

A S S U R A N C E

RESTING
IN GOD'S
SALVATION

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

WILLIAM P. SMITH

William P. Smith gets right to the cry of my heart in his latest book, *Assurance: Resting in God's Salvation*, when he asks, "Are you used to thinking of God as someone who cares about doubters?" What a perfect question to help us all to meditate on and proclaim the scriptural truth that God delights in helping doubters to grow in assurance of his love.

—**Tara Barthel**, Professional Christian Mediator; Author, the *Living the Gospel in Relationships* DVD Series

Bill Smith is enthralled by the gospel. I have heard him teach and preach, read his articles and books, and counseled with him. His "laser-like," soul-piercing questions and his gentle naming of the struggle to understand and believe God's benevolent grace are accurate, because he has first identified the same struggles to believe in his own heart. This 31-day devotional has isolated and addressed the most difficult questions that I often revisit in my own mind. It helps me by softening my heart so that, awed again by God, I believe.

—**Penny Nelson Freeman**, Counselor, Serving Leaders Ministries; Counselor and Trainer, Parakaleo

Bill Smith has done a great service for those who feel the absence of God in the presence of our suffering, our sorrow, and even our battle with sin. Each daily reading offers fresh perspective, unshackling insights, and biblical wisdom that focuses the mind and fortifies the soul. If you feel a pressing need to live with an assurance of the astounding scope of God's love, take a month and allow *Assurance* to enrich your faith in God. Then do it again!

—**Dave Harvey**, Teaching Pastor, Summit Church, Naples, Florida; Author, *When Sinners Say "I Do": Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage*

As I began reading Bill Smith's devotional, *Assurance: Resting in God's Salvation*, people who I care about kept going through my

mind. Whether they are counselees, members of my church, or extended family members, so many Christians who I know struggle with feeling assurance of their salvation. Now that I have finished *Assurance*, I can't wait to share copies of it with these dear folks. Bill does not ignore our doubts or diminish our feelings. Instead, he consistently, gently, and wisely shepherds us back to *the Shepherd and the Scriptures*.

—**Bob Kellemen**, Vice President of Strategic Development and Academic Dean, Faith Bible Seminary, Lafayette, Indiana; Author, *Grief: Walking with Jesus*

This is one of the most refreshing devotionals I have read in quite some time. Bill is a skilled pastor, counselor, and apologist for the Christian faith. Throughout this 31-day devotional, he condenses rich biblical doctrine into bite-size truths and applies them to common doubts that most Christians wrestle with. This was a deep encouragement to my soul, and I trust it will be to yours as well. Highly recommended!

—**John Perritt**, Director of Resources, Reformed Youth Ministries; Author, *Insecure: Fighting Our Lesser Fears with a Greater One*

I'm convinced that virtually every true Christian doubts his or her salvation on occasion. After all, if we have an entire book of the Bible—namely, 1 John—written to address the subject, you can be sure it's a common problem in the Christian life. If you're holding this book because you struggle with whether you are right with God, I believe you will find solid, biblical help in these pages.

—**Donald S. Whitney**, Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; Author, *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian?*

ASSURANCE

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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ASSURANCE

RESTING
IN GOD'S
SALVATION

WILLIAM P. SMITH



P U B L I S H I N G

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For the bruised reeds and smoldering wicks
that at times we all are.

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Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR marriage, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them.* The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

This devotional is just like rain filling up a bucket. It's slow, and it builds over time. Just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Just a few drops of Scripture daily to satiate your parched soul.

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. In fact, it's the most powerful force in the entire universe.¹ It turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Bill speaks directly to you, the reader. The readings contain a mixture of reflection questions and practical suggestions. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

1. Jonathan Leeman, *Reverberation: How God's Word Brings Light, Freedom, and Action to His People* (Chicago: Moody, 2011), 19.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. Fundamentally, any struggle with assurance is a worship problem. We've lost our orientation toward the One who should rule our lives, and we need to turn back to him. The Word points us to Christ, who rescues us from our plight and reorients our life. The goal of your time in God's Word should always be renewed worship. Even though you've struggled with doubt and uncertainty about your salvation, the Lord himself tenderly takes you by the hand and leads you along the narrow path back to him. As you grow in your affections for Christ, the King, hope and certainty grow. A greater love for Christ transforms your soul. Adore Christ. Love him. Cherish him. Praise him. Honor him. Give your whole life to him. Don't hold anything back.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now, to continue growing more deeply assured that God really has rescued and saved you.

This devotional is *not* meant to be a comprehensive guide to struggles with assurance. Good volumes are already written for that purpose. Buy them and make good use of them. You'll see several resources listed at the end of the book.

That's enough for now. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

Introduction

WHY WOULD YOU doubt God's promises to you? Why would you struggle to believe that he loves you, is actively at work in you, is planning good things for you, and is delighting in you? In short, why is it so difficult to be certain that he has saved you?

The answer is easy: sometimes it just doesn't look like it, because the evidence of your life seems to argue for a different conclusion.

For instance, you still go through hard times. Bad things happen to you, and people hurt you. You still suffer. And so it feels logical to wonder, "If God is as powerful as he says he is, then he could have stopped these things from happening to me if he really loved me . . . so maybe that means he doesn't?"

Or you look at the things you don't have—a spouse, children, a satisfying career, fun vacations, the latest electronics, a nicely decorated home, a healthy bank account, or a healthy body—and you think, "Other people seem to be far better off than I am. If God blesses his people, and if I'm not blessed . . . maybe that means I'm not one of his people?"

Or, worse, you look at what comes out of your life. You do things that you know are wrong—things that you feel guilty about—but things that you can't seem to stop doing. Doubt creeps in and asks, "If the sparkle and tug of sin feel so much more attractive than the glory of God does, how can you possibly be a child of his?"

And you start nodding your head in agreement. It only makes sense to think, "If what comes out of me bears little resemblance to the work of the Holy Spirit, then doesn't it follow that I'm not being led by the Spirit? And if I'm not being led by him, doesn't that mean I am more active and involved in my life than he is? So maybe that means he's not in me."

Being certain—assured—that God has saved you from sin

and destruction, and has made you part of his glorious New Creation, is never a matter of theological information only. It's an existential problem that's created when the data of your life doesn't line up with what you believe the new life in Christ should be. At those times, uncertainty makes sense.

Now, it's relatively easy to challenge the *logic* of doubt (for example: how many times do you think you can be reborn?), but the *feeling* of doubt is what's so compelling and stubborn. Unfortunately, many people attempt to deal with their uncertainty by looking at the same things that caused them to feel uncertain in the first place. They look to see whether their circumstances improve or whether their failure rate drops.

The antidote to doubt, however, never comes as a result of increasing your gaze outward to your circumstances or focusing inward on yourself. It comes when you look more intently upward to a God who moves toward you in order to live with you. Your doubts tempt you to move away from him or from anything that reminds you of him. But those are precisely the times when you need to look even more intently into Scripture to see a God who longs to help his people deal with their fear and uncertainty.

Sometimes, in the Bible, the Lord challenges people—and you, as you read it—directly, in the “Why do you have so little faith?” passages. More often, however, he gives you pictures, metaphors, descriptions, and explanations of what he's been doing on your behalf to help you understand that he's not demoralized by you or ready to quit and give up on you. Instead, he really believes he will be successful in rescuing you from yourself, and he wants you to have the same confidence that he has. Passages like these pull back the curtain on his heart so that you can see how much he loves you and longs for you, even when you're not sure that he does.

Discovering a God who talks to you about your doubt helps you to realize that he always knew you would experience that

doubt. Far from being offended by your doubt, he anticipated it, offering you answers before you even existed to have questions.

If you're not sure that God has saved you and is working in your life, it's because you believe that the momentary, fleeting things of this life have more influence in you and on you than does the God who made you, redeems you, and sustains you. That means that, in order to address doubt, you need to see the world in a whole new light. You need to embed each thing that provokes your uncertainty within the larger framework of a God who, at great personal cost to himself, set his love on you through Christ so that you would only ever be with him.

In order to address your lack of assurance, you need to see

- God's heart for you, as expressed through his character and his actions toward people who doubt,
- the resources that he gives you to tackle the things that are urging you to doubt him and his goodness, and
- how impotent any doubt-producing thing is in light of God's unstoppable power.

That's my aim in this book. I am not addressing theological issues regarding doubt in general (for example, *How can there be only one way to know God?*). Rather, I am focusing on doubts about God's goodness as it specifically relates to you, as a particular individual (for example, *I believe that God loves humanity, but I'm not so sure that he loves me—so how can I be sure that his promises apply to me?*).

Personal questions about the status of your relationship with God require knowing things about him, and yet assurance is ultimately not a matter of what you know. The problem is that you don't believe what you know. Growing in assurance, then, is not a matter of simply getting more information. It's a matter of trust. It's a matter of believing the character of the one who is trying to communicate information to you.

When telemarketers call and promise me the cruise of a lifetime for next to nothing, I hang up. I don't know them. I don't trust them, and frankly, I want nothing to do with them—and no amount of information will change that.

When my wife calls, however, and invites me to take a walk with her after work, I rearrange my evening's plans and can't get home quickly enough. What's the difference? I know her and trust her, and because of that, I want more of her.

My hope is that, as you see God engage you in your uncertainty, you'll know him better, grow to trust him more, and develop a greater hunger for him.

ACKNOWLEDGING
YOUR UNCERTAINTIES

DAY 1

“How Can God Forgive Me after What I’ve Done?”

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” (Gen. 3:15)

EVERYONE’S CONSCIENCE HAS a different setting. Some of us are more sensitive and don’t have to do much before we are deeply upset with ourselves—such as speaking harshly, slapping our child in anger, shoplifting something small, or drinking too much the night before. Others of us are more hardened and need more in order to convict us that we’re out of line—such as cheating on our spouse, embezzling from the family business, ruining someone’s reputation, or chiseling a relative out of their inheritance.

The particulars are unique to each person, but what is universal is that there is at least one thing you have done that creeps into your mind at the oddest times, when your guard is down. Something you just can’t let go of—that you think about far more often than you’d like. Something that you find unforgivable.

No one needs to point it out to you, because your conscience points it out. And because it lingers there in your conscience, you start to wonder, “If I can’t forgive myself, how can God forgive me?”

That’s when it’s helpful to consider the first human sin, back in the garden of Eden. The results of that sin were catastrophic: It plunged all of humanity into sin, so that we’re each born separated from the God in whose image we are made (see Eph. 2:1–3). It bound every one of our race to an inescapable death (see Rom. 5:12–14). It subjected the entire universe to the curse of frustration and decay, so that nothing works or lasts the way that

it should (see Rom. 8:20–21). Nothing you have done or ever will do can begin to compare with the tragedy that Adam and Eve wrote for the rest of their descendants.

But God didn't sit back and watch the story unfold to its logical conclusion. He inserted himself into it—and, by doing so, rewrote the ending. He interposed hatred between our first fore-parents and their enemy, the Serpent—signaling that he would turn their hearts back to him—and he promised to send the Snake-Crusher so that sin and evil would not have the last word (see Gen. 3:15).

He didn't abandon Adam and Eve to their fate—which gives you confidence that he won't abandon you to yours. He doesn't merely forgive; he throws himself into the fray, using all his power and energy to rewrite the tragic story that his people had crafted for themselves. And he does this not just for humanity as a whole but for you, as an individual, as well.

The question has never been “How good are you at being good?” It has always been “How good is God at being good when you are not?” Let yourself be captured, then, not only by the depth of his goodness but also by its breadth. Watch as his goodness outstrips the destruction that sin has brought cosmically, and your confidence will grow in how he responds to you personally.

Reflect: Think about the thing that most haunts your conscience. How does its result compare in size or scope to that of the first human sin?

Reflect: What do you think is more powerful: your ability to ruin your life, or God's ability to rescue and restore it? (Hint: which do you spend more time thinking about?)

Act: Spend a few minutes talking to God about what he does in relation to what you have done.

DAY 2

“I Can’t Stop Thinking about What I’ve Done”

*For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me. (Ps. 51:3)*

THE ENEMIES OF your soul are not only relentless but also dishonest. They play both sides of sin against you.

First, they flood your mind and inflame your heart with non-stop temptation, promising that if you’ll just give in, then your life will be better than you could imagine. Then, when you do give in and enjoy the fleeting pleasure of sin (see Heb. 11:25), they flood you with a different barrage.

This time, the thoughts that you can’t get away from run along such lines as “How could you? Look at what you’ve done. You know better. You call yourself a Christian? God couldn’t possibly love you.” Your heart is heavy. There’s no joy in the world, and everything looks bleak.

That’s what God’s enemies do. They provoke you in order to goad you toward a destructive cliff. Then, when you take the bait and plunge over the edge, they stand there accusing you of your failure just as loudly as they once urged you toward it.

King David has been there. The man after God’s own heart (see 1 Sam. 13:14) became infatuated with another man’s wife. He couldn’t get her out of his mind, invited her over, slept with her, made a baby with her, and then murdered her husband so he could marry her in order to cover it all up.

For a time, it looked like he’d gotten away with it. But when God confronted him about it through the prophet Nathan, David couldn’t get out of his mind what he’d done. “My sin is ever before

me”—can you hear how keenly aware he is of it? There’s no escape from it. He sees it everywhere he goes, and he hates it. What once was not a big deal now haunts him.

But while the problem consumes his mind and his heart, he doesn’t stay locked up inside himself. That would be foolish. Since his mind and heart got him into trouble, they won’t be much help in getting him out. And so he doesn’t keep trying to deal with the mess or to figure out how to make things right on his own. Instead, he runs to God.

He doesn’t go to God in order to hear the same thoughts that come from within him—the thoughts that accuse and condemn him. Instead he goes to God for mercy (see Ps. 51:1), for compassion (see v. 1), for cleansing (see v. 2), for a clean heart (see vv. 7, 10), for God’s renewed presence in his life (see vv. 11–12) and for freedom from guilt (see v. 14) so that he can praise God once again (see v. 15).

He goes to God not on the strength of what *he* could do to make things right with God (see v. 16) but on the strength of what *God* does to make things right between David and himself (see vv. 7–12) according to God’s unfailing love (see v. 1).

The presence of sin in David’s life doesn’t drive him to doubt God’s love; it drives him to seek the God who loves him.

Reflect: What does the ugliness of David’s sin tell you about the greatness of God’s grace?

Reflect: What does the goodness that David experiences tell you about God’s longing to restore things between himself and his people?

Act: You can grow in confidence only by experiencing this grace—so, like David, let the sin that is ever before you drive you to God rather than away from him. Use David’s prayer in Psalm 51 to frame your own.

DAY 3

“But I Keep Sinning!”

“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.” (Mal. 3:6–7)

HAVE YOU EVER thought something like “I came to Christ because I saw my sin for what it was and I hated it. I was so happy to be forgiven and set free—but now I find myself doing things that I hate and know I’ll regret. How can I be a Christian if I keep falling into the same patterns?”

This is a common trap. You fall into it when you try to prove your justification (the fact that you’ve been set right with God through Christ’s sacrifice) by examining your sanctification (whether you are now living more righteously).

Many Christians understand that justification produces sanctification, but it’s easy to forget that, while justification happens in an instant, sanctification is a lifelong process—one that is often nonlinear as you run into roadblocks and experience setbacks. If you expect to see some evidence of the end result (sinless perfection) while skipping over the process, you will be disappointed—and, worse, you will question how effective your sanctification is. Those questions will then lead you to wonder whether you were ever justified.

Here’s why you can’t prove that you’ve been justified by measuring your sanctification: on this earth, you will never get to a place of sinlessness (see 1 John 1:8). The sin nature still resides inside you, and it strives against the Spirit of God (see Gal. 5:17). And so even the godliest Christians find themselves doing things that they no longer want to do (see Rom. 7:15–20; Gal. 2:11–13).

If sinlessness is a precondition for knowing that we're saved, then none of us qualify. Our inclination to see things this way is merely another trick of the Evil One to keep us focused on the object of salvation (us) and not on its author (God).

Malachi 3:6–7 offers a different focus. God acknowledges that his people have always had a problem being faithful to him. His response is not to be disgusted with us, to throw his hands up and walk away, to threaten us, to tell us to work harder, or to offer us bribes so we will be good. Instead he offers us an invitation. He invites us to turn back to him, despite having sinned just like our ancestors. He doesn't base that invitation on the strength of how hard we are trying or how successful we are. He bases it on his unchanging nature. He is the God who made us to know him—to love him and be loved by him. He has never wavered from his desire for us to do so, despite the many reasons we have given and continue to give him.

He still wants you. What you have done has not changed what he already did for you. Nor has it changed his heart for you. He doesn't want you to wonder if he has turned from you. Rather, he longs for you to turn to him.

Reflect: Have you fallen into the trap of evaluating God's effectiveness at justifying you by how well you are living a holy life? What makes that trap appealing to you?

Reflect: God's unchangeableness means that he keeps wooing you back when you stray, just as he did before you first turned to him. When was the last time you told him how amazed you are at his commitment to you?

Act: Go to a trusted friend and talk about the unchanging invitation God offers to turn back to him.