

How Can I Know if It's True?

The Scriptures teach that God is sovereign over all things, along with the fact that we make real choices that we're responsible for (e.g., Daniel 4:34-35; John 15:16; Ephesians 2:8-10). Although we make real choices daily—in and of ourselves—we would never choose Jesus Christ. How, then, can anyone be truly right with God? In this series from John 3:16-21 we're reminded that, because of our sin nature, our choices can never truly honor Christ unless or until there's a change in us from the inside-out. Salvation is not our own doing. It is a gift of God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). John 3 is foundational in helping us to understand the teaching of God's gracious salvation given in Jesus.

“Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” (John 3:5) These words from Jesus may remind us of words recorded in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. The prophet gives these words from God: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:25-27) You can see how the words of Ezekiel clearly touch the words spoken by Jesus in John 3. Our salvation in Jesus Christ is something that changes our lives forever! Are you discouraged? Are you struggling? Are your fears threatening to overwhelm you? God's special love, given in Jesus Christ to all those who trust him by faith, is very comforting no matter what you're facing. And yet, genuine salvation is not merely words that we say but a grace given, new life which is inclusive of seeking to trust Jesus no matter what comes. That being true, what does genuine saving faith consist of? Let's briefly unpack this important question. Someone might say,

“I believe that I'm a follower of Jesus, but I don't agree with the kind of commitment that you're speaking of. I pray and I try to be a good person and that should be enough.” But we must ask ourselves, “Is anything *enough* if it falls short of the teaching of the Bible?” According to the synthesis of Scripture, there are biblical beliefs that we must embrace, by grace, to be a genuine follower of Jesus. Theologians have identified three distinct truths that will help us to know if our faith in Jesus is genuine. The first is:

—**Knowledge:** It's a general biblical principle that we need to know what the Bible says about our sin and what Jesus Christ has accomplished for the sins of his people. In Acts 4:12, speaking of Jesus, we read, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” The second element of genuine saving faith is:

—Assent: We not only need to *know* what the Bible says about Jesus and what he's done for sinners, we must *believe* that it's true. Dr. R.C. Sproul in his book, "Faith Alone," writes that, "Intellectual assent involves the assurance or conviction that a certain proposition is true. When we say we believe George Washington was the first president of the United States, we mean that we affirm the truth of that proposition." At this point I would give a warning. If we stop with the first two aspects of belief, we fall short of genuine saving faith. It's not enough just to say we believe certain truths intellectually. Listen to these words from James 2:19: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" The third element of genuine saving belief is:

—Trust: It's only when we genuinely trust in Jesus, inclusive of committing, by grace, to seek to live lives of obedience to the scriptures (John 14:15), that we can have true assurance of salvation. James writes, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). Jesus is the Lord and Master of a Christian's life, and genuine Christians will seek, by grace, to obey their Master. And when we fail, as we will do, we continue to go to God in confession and true repentance. God loves his children and delights to hear and answer our prayers.

In the first article from this three-part series entitled, "The Comfort of a Father's Love," I mentioned the story of the love that a father showed to his son, David, by encouraging him with the words "I love you, David" when he called home from Vietnam confused and scared. David's little sister, Julie—who overheard what was being said that night so long ago—would later say that those words from her father to her brother David became a comfort to her own heart for many years after that. By God's grace, Julie eventually came to believe in God whose words of love given in Scripture speak to those in a battle-weary world with words as simple as the gospel truth that's taught in John 3:16. The gospel became all the more important to Julie when her brother—years after his time in Vietnam and soon after he had come to faith in Jesus Christ—was murdered. How would the family survive such a tragedy? Julie would later say that they made it through this devastating time by trusting in the fact that this God who taught her father to say "I love you" to a hurting son, is the same God who had graciously saved David before his tragic death. Even in the midst of that tragedy the family found peace and—with that peace—the strength to live for God's purposes. They now pray for the salvation of her brother's murderer.

All those who, by grace, want to love and serve Christ must know that there are great battles ahead as long as we're in this world. But we can face them, in Christ, because our Father loves us, and out of that love he gives us peace and strength in the middle of our day-to-day struggles, for our good and his glory. The gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ is the greatest news ever! When sin causes us to have doubts about God's love and about our salvation, by his grace, we can *truly know* that our faith in Jesus is genuine. What a blessing it is to be a Christian!

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