

GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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Assurance Lost And Regained (Song 3:1-5)

by B S Poh

We remind ourselves that the Song of Solomon is an allegory written by King Solomon, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. King Solomon was given a glimpse of the future, when the promised Saviour would come. He was given an understanding of the relationship between the Saviour and His people.

We have learned that Chapter 2 is a prophecy of the gospel age. The chapter consists of two parts, which teach about “The Church At Peace”, and “The Church Militant”. Moving on to Chapter 3, we find that it can also be divided into two parts. Verses 1-5 concern “Assurance Lost And Regained”, which we study here. This will be followed by verses 6-11, “God’s Seal Of Assurance”. While the previous chapter is about the church considered corporately, the present chapter focuses on the experiences of the individual believer. In this study, we shall consider two things. Firstly, we shall consider the danger of losing the assurance of salvation. Secondly, we shall consider how to regain and keep the assurance of salvation.

I. The danger of losing assurance of salvation (vv. 1-3)

A precious gift

The passage begins with the bride thinking of the groom, “By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him”. We should begin by noting that there is such a thing as the assurance of salvation. A person who has repented of his sins, and trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation, may have that sense of certainty that he is forgiven and accepted by God, and is in possession of eternal life. This truth is taught in many parts of the Scripture but we will refer only to a couple of passages. In Romans 8:14-17 we are told, ‘For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together.’ Then, we have 1 John 5:13 which says, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue to* believe in the name of the Son of God”. From these, you can see that believers may come to a certainty that they are the children of God. They have been fully forgiven of their sins and are accepted by God.

This certainty is both objective and subjective in nature. We consider, first, the objective aspect of assurance. By “objective” we mean that which is not based on our feelings. Rather, it is based on something outside of ourselves which can readily be confirmed. We are referring to the objectivity and authority of God’s word. We are saying that God’s word is the basis of our assurance of salvation. From the word of God, we know that the Lord Jesus Christ came to die for sinners. From the word of God, we know that whoever repents of his sins and trusts in Jesus Christ will be saved. The word of God also assures us that the Lord will never allow any of His sheep to be snatched out of His hands. The word of God declares that the Lord will return to take us to be with Him. If we trust in Jesus Christ, we can be sure that we are saved. We know that God cannot tell a lie, for that would be contrary to His nature. And since God’s word is true, we believe what it says. That is the objective aspect of our salvation.

Then, there is the subjective aspect of assurance, which lies within ourselves. Although our feeling is not a sure guide, God nevertheless works in us so that we may know, and sense, that we are forgiven, that we belong to Christ and will never be lost. That is because the Holy Spirit is given to us when we repent of our sins to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit who dwells in us bears witness with our spirit to give us that assurance of salvation. That assurance can grow, but it can also weaken and be lost. That is why we must be careful not to lose the assurance of our salvation. We consider how that may happen.

How assurance may be lost

The Scripture shows us that one of the chief reasons why our assurance of salvation may be weakened is because we indulge in sinful habits. When you do something sinful and get addicted to it, a sinful pattern or habit is formed which will cause you to wonder whether you are truly saved. You will be wondering, "Is it possible that the Lord has forgiven all my sins while I continue in this particular sin?" The Bible tells us, in 1 John 3:4-6, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him." Habitual sinning is referred to in this passage.

Secondly, there is the neglect of God's word. We know that a person is saved only by the hearing of God's word. "Faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Roms. 10:17). Once saved, we continue to need God's word to sustain us in the faith and in order that we may grow spiritually. "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). We need to feed on good spiritual food on a regular basis to grow well spiritually. Irregular feeding will not help one to grow well. Irregular attendance at church will mean that you do not hear God's word regularly, which will affect adversely your spiritual growth. A workman who builds a wall will lay the bricks side by side, then layer by layer. In that way, he gets a strong and well-built wall once the cement is dry. Similarly, building up our faith is by the hearing God's word expounded on a regular basis. It has to be "precept upon precept, and line upon line" (Isa. 28:10). This is a common truth, yet many do not seem to see it. They come to church whenever they like, and they absent themselves whenever they like. How can they expect to grow well spiritually? While there are Christians who do not have the opportunity to hear systematic, expository, and applied preaching, others seem to take the opportunities they have for granted.

Then there is the disobedience to God's word. When you refuse to obey what is clearly commanded by God, you will be in danger of losing your assurance. God will chastise you, and if you give up on the faith, you will prove yourself unregenerate. You will be like the seeds that either grow on stony ground or are choked by the thorns of life, in the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:3-9). In addition, there is physical and mental exhaustion. A living person is made up of body and soul united together. Physical or mental exhaustion may affect a person spiritually. The reverse is true as well. Spiritual ill-health may affect you physically. We are here discussing the loss of assurance. Physical ill-health may cause a person to become depressed, and lose his assurance of salvation. It is good to stay physically healthy, although our priority should be upon godliness. We remember Paul's exhortation to Timothy, saying, "... exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:7-8). Similarly, in the midst of dealing with godly living, Paul reminded Timothy to "use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities" (1 Tim. 3:23). There is an undeniable link between our physical and spiritual well-being.

Briefly, then, these are the possible causes of a loss of assurance of salvation - sinful habits, neglect of God's word, disobedience to God's word, and physical and emotional exhaustion. But let us not forget the spiritual dimension, and fail to consider the activity of the devil in all these. The devil is very good at shaking the assurance in God's children. Two very common tactics used by him are to bring fear and discouragement to them. We fear men, imprisonment, pain, shame, the loss of reputation, and what others say about us. Fear brings us down and makes us ineffective in God's service. Imagine what would have happened if Martin Luther had succumbed to fear - if he had feared the pope, feared death, or feared the loss of his reputation as the top theologian of his day. There would have been no

Reformation! Today, fear grips too many of God's people. You fear that your weaknesses might be known to others, you fear suffering pain and imprisonment, you fear the threats of enemies of the gospel, you fear offending people, you fear taking risks in missions. What is the result? You do not take any initiative for the gospel, and you become ineffective in God's service.

Then, there is discouragement, arising from disappointments of various kinds. You do not see visible results in your ministry, you are betrayed by trusted friends, you are accused by others of what they are guilty of themselves, you are disappointed by pettiness and vindictiveness in the most unexpected people. Like Shylock in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice", they are bent on destroying you and causing you pain. If you "step on their tail" - causing them offence in any way - they will demand from you the pound of flesh you are supposed to owe them. We do encounter such characters. They are supposed to be Christians, and even ministers of the gospel! It shocks us that they are capable of such vindictiveness. We find it hard to believe that they can be so petty. But that is what we find in them, and it causes us to be so depressed. That is where we must be careful, for severe disappointments can lead to discouragement, discouragement can lead to depression, and depression can cause you to lose the assurance of salvation. The devil is very good at that. Beware of the weapons of the devil! Do not be ignorant of his devices!

Indolence, the chief cause

But let us not blame the devil for everything. Let God deal with the devil. More importantly for us is a problem within ourselves which may be considered the common, if not the chief, cause of the loss of assurance. That problem is indolence - or laziness coupled with carelessness. We are often lazy and careless - both in action and in attitude. This is portrayed in verse 1, "By night on my bed I sought the one I love; I sought him, but I did not find him". What it means in the original text is that the bride has been lying in bed "night by night". It had been going on for some time. She had been lazy, careless, and half-hearted in her search for the groom. She looks for him through such inaction, in such a sloppy state of mind. And she expects to find the one whom she professes to love. Of course, she does not find him! If nothing is done about the indolence in us, we are likely to become worse. Drastic action is needed. A definite effort has to be made to bestir ourselves from indolence. We cannot expect half-hearted attempts to pull us through.

It is like being caught in a whirlpool. We are not saying that anyone of us has experienced being sucked into a whirlpool. We are only using this to illustrate a point. A whirlpool is supposed to turn in one direction as it sucks you in. If you were caught in one, you wouldn't wait for it to turn in the opposite direction to throw you up. You want to get out of it right away. When caught in a sin, you must make a drastic break with it, or it will spiral and suck you deeper down. Indolence and wishful thinking will not set you free. Here, the bride finally realizes that the one she loves is not with her, and that she is not going to find him by lazing around. It says, in verse 2, "I will rise now," *I said*, "and go about the city; in the streets and in the squares I will seek the one I love." We are reminded of the prodigal son, in Luke 15, who finally awakened to the realization of his ridiculous situation. We are told in Luke 15:17, "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father...'" Coming back to our passage, we see the bride stirring herself and saying, "I will rise now". Then, doing the right thing, she goes through the city of Jerusalem to seek the one she loves. She does not go into the wilderness, but through the city.

In the Christian life, we are to seek the Lord in the midst of His people, which is the church. The Lord wouldn't be in the wilderness of the world. The Lord is in the holy city. All too often, we seek the Lord in the wrong places, and we attempt to solve things in our own ways. We know of those who attend so-called "Marriage Enrichment" seminars to solve their marital problems. Others look for "How To" books to cure their low self-esteem and countless other problems. Yet others listen to gospel songs to overcome their low spirits. We are not saying that these things are wrong in themselves, or that you will not derive any benefit from them. What we are saying is that these can offer you only temporary relief. What you should do is to seek the Lord in His word, in the company of His people. You should go to a church that teaches the Bible faithfully, in which the believers love the Lord and His word. The Lord will be found there! You would remember the occasion when Jesus Christ was told, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You." Looking around,

He said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother" (Mark 3:34-35). You must look for Christ in the midst of His people!

Thank God, He will not let His children to go astray for too long. As long as you make the effort to seek the Lord, and if you seek Him in the right place, God will honour you. In His providence, He often arranges things such that you are confronted by His watchmen. We are told in verse 3, 'The watchmen who go about the city found me; *I said*, "Have you seen the one I love?"' Who are these watchmen? They are the shepherds of the souls. They are the mature Christians who are filled with the spirit of God. They are the pastors and ministers of the gospel. As watchmen, they do not have power within themselves to restore you. But they can point you to Christ. They will direct you to God's word. They will remind you of truths that are relevant to your situation. In the first place, you should have gone straight to them to seek their help. You needn't have wandered "in the streets and in the squares". You could have sought out those who could give you directions based on the Bible's teaching.

As you make the effort to seek the Lord, God will confront you through His ministers. He will seek you out in order to restore you. When Adam fell, God drew near and called to him asking, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). It wasn't that God did not know where Adam was. He asked only to show Adam that he had been found out, that he had to have dealings with his God. In the same way, God asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9, 13). God wanted Elijah to realise that He was in control of everything, that He had not forsaken His people - the nation of Israel. Elijah had run away from wicked Jezebel in fear, but God had more work for him to do. God will not forsake His children. He wants us to draw near to Him. As we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us.

II. How to regain and keep the assurance of salvation (vv. 4-5)

Seek the Lord in the word of God

We have seen that the Lord must be sought in the city, i.e. in the midst of His people. We have also seen that His ministers, and other mature Christians, are ready to help us. Our objective, however, is to seek the Lord, not the place nor the helpers. We wish to regain our communion with the Lord. We ask, next, how do we regain the assurance of our salvation? As we seek help from the watchmen, we will be directed to God's word. Assurance of salvation is to be sought in God's word. If ever you go astray, return to God's word. Return to hear it expounded. Seek out those who teach it faithfully. Of course, the question would arise, "How do you recognize a true watchman from a false one?" We live in desperate times. We cannot trust everyone. Many purveyors of falsehood are around. We want to know how we may recognise a true teacher of the word from one who is not.

In the old days, the watchman will stand guard on the city walls. He would not fall asleep while on duty. He would watch out for potential dangers, and potential enemies. If he discerns danger, or enemies, he would warn the people in the city. The prophet Ezekiel tells us that preachers are the watchmen over souls. They warn you of dangers. They identify the enemies of the soul. The first mark of a true servant of God is that he preaches God's word faithfully. He does not rely on human wisdom. He does not base his teaching on secular philosophy or humanistic psychology. Instead, he refers you to the Bible, and attempts to convince you from God's word. He teaches, and he warns. That is because the Bible contains both instructions and warnings. The preacher who seeks only to soothe your conscience and say nice things to please you is not a true watchman from God.

Then, we expect the true watchman to point you to Jesus Christ, who alone can save you. He will make much of the cross of Jesus Christ, for it is by His death on the cross that atonement is made for our sins. Without the death of Christ, there would be no reconciliation with God. Without the shedding of His blood, there would be no forgiveness of our sins. The faithful servant of God preachers "Christ crucified", not a Christ who comes to make you happy and wealthy. He calls people to repentance and faith, not to experience miraculous healing and tongue speaking. And when you are backslidden, he preaches to you the same message of "Christ crucified". It is in Christ that you will find restoration. It is by His atoning death that you can be assured of forgiveness.

Thirdly, a true servant of God will direct you to trust in the sovereign God. You are not to trust in yourself, nor in him as a preacher. God knows the end from the beginning, and is in control of all

things. Nothing happens by chance. It is to Him that you must turn, and in Him you must trust. You must submit yourself to Him, and not insist on your own ways. His word is our all-sufficient guide. What He says in the Bible is what He wants you to believe in. What He promises to do, He will carry out. That is because He is a faithful God, who is incapable of telling a lie. And He has the power to carry out whatever He promises to do.

Fourthly, you must examine the fruit of the watchman's ministry. One who professes to be a servant of God will be serving God. Is he being used as an instrument of blessing by God? Are people being helped in their walk with the Lord by his ministry? Are people soundly saved in his ministry? Are the members of his church those who love the Lord, and those who live to please God, or are they mere hypocrites? A true teacher of the word does all things to God's glory, and for the edification of the saints. Sadly, there are people who profess to be pastors, and teachers of the word, but mislead others. Strangely, there are many who follow such false teachers. They do not seem to mind being used by such men, and being under bondage to them. It is only after they have been badly burned, or when they are rudely awakened by some great disappointments, that they realise the seriousness of their situation. Thank God, many have been rescued from such situations. Beware of being brainwashed by false teachers in the name of truth! Beware of being bound in your conscience to a mere man, all in the name of God!

The true servant of God works hard in the ministry. He is prepared to suffer for the faith. Time, money, and effort are spent in kingdom work. Consider the Lord Jesus Christ. While on earth, He was constantly travelling in circuit to preach. He was often exhausted and had to take time off to pray and recuperate. Consider the apostle Paul. He laboured in the ministry that the Lord had given to him, and suffered for it. Suffering is part and parcel of the ministry. Paul reminded Timothy that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). If our Master laboured and suffered for what He did, His disciples cannot expect to do less nor to be spared suffering. Examine the fruit to see if the man is being blessed in the midst of hard work and suffering. That is a mark of a true servant of God. By the fruit you will be able to tell the tree!

These, then, are the four marks by which you may test whether you are meeting a true watchman from God. Does he faithfully preach God's word? Does he point you to Jesus Christ? Does he direct your trust to the sovereign God? Does he labour fruitfully despite trials and persecution? God uses His servants to restore you. Thank God for them. They are sent into your path in your time of need. But you must have a heart to learn, and the right spirit to receive instruction. You must have a hunger for God's word, and a desire to find Christ in the pages of Scripture.

Renew your commitment to Christ

This leads us to the second point under this second section, viz. that you must renew your commitment to Christ. We read, in verse 3, of the bride asking the watchmen, "Have you seen the one I love?" She had asked the right people, and was rewarded accordingly, for we read next, "Scarcely had I passed by them, when I found the one I love." Then, we are told, "I held him and would not let him go..." This speaks of our commitment to Christ, of the renewal of our consecration to Him.

I am little embarrassed to tell you this but I think it will be helpful for you to know. As a father of four young children, I had had the great embarrassment of losing a son in the crowd on two separate occasions. Those were not pleasant experiences - to be so absorbed talking to friends and then to turn around and find the son missing in the crowd. On each of those occasions, I panicked for a moment and had to control myself and prayed to the Lord. I blamed myself for being so careless, and a deep pang of regret hit. What if my son is lost for good? What if he has been taken away by some bad people? While frantically looking around for him, a voice came over the public address system saying that a boy of a certain description had been found. The description fitted my son and I rushed over to the place specified to fetch him. Oh, what a great relief it was to have him back! You would be happy to have your son back. You would not want to let him go away from you, at least for the moment. What about the son who was lost? He would stay close to his father, and hold his father's hand tight. He would cling to his father, and would not let go, at least for the moment.

The point I am making is this - when we have gone astray, and finally found our Lord again, what

would we do? We would cling to Him in faith. We would not want to let Him go. We would not want to lose Him again through our own foolishness. You would remember Jacob wrestling with the Lord, recorded in Genesis 32. Even when the Lord touched his hip and dislocated it, he clung on and would not let go until the Lord blessed him. That is the picture of our struggle with the Lord in prayer. But it also speaks to us of our relationship with Him. If we really want the Lord and His blessings, we must cling on to Him. A true child of God would want to return to the Lord, however far he has gone astray. Deep down in him, there is that spark of spiritual life which makes him aware that he belongs to the Lord and causes him to long for Him. When he finally returns to the Lord, he would not want to depart from Him again.

Just glance through the five verses we are considering here and see how many times the groom is referred to as 'the one I love'. In verse 1, we have, "By night on my bed I sought the one I love". In verse 2, we have, "...I will seek the one I love". In verse 3, we have, "Have you seen the one I love?" In verse 4, we have, "...when I found the one I love". In just five verses, there are four times in which the groom is regarded as "the one I love". True believers have a genuine love for the Lord. When he loses the sense of the presence of the Lord, he feels miserable. He would want to find back the One he loves. Put in other words, we want to have our assurance of salvation restored.

The first step to take towards restoration is to seek the Lord in God's word by going to hear it preached regularly and by seeking out the counsel of the godly, if necessary. Once we have found the Lord, which we will, we must renew our commitment to Him. God's word declares that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The Lord is ready to forgive all those who come genuinely to Him in repentance. On our part, we must submit ourselves to Him and be thankful for the salvation we find in Him. A thankful person would love his Lord, who had first loved him.

The best way to show our gratitude to the Lord is by our life and actions, not just by our words. We want to obey Him, serve Him, and worship Him. We enthrone Him in our hearts, and attempt to share the good news of salvation to others. This is what we find the bride doing - she brings the groom home to her mother's house, into the only bedroom that is there. She wants to talk to the groom, and to hear from his lips again. She wants her mother and siblings to sit at the feet of the groom, in the same way that Martha sat at the Lord's feet, in the Gospels. Remember that the bride is from the countryside, and not from the city. The house cannot be too big, and there is probably only a bedroom and a hall, with barely any furniture, while the cooking is done at the back of the house. We have visited such homes in neighbouring countries where we have some ongoing ministries. The peculiar thing about our love for the Lord is that we want to share Him with as many people as possible, and especially with those close to us. Unlike selfish romantic love, we do not want to keep the One we love to ourselves. We see now the sense of verse 4, "Scarcely had I passed by them, when I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go, until I had brought him to the house of my mother, and into the chamber of her who conceived me."

Maintain peace and communion

Finally, we have verse 5 which says, "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the does of the field, do not stir up nor awaken love until it pleases." These words are the same as those in chapter 2, verse 7. We have noted there that the better translation is, "...do not stir up nor awaken **my** love until **she** pleases". This is to be consistent with the passage which, throughout, is speaking of the groom - "my love" - and not about the feeling of love. Furthermore, the word for "pleases" is feminine in the original language, not neuter. What we must learn here is that those who love the Lord will value the peace and blessing in His church. It is in the church that the Lord is found. The Lord considers the church as His mother and brothers and sisters (Mark 3:34-35). We would not want to disturb the peace of the church by making unnecessary and unreasonable demands. A church that has gone astray needs to be warned and attempts will need to be made by its members to restore it. But a church that strives to be faithful to God's word and does its best to serve the Lord should not be disturbed unnecessarily. We must value the peace that the Lord gives to the church. You must do your utmost to maintain peace and communion with the Lord.

Conclusion

Let us summarise what we have learned. In the first section, we have learned of the danger of losing the assurance of our salvation. Assurance of salvation is a gift from God that must be treasured and sought after. Many factors may lead to the weakening and loss of assurance. The chief cause is indolence on the part of the believer. In the second part, we have learned how to find and keep the assurance of salvation. We must seek the Lord in His word, renew our commitment to Him, and maintain peace and communion with the Lord.

The assurance of salvation is a precious gift from God. We must seek and pray for it. It is to our comfort and good that we have a strong sense of assurance. Sadly, there are Christians who do not seek for it due to ignorance of this teaching. On the other hand, there are those who claim to have assurance of salvation when they have no reason to be sure. If you have not repented of your sins, if you do not trust in Christ to save you, or if you are not walking in obedience to Him, you have no good reason to be sure. Instead, you should be told that you need to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Otherwise, you will be rejected by the Lord, whatever you claim about yourself. Repent of your sins! Come to Jesus Christ! Make up your mind to follow Him for the rest of your life!

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