

# Assurance



Can I Know  
For Sure  
That I Am Going  
To Heaven?

By Dick Tripp

# Can I Know for Sure That I am Going to Heaven?

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## Foreword

I was about ten years old, I guess, when the challenge of Assurance crossed my path. Our diminutive Sunday School Superintendent asked us all to put our hands up if we were sure we would go to heaven when we died. Apart from the couple leading us, and perhaps a few of the teachers, no one did! Then she declared that she was certain she would, because Jesus had died for her.

My tiny soul was shocked. How could she be so confident that she was good enough to go to heaven and be with God for ever? Much later I came to understand the precious and life-giving truth that it is not by our good deeds but by our knowledge of God's work for us that eternity is guaranteed to us through Jesus Christ.

In a time when the ashes of wealthy dead are being shot into space for a brief spell of star-trekking, the Christian confidence in real eternal life with God is an important living truth. Its relevance is not just for after death. How we see ourselves now in this complex universe can affect how we live, how we enjoy each day, and how we shape our lives.

May this readable explanation help you find that blessed assurance that has given millions of believers grounds for great hope in life's darkest hours and a consistent purpose for each day they have lived on earth.

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## **Introduction**

This world is full of uncertainties. None of us can know for sure what tomorrow holds for us, or even if we will be around to see it. The Bible, however, speaks of one certainty which, if we have found it, can give us an anchor in the middle of all the rest of life's uncertainties. It is the certainty of our forgiveness, the certainty of our acceptance by God and the certainty of a relationship with him that will last forever. Thousands have found this certainty and would not swap it for anything else this world can offer. The purpose of this booklet is to share how you may have it, if that is something you are looking for.

I will explore the following issues:

- The nature of our relationship with God.
- The certainty that runs through all the New Testament.
- Three important truths we must understand if we are to enjoy this certainty.
- Why the question of certainty as to what will happen to me after death is an important one.

## **The nature of our relationship with God**

The Bible constantly emphasises the point that God created us for friendship with himself, a friendship based on love. The reason we don't enjoy this relationship is that we choose to live our lives independant of God. We have broken his laws and gone our own way. God has, however, acted in Jesus to reconcile us to himself. He bridged the gap by dying for our sins on the cross. When we turn to him in faith and accept Jesus as our Saviour and the Lord of our lives, then he comes to live within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. We experience his love and respond in love to him in return.

Paul says: **“God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us”** (Romans 5:5).

If this love, demonstrated by the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf and experienced by his indwelling Spirit, is the basis of our relationship with him, would he not want us to know that we have it? Indeed, could it be called a love relationship if we did not know we had it? And, if God is all powerful, would he allow us to enjoy his love for a few years here and then cast us aside? Would he not want us to enjoy this relationship with him forever? After all, he raised Jesus from the dead. Why not us, too?

There is an old hymn, written by the converted slave trader, John Newton, which contains the following verse:

‘Tis a point I long to know,  
Oft it causes anxious thought;  
Do I love the Lord or no?  
Am I his, or am I not?

Can you imagine a man travelling overseas, sending a message to his wife in which he said:

‘Tis a point I long to know,  
Oft it causes anxious thought;  
Do I love you, dear, or no?  
Am I yours, or am I not?

I expect he would get a telegram by return mail demanding, “Come home quickly!” What is the point of a love relationship if you don’t know you have it?

## **Christian certainty in the New Testament**

From the moment of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, and the giving of the Holy Spirit on the Jewish day of Pentecost seven weeks later, there is a note of certainty that runs through the New Testament. When speaking to his disciples at his last meal with them before he was crucified, Jesus talked about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He said, **“Then you will know that I am one with the Father. You will know that you are one with me, and I am one with you”** (John 14:20). This certainty they were to discover is found everywhere in the book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament. John gives us the reason for writing his first letter near the end of the New Testament: **“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”** (1 John 5:13).

The Bible talks about the **“full assurance of understanding”** (Colossians 2:2), **“the full assurance of hope”** (Hebrews 6:11) and **“the full assurance of faith”** (Hebrews 10:22).

Paul, facing possible death in a Roman prison, wrote, **“I want to die and be with Christ, because that would be much better”** (Philippians 1:23). He says, **“We should be cheerful, because we would rather leave these bodies and be at home with the Lord”** (2 Corinthians 5:8). The author of Hebrews, in commending those he writes to, says, **“You gladly let your possessions be taken away, because you knew you had something better, something that would last forever”** (Hebrews 10:34).

If you wish to explore further this certainty of heaven and of the defeat of death in the New Testament, I would suggest you begin with the following passages:

- Romans 8:28-39
- 1 Corinthians 15
- 2 Corinthians 5:1-9
- Philippians 1:20-24
- Hebrews 2:14,15
- 1 Peter 1:3-9
- 2 Timothy 4:6-8

There have been a great many examples throughout history of individuals facing death with this same certainty found in the New Testament. One of my favourite stories is about C. T. Studd, who captained the English cricket team in the 1880s. He left a promising career at home to go as a missionary to China. Later, when most men would think of retiring, he pioneered missionary work in the heart of Africa. When dying in central Africa, the last word he wrote, in a letter to missionaries, was “Alleluia!” The last word he spoke was “Alleluia!” After his death, the mission sent a telegram back to England, “Bwana glorified July 16th, Alleluia!”

Another is the story of Henry Venn, Anglican clergyman and one of the founders of the Church Missionary Society. During his final illness his doctor told him he only had a week to live. He actually lived for three weeks. His doctor later declared that it was the prospect of dying and going to heaven that made him so jubilant and high-spirited, and it was this that had kept him alive for the extra fortnight!

## **Truths on which we may base our certainty of heaven**

How can we have this kind of certainty? The Puritan minister, Richard Baxter, said on his deathbed, “I bless God I have a well-grounded assurance of my eternal happiness, and a great peace and comfort within.” Some people think they are going to heaven, but the basis on which they make that assumption is not well-grounded. I remember the English cricketer, David Sheppard, now bishop of Liverpool, tell how his sister heard someone on a bus say, “I know I am a Christian. I have a letter from the Archbishop.” That assurance is hardly well-grounded! I suggest there are three truths on which

we should base our hope if we are to have confidence in the face of death. Each of these truths is related particularly to the activity of one of the members of the divine Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

### **The work of God the Son**

First, it is vital to grasp that our acceptance by God does not depend on our being able to make ourselves good enough for him. That is an impossibility. We all come a long way short of his standards. Our acceptance can only be dependent on what Jesus has done on our behalf by paying the penalty for our sins on the cross, and our receiving his forgiveness. **“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:8).

It is interesting that the words Jesus cried out while hanging on the cross, **“It is finished”**, could be translated, “It is paid.” One of the uses of the Greek word used here in the New Testament was that of paying a debt in the market place. Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission, discovered this truth when a lad of 17. He was brought up in a third-generation Christian home, his grandfather having been converted to Christ on his wedding day during the Methodist revival that spread across England under the preaching of John Wesley. Hudson, though surrounded by Christian influence, had made no personal commitment to Christ himself. One day, while browsing in his father’s library, he picked up a Christian tract and began to read it. In his own words he describes what happened:

*I...was struck with the phrase “the finished work of Christ”. ...Immediately the words “It is finished” suggested themselves to my mind. What was finished? And I at once replied, “A full and perfect atonement and satisfaction for sin. The debt was paid for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” Then came the further thought, “If the whole work was finished and the whole debt paid, what is there left for me to do?” And with this dawned the joyful conviction, as light was flashed into my soul by the Holy Spirit, that there was nothing in the world to be done but to fall down on one’s knees, and accepting this Saviour and His salvation praise Him for evermore.*

The Bible is very clear on the matter of our not being able to get to heaven on the basis of our own goodness. **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”** (Ephesians 2:8,9). A place in God’s family is not something to be earned. It is a gift to be received. This means

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<sup>1</sup> I have explored further the nature of God as three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—in the booklet *Understanding the Trinity*.

that for someone to say, “I know I am going to heaven”, when rightly understood, is not being presumptuous. It is not boasting that I am worthy of it. It is boasting of the saving power of Jesus Christ. It is putting him on the pedestal, not me—and that is honouring him. He can save even someone like me!

As I first trust Jesus to forgive my sins and give me the gift of eternal life, so I may also trust him to keep me faithful to him until death. A useful illustration of this comes from the life of Lord Radstock, an English nobleman of the last century. He was a committed Christian and gifted speaker. Because of his connections with nobility, he had access to many of the royal families of Europe. He would often hold informal meetings in royal sitting rooms and share his faith in Christ. Among those to whom he witnessed were the Czar and Czarina of Russia.

On one occasion, after speaking at a meeting in Woolwich, he nearly missed his train home. He just had time to jump on board as the guard blew the whistle. A young army officer had followed him onto the platform and, running up to the carriage window, said to him, “Sir, I heard you speak tonight; but tell me, how can a fellow keep straight and upright?” The train had started and there was no time for a long reply, so Radstock took out his pencil and laid it on the palm of his hand. “Can that pencil stand upright?” “No.” Then he grasped the pencil in his hand and held it in an upright position. “Ah, but you are holding it now.” “Yes,” replied Radstock, “and your life is like that pencil—helpless. But Christ is the hand that can hold you.” And the last the young officer saw of Radstock on that occasion was the outstretched hand holding that pencil as the train rounded a curve and was lost to sight. Twenty-five years later the same officer met Lord Radstock in India and told him that all those years ago, on that railway platform, he had trusted his life to Christ. Christ had upheld him and kept him ever since.

Peter says that we **“through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time”** (1 Peter 1:5). Jesus said of those who are his, **“No one can snatch them out of my hand”** (John 10:28). If we do the trusting, he will do the keeping.

### **The word of God the Father**

The second basis for our confidence must be what God the Father says in the Bible about the work of his Son. It is in the Bible that God has given us a revelation of himself and his plans. We find there that not only has he clearly declared what Jesus has done on our behalf, but he has also declared that he will accept those who trust in Jesus.

There are some great promises in the New Testament on this subject. Here are three of them. John declares in his first letter, **“If we don’t believe what God has said about his Son, it is the same as calling God a liar. God has also said that he gave us eternal life and that this life comes to us from his Son. And so, if we have God’s Son, we have this life”** (1 John 5:10-12). Jesus’ promise to those who open the door of their hearts to him is **“I will come in”** (Revelation 3:20). Again he promised, **“whoever comes to me I will never drive away”** (John 6:37). In the original Greek language in which this verse was written, the “never” is emphasised. These are the words of a man of integrity!

This means that if we have sincerely come to Jesus, accepted that he died for us, asked his forgiveness, submitted to him as our Saviour and Lord, and then do not believe that he has accepted us as one of his family, we are casting doubt on his promise. John puts it more bluntly. We are making God a liar. We must learn to trust his word. He said it; I believe it; that settles it.

To rely on our up-and-down feelings is a shaky foundation on which to base the assurance of our acceptance by God. Harry Ironside, one-time pastor of the famous Moody Church in Chicago, said, “Looking into your own heart for a ground of confidence is like casting the anchor in the hold of a ship.” We need something solid outside ourselves in which to put our trust.

Feelings come and feelings go,  
And feelings are deceiving.  
My warrant is the Word of God,  
None else is worth believing.

Though all my heart should feel condemned,  
For want of one sweet token,  
There is One greater than my heart,  
Whose word cannot be broken.

I’ll trust in His unchanging words  
Till soul and body sever,  
For though all else shall pass away,  
His Word shall stand forever.

There is a delightful story told about an old minister who had preached the gospel with clarity and power during his public ministry. When he was suffering, at times he found himself greatly disturbed by doubts and uncertainty. Mentioning the matter to his wife, she drew his attention to John 5:24 in which Jesus declares, **“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”** As he read those wonderful words again, the minister burst into a joyful laugh and said, “How strange that I



should ever forget words like these, when I have preached on them myself for years.”

Sometime later, his wife came into the room and found him leaning over the side of the bed, holding the open Bible underneath it. She exclaimed, “Whatever are you doing?” He answered, “Satan has been after me again, and as he is the prince of darkness, I took it that he would be in the darkest place in the room, which is under the bed. I was just showing him John 5:24, and the moment he saw it he ceased to trouble me.”

It is Christ’s death that makes the believing sinner safe, but it is God’s word that makes the trusting Christian sure.

### **The witness of God the Holy Spirit**

Though feelings are not the main criteria for deciding whether or not we are the Lord’s people, they do have their place in the Christian’s experience. After all, peace and joy are feelings, and the New Testament has a lot to say about them. Paul says, **“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.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ..”** (Romans 8:15-17). In other words, when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives he gives us an inner awareness of our relationship to God. He also produces the desire to come to him with our needs as a child would to its father. One of the evidences that we have received the Holy Spirit is that we have the desire to pray and the awareness that God listens.

Lt. General William K. Harrison, former Senior Delegate of the United Nations Command Troops Team in Korea, and later Commander in Chief of the Caribbean Command, put it like this:

*It is wonderful to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and I am exceedingly thankful that God has graciously led me to saving faith in Christ. God gives us who believe in Christ a daily personal experience which is convincing evidence of the reality of a new life in Christ.*

There is another way also in which the Holy Spirit witnesses to his presence in our lives. Paul says, **“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”** (Galatians 5:22,23). In other words, as the sap in an apple tree will eventually produce apples, one of the evidences that the Holy Spirit is within us is that he will be working changes in our character, producing a little more love, a little more patience, a little more goodness, and so on. His ministry is to produce in us something of the character of Jesus. Am I aware that this is

happening? I may have a very long way to go. Most of us do! But at least I will be aware that I am different from what I was.

This means that growth in Christian character and the outward expression of that in good works, have an important place in the Christian life and should be part of the evidence that we are his people. However, this is not the means of earning acceptance with God, but rather the outflow of that acceptance and our relationship with him. This becomes particularly clear when we look at John's first letter towards the end of the New Testament.

### **John's first letter (1 John)—a useful summary**

John is very clear about the reason he wrote this letter. It was that his readers might have certainty about their relationship to God and that God had indeed given them eternal life (1 John 5:10-13). It is interesting that John uses the word "know", or its equivalent, about 36 times in this letter. However, he uses it in three different senses. He talks about knowing the truth *about* God. For instance, he says we "**know that he is righteous**" (2:29). He also uses it in the sense of knowing God personally, as one would know a friend. The third way he uses it is in the sense of knowing, or being certain, that we know God and that he has indeed given us eternal life. He uses the word roughly a dozen times in each of these three senses. Some of the reasons he gives that we may be sure of our relationship to God are challenging. For instance, he says, "**Our love for each other proves that we have gone from death to life**" (3:14). He also says a lot about our obedience to God. If you want to explore the matter further I suggest you read the letter through. It is not a long one.

We could sum up what we have been saying so far like this: God the Holy Spirit bears witness in our hearts and in our behaviour to the truth of what God the Father declares about the work of God the Son in coming to die and rise again on our behalf. A long sentence, but hopefully it makes sense.

### **Does it matter?**

Does it matter whether I know I am going to heaven or not? One obvious reason the question is important is that it is not possible to enjoy a relationship with someone if you are not certain whether or not that relationship exists. The very purpose of our being here is to live out this life, and enjoy the next, in a purposeful relationship with the One who created us. Unless we are sure of that relationship, our lives will lack true direction.

Secondly, the more secure we are in our experience of God's love, the more we will love him in return. Also, the more we will want to serve him and share what we have found with others. Imagine two men emigrating to a foreign country. Each is given a tract of land on which to make a living, together with the title deed for his property. The first person looks at the title deed, accepts gratefully that the land is his and immediately gets to work to plant his crops. The second person looks at the deed, but cannot really believe that the land belongs to him. He makes countless trips back to the land office before he can be assured that it is really his. Which of the two will have the greatest harvest?

Bishop Latimer, one of the Reformation martyrs, once wrote to Bishop Ridley (also burned at the stake with Latimer in Oxford) that when he was settled and steadfast about his own salvation he was as bold as a lion, but if that hope became eclipsed, he was fearful and afraid and was unqualified for service.

In the New Testament we have the title deed to our inheritance in the kingdom of God, purchased at tremendous cost for us by Jesus. It is his desire that we accept it gladly and live our lives for him in gratitude. There have always been those who have claimed that Christians have been too interested in the next world and not enough interested in this one. Don't you believe it! C. S. Lewis made the point that if you study history you will note that it is those who have thought the most of the next world, that have done the most for this one! It is the wonder, gratitude and certainty of all that has been given us by Jesus, at such tremendous cost, that has always been one of that greatest motivations for believers to give their lives in service to others.

There is one further reason why this matter of certainty is of vital importance. If you are not sure your sins are forgiven and that you are on your way to heaven, there is always the possibility that you are not. The Bible is very clear that there is a judgement to come and not all will make it into God's kingdom. It speaks of those who will spend eternity without God because of their failure to accept this reconciliation. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?"** (2 Corinthians 13:5). The Living Bible, which is actually a paraphrase, puts it like this, **"Check up on yourselves. Are you really Christians? Do you pass the test? Do you feel Christ's presence and power more and more within you? Or are you just pretending to be Christians when actually you aren't at all?"**

Of course, it is possible to be a true believer and yet still be uncertain of your relationship to the Lord. Failure to dig into the Bible to find out what

God's promises are, not trusting him, an unwillingness to submit all of your life to him, things that are displeasing to God in your life that need sorting out, lack of fellowship with other believers—these are things that can hinder the full enjoyment of the relationship. However, if you are not sure whether you have ever really trusted Christ for forgiveness in the first place, then it is wise to make sure.

Leighton Ford, who today has a worldwide ministry of training evangelists, tells how he sorted out this question in his youth. He says:

*When I was a boy I became very concerned as to whether I was really a Christian. I thought as a smaller boy years earlier I had trusted Christ but I wasn't sure. I asked my mother and she gave me some wise advice. "Why don't you tell God about it?" So I prayed and said something like this, "Dear God, I think I received Jesus as my Saviour before, but if I didn't I want you to know I do it now", and God brought to my young heart the certainty that my life was secure in Christ.*

It would be tragic to miss out on both God's best in this life, and eternity with him in the future, just because of failure to accept his glorious offer of forgiveness in Christ. If you want some guidance in taking this step and clinching the deal, then you may find the following prayer helpful:

*Jesus, I don't understand it all, but I accept that you came into this world to die for me. I thank you for this.*

*I acknowledge my failure to live up to your commands and I ask forgiveness for my sins. I turn from them in repentance.*

*I ask you to come into my life as my Saviour and Lord. I submit my life to you.*

*Give me the certainty that I am truly yours and a citizen of heaven.*

*Help me to get to know you better and to live in gratitude for your gift of eternal life.*

If this is a new commitment for you, then get a modern translation of the New Testament and begin reading through John's gospel. Find a Christian Church where you feel at home and can make your contribution to the fellowship. Look for opportunities to use the gifts he has given you, in service to God and to others. As you do, the certainty of your relationship with God will grow.

May God make your life more and more satisfying as you journey towards the inheritance he has purchased for you in heaven.

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I am grateful to The Rev. Dr. John R. W. Stott for the basic outline of this booklet which is found in his book *Your Confirmation*, published by Hodder and Stoughton, 1958.