

# Alpha 3: How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?

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This morning we continue our series based on the core questions about the Christian faith covered in our Alpha class. Today our question is “How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?” Let us look at what the Apostle Paul said about how we can be sure of our faith.

## **Romans 8:15-17**

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” <sup>16</sup>The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. <sup>17</sup>Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

How can a person know if they are saved? Can a person know they will go to heaven when they die? John Wesley the founder of the Methodist movement said there are two extremes to avoid when it comes to our faith. One is presumption. The other is uncertainty. Some people wrongly assume they are children of God. It is an easy presumption if we base our Christianity on anything other than a personal experience with Jesus Christ. Some persons mistakenly believe they are Christians because they live in a Christian nation or because they were raised in a Christian home or because their name is on the membership roll of a Christian church. Presumption is looking to those things as proof that we are Christians and ignoring the only thing that truly makes us Christian: a personal experience with Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. Presumption is dangerous because it lulls us to sleep. We are inoculated enough to prevent us from getting the real thing.

The other end of the spectrum from presumption is uncertainty. This person believes that in this life we can only hope that we are going to heaven. They are turned off by persons who are sure they are going to heaven. They believe humility is the best virtue.

“I hope I’m a Christian, but I guess only God knows for sure. Will I go to heaven? I don’t know.” They are totally insecure in their faith.

Is it possible to have something other than presumption or uncertainty? Is it possible to have an authentic experience of assurance? Paul said: “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.” The Apostle John said: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may **know** that you **have** eternal life.” (I John 5:13)

Some translations say “The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” What is the witness or testimony of the Spirit? It is a divine dialog between the Spirit of God and my spirit. Out of that conversation comes an assurance that I am a child of God.

Notice the conversation starts with God: “The Spirit himself testifies...” God initiates the assurance. Authentic Christian faith begins with God, not me. I do not work my way up to God and stand before him saying: “Look at the good life I lived. I deserve to enter heaven because of my goodness.” That is presumption. The only basis for authentic assurance comes when God makes the first move. God acts to do something for us and in us. God comes to us first and offers his life as a sacrifice for our sins. He dies in our place. He takes away our sin. He does for us what we could not do for ourselves. He offers us love and joy.

John Wesley left England and came to America as a missionary in the mid 1700’s. While in Georgia he encountered a Moravian missionary. The Moravian church originated in Eastern Europe and focused on a vital relationship with God. During the conversation the Moravian missionary asked John Wesley: “Do you know that Jesus is your Savior?” Wesley responded: “I know he is the Savior of the world.” The Moravian asked, “But do you know that Jesus is your Savior?” Wesley responded, “Yes.” Surely, Wesley was a

Christian. His father was a priest in the Church of England. Wesley himself was now an ordained priest in the Church of England; a seminary graduate. Surely he was a Christian. But that is presumption. Wesley recorded this encounter with the Moravian missionary in his journal. He said when he responded “yes” to the question, “Do you know Jesus is your Savior?”—“I fear those words were in vain.” John Wesley did not have the assurance in his own life that Jesus was his Savior.

The witness of the Spirit means knowing that God loves me. It would not be until John Wesley returned to England and reluctantly attended a Bible study one night that he would discover that God’s love was not just for the world, it was for him. He wrote in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Do you know that Jesus loves you personally? He knows your name. He knows the number of hairs on your head. For some of us it does not take him very long to count!! Knowing the number of hairs on our head is a way of expressing how intimately Jesus knows everything about us. Why would he know the numbers of hairs on our head? Because he loves each one of us individually. Do you know how much God loves you?

God’s Spirit testifies first that he loves us so much he gave his life for us. Then the second part of the dialog begins: His Spirit testifies with our spirit. God loves us and we respond. We love him in return. “We love God because he first loved us.”

What does it mean to love God? Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” Our response to God’s love goes beyond a sentimental feeling. We demonstrate our love for God by obeying him. How do know when you are in love? There

is a difference between infatuation and love. Infatuation is a gushy, romantic feeling. It comes and goes. Warm, romantic feelings are great, but they cannot provide a lasting foundation for a relationship. Love means that you sacrifice for the one you love whether you feel like it or not. You put aside your needs to meet the needs of the other person.

In our relationship with God there are times when we feel the warmth of his presence and our hearts overflow with expressions of praise and gratitude. We call those moments “spiritual highs.” They are a wonderful part of our relationship with God. We may experience those spiritual highs at camp or on an Emmaus Walk or a mission trip. We would love to have that feeling all the time. But those feelings come and go. They are not the basis of a lasting relationship with God.

Because you love your child, you get up in the middle of the night to get her a drink of water—even though you are tired and sleepy and the floor is cold. Because you love your child you clean up their throw up. There is no warm, fuzzy feeling while you are doing that. You go to the symphony because you know your spouse loves to dress up and go the symphony. You would rather be watching football. Love means putting yourself aside for the other person. Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” We may not always experience a spiritual high, but we do what Jesus asks us to do because we love him. Keeping his commandments means that we follow his way rather than our own way. We put ourselves aside for him. We put aside our desires for him. When I get our paycheck, rather than spending it all on things I want, I ask: “How can I express my love to Jesus with this money?” I write out my tithe check first, even when I don’t feel like it—even when there are other things I would like to do with the money. It is a way of expressing my love for him. We put aside our own desires to do what pleases him. God first loves us. Our love is in response to his love.

How do we know when our faith is authentic rather than presumptuous? John Wesley said there are five questions we can use to examine our faith to see if it is authentic. These questions help us to do a “grace” check in our lives. Are we experiencing God’s grace?

1. Has there ever been time when you made a conscious effort to repent of your sins? “Yes, I’ve repented many times.” We all need to continue to repent continuously. We have much to repent. It is not a once in a lifetime thing. Wesley pointed out that there needs to be a critical moment in our lives when we have come before God and repented of all the known sins in our lives. We have asked God to forgive us for our offences against him. This moment is a significant turning point in your life. The word “repent” means to turn around. Was there a moment when your life turned around? You headed away from your desires and headed toward God’s desires for your life.
2. Is there a change in your life as a result of that repentance? Wesley did not believe that you had to have a dramatic, spectacular conversion to become a Christian. Many persons have a very quiet experience when they invite Jesus into their lives. Regardless of whether it was dramatic or low key, you know that you are a different person because of that experience. The change may be primarily in your attitude. I was a person who tried to do the right thing. I grew up in the church, but I was always trying to earn God’s approval. I felt like I was never doing enough; never good enough. When I heard the good news that becoming a Christian was trusting in what Christ had done for me rather than what I did for him, I was set free. My behavior did not change much, but my attitude changed dramatically. Rather than going to church and praying and tithing to earn God’s approval, now I did those things out of gratitude for the

acceptance and grace God gave to me as a gift because of what Jesus had done for me. Others experience a dramatic change in behavior. When they repent, God sets them free from destructive habits or addictions. Maybe they started speaking to people with kindness rather than harshness. We are living under grace when we are aware of a change in our lives.

3. Is there any joy of the Lord in your life? John Wesley said, "Sour godliness is the devil's religion." Wesley encouraged Methodists to joyfully sing their faith. His brother Charles wrote many joy filled hymns like "O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Rejoice the Lord is King," and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." John Wesley even encouraged Methodists to laugh their faith! When we greet the day with these words: "This is the day the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it," We are experiencing authentic grace-filled faith.
4. Do I desire to do God's will? You seek to do God's will every day, not just on Sunday. You see your vocation as a way to serve God. "I am a Christian who is a dentist or teacher or attorney or banker or student or nurse or business man or saleswoman." Do you seek to do God's will every day in the stands or on the field at the little league game or soccer game or tailgate party? Do you desire to honor and serve God wherever you are?
5. Is there obvious growth in the fruit of the spirit in your life? The fruits of the Spirit are listed in Galatians 5:22,23: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Wesley said you cannot measure spiritual maturity by the gifts of the spirit: prophecy, teaching, speaking in tongues, or healing. The Corinthian church had all the gifts of the Spirit, but they were extremely immature. Several years ago we were interviewing a possible staff member. He impressed us by the many spiritual

disciplines he practiced. Someone on the interview committee commented that he would bring spiritual maturity because of all the disciplines he practiced. I replied, “Not necessarily, because the sign of spiritual maturity is not how disciplined we are, but how much we love God and others.”

John Wesley offered those five questions as a way for us to do our own spiritual inventory and see what they reveal about our experience of faith. Does our spirit testify with God’s spirit that we are children of God? The questions are not intended to make us feel guilty or inadequate. They are not intended to make us try harder to be better Christians. We cannot manufacture the fruit of the Spirit in our lives by self-effort. The fruits of the spirit flow naturally out of an experience of God’s transforming grace in our lives. When we have authentic faith we recognize that it is not about how good we are; it is about how good God is. It is giving witness to the change that Jesus Christ has brought about in our lives. It is not about what we have accomplished. If we don’t have the witness in our spirit, we need to take a trip to the cross. We need to fully absorb the price that Jesus paid so that we could be forgiven and released to live a new life by his Spirit. We need to repent of our self-centeredness and ask God to fill us with his Spirit. You need to discover how much God loves you.