstances rather than failures of diligence?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the preacher who consistently preaches the specific promises with the personal, addressed-to-you, present-tense application is producing the first-leg assurance in the congregation week by week. Evaluate your own preaching practice: do you consistently bring the specific promises of the gospel to their specific, personally-addressed application (receiving John 6:37 as specifically addressed to the person in the pew who has come to Christ), or do you tend to preach the promises in the third person (what God has done for believers in general) rather than the second person (what God has done for you specifically, if you have come to Christ)? What specific change in the way you preach the promises would most directly increase the first-leg assurance production in your congregation?
- The lesson identifies three specific pastoral situations requiring three specific applications of the three-legged doctrine. For each situation, name a specific person in your pastoral care who most closely fits the description: (a) the person who has never personally appropriated the specific promises (promise-ground needed); (b) the person whose evidence-examination has produced more awareness of the failing than of the fruit (evidence-ground needed with the genuine-rather-than-perfect reframing); and (c) the person who has engaged the first two grounds and is waiting for the Spirit’s testimony (testimony-ground needed with the prayer-posture and means-of-grace guidance). For each person: what specific text, what specific pastoral approach, and what specific pastoral question would most effectively deliver the specific ground that their specific situation requires?
- The lesson closes with the vision of the congregation that knows it has eternal life, not the naively confident (unexamined assumption) and not the paralyzed-by-uncertainty (never-sustained conviction), but the three-ground-engaged, full-assurance-attaining company of those who have received the promises personally, examined the evidences honestly, and received the Spirit’s testimony gratefully. Evaluate your congregation honestly against this vision: how many of the genuinely regenerate members of your community would you estimate currently have the full, stable, Spirit-attested assurance that 1 John 5:13 describes? What are the primary obstacles to the full assurance in your congregation (lack of promise-preaching, absence of honest evidence-examination, insufficient attention to the Spirit’s testimony-producing work through the means of grace)? And what specific programmatic or pastoral change would most effectively move your congregation toward the 1 John 5:13 vision?
- The lesson observes that the Puritans of the seventeenth century gave the doctrine of assurance its most sustained and most practically developed treatment in the whole history of the church. Read at least one selection from the Puritan literature on assurance: Thomas Brooks’s *Heaven on Earth* (on the grounds and

means of assurance), William Guthrie's *The Christian's Great Interest* (on the trial of saving interest in Christ), or John Owen's work on the Spirit's testimony. Identify the most practically useful insight from the Puritan treatment of assurance for your own pastoral practice. How does the Puritan account of the assurance-cultivation compare to the three-legged Westminster Confession structure? And what specific wisdom from the Puritan tradition's pastoral experience with the assurance question would most benefit your current pastoral care of those who lack assurance?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time by reading 1 John 5:13 as both the apostolic statement of the epistle's purpose and the personal declaration of the apostolic intention for your own assurance: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." Receive the "so that you may know" as the Spirit's own purpose-statement for the testimony He has inspired through John, not as the distant aspiration of a spiritual elite but as the specific, intended, accessible destination for every person who believes in the name of the Son of God, including you, in this moment, in this season of whatever quality of assurance you are currently experiencing. Ask the Spirit to do in your heart what He inspired John to do in his epistle: to produce the specific, settled, oida-quality knowledge that you have eternal life, through the engagement with the promises and the evidences and the Spirit's own direct testimony that the three-legged doctrine provides.

Pray through each of the three grounds of assurance as a specific, targeted, personally-directed prayer for your own assurance and for the assurance of each member of your congregation. For the promise-ground: receive John 5:24 and Romans 8:1 as personally addressed to you, the present-tense "has eternal life," the present-tense "no condemnation," the perfect-tense "passed out of death into life", and then pray them over specific members of your congregation by name: "For [name]: there is now no condemnation. She has passed out of death into life. She has eternal life. Father, let the promise be more vivid to her than the condemnation-anxiety. Let the 'now no condemnation' of Your word land in her heart with the specific, personally-addressed weight that is the difference between knowing the doctrine and knowing that she herself is its beneficiary."

Pray through the 1-John evidence-tests as a corporate examination of the congregation's spiritual condition, asking the Spirit to produce in the genuinely regenerate the honest recognition of the genuine evidence and in those whose evidence is thinner than they have assumed the honest, Spirit-applied conviction that calls them to the genuine regenerating work. For the doctrinal test: ask the Spirit to strengthen the genuine, heartfelt, personally-owned confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God come in the flesh. For the moral test: ask the Spirit to produce the genuine, direction-of-life orientation toward the keeping of the commandments that is the second evidence of the genuine regeneration. For the love test: ask the Spirit to deepen the love for the brethren that is the most visible community-expression of the genuinely regenerate nature. And ask the Spirit to give each one the specific, honest, neither-superficial-nor-anxious awareness of these evidences that produces the second-leg assurance.

Pray specifically for the Spirit's direct testimony, the third-leg, cannot-be-manufactured, directly-experienced dimension of the assurance that only He can provide. Name the members of your congregation who most need this specific dimension of the assurance: those who have engaged the promises and examined the evidences but who still lack the vivid, Spirit-attested, Abba-crying, Romans-8:16 awareness of the adopted standing. For each one, pray Romans 8:15–16 as the specific intercessory request: "Spirit of adoption, testify with [name]'s spirit that she is a child of God. Not a spirit of slavery leading to fear, but the Spirit of adoption by which she cries 'Abba, Father.' Testify with her spirit. Let the testimony be more vivid than the doubt. Let the Abba cry be louder than the enemy's accusation. And let the knowledge that she is a child of God be the settled, direct, Spirit-attested, apostolically-intended possession of this specific, beloved, genuinely-regenerate soul."

Close with the specific, communal, corporate reception of 1 John 5:13's promise as the shared declaration of the assembled community's apostolically-intended assurance: "John has written these things to us, to us who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that we may know that we have eternal life." Read it in the first-person plural: not "some of us may know" and not "all of us automatically know without examination," but "we, the community of genuine believers, who have received the promises and examined the evidences and received the Spirit's testimony, may know that we have eternal life." Let the community's shared possession of the apostolic testimony be the shared assurance of the assembled community, and let the shared assurance be the occasion for the shared praise of the God whose faithfulness is the ultimate ground of everything the assurance is built upon.

"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life."

1 John 5:13, NASB 1995

Key Texts: 1 John 5:13; 2 Peter 1:10; Romans 8:15–17; Hebrews 6:11; 10:22; John 5:24; 6:37; Romans 8:1; 1 John 2:3–6; 3:14; 3:24; 4:13; 2 Corinthians 13:5

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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