



“Here is the voice of historic Christianity speaking about Christian assurance with clarity, wisdom, and grace and doing so at a time of enormous cultural uncertainty, drift, and self-doubt. The importance of the issue and the excellence of its treatment here alike commend this book.” —**David F. Wells**

“If you are ever tempted to doubt that the assurance of God’s love is one of the benefits of justification, here is an excellent antidote. This book will set you on the path to security, stability, and joyful discipleship.” —**Alistair Begg**

“Assurance of God’s gracious, saving, fatherly love to us in Christ is vital to Christian life and witness. Unfortunately, too many saints lack assurance, and today there are even Reformed and evangelical preachers who are undermining it by erroneous teaching. Thankfully a band of faithful brothers has given us this book to clear the fog, present the truth, and help us on our way. Read this book prayerfully, with faith in God’s Word, and be encouraged!” —**J. Ligon Duncan III**

“Thank you, Burk, for such a clear, thorough, and easy-to-understand book on what the Bible has to say about the assurance of salvation. For those who have questions, this will give them the answers!” —**Joni Eareckson Tada**

“The leadership of Burk Parsons has effectively brought together pastors, theologians, and authors who are not only adept at ministry but competent to address the issue of divine assurance in a personal relationship with Christ. Now we have an effective tool that will assist pastors and Christian workers in their disciple-making ministry.” —**Harry L. Reeder III**

Assured by God

LIVING IN THE FULLNESS
OF GOD'S GRACE

*Second Edition,
with Study Questions*

Edited by
Burk Parsons


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

©2006, 2007 by Burk Parsons
First edition 2006
Second edition, with study questions 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright ©2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from The Holy Bible, King James Version.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from The Holy Bible, New American Standard Bible, copyright ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version, copyright ©1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Page design and typesetting by Lakeside Design Plus

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007935320

CONTENTS

Foreword 7

R. C. Sproul

Preface 11

Burk Parsons

Contributors 15

1. Our Sure Foundation 19

Burk Parsons

2. Assured from Beginning to End 37

Philip Graham Ryken

3. Guarded through Faith 53

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

4. Assured in Christ 69

Richard D. Phillips

5. Assurance Justified 87

Sinclair B. Ferguson

6. The Fullness of Grace 107

Joel R. Beeke

Contents

7. The Glory of True Repentance 125

John MacArthur

8. God's Means of Assurance 139

Keith A. Mathison

9. The Blessing of Discipline 155

Jerry Bridges

Epilogue:

The Anatomy of Doubt and Assurance 171

R. C. Sproul

Notes 181

Study Questions 187

Index of Scripture 191

Index of Subjects 197

CONTRIBUTORS

Joel R. Beeke is president and professor of systematic theology and homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, pastor of the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, editor of *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*, editorial director of Reformation Heritage Books, president of Inheritance Publishers, and vice president of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. He has written or edited fifty books and contributed more than fifteen hundred articles to Reformed books, journals, periodicals, and encyclopedias. His PhD is in Reformation and post-Reformation theology from Westminster Theological Seminary. He is frequently called upon to lecture at seminaries and to speak at Reformed conferences around the world. He and his wife Mary have been blessed with three children.

Jerry Bridges is an author and Bible teacher. His most popular title, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, has sold more than one million copies. He has authored several other books, including *The Discipline of Grace*, *Transforming Grace*, and *The Gospel for Real*

Life. He is currently part of the Navigator collegiate ministry group, in which he is involved in staff development and serves as a resource to campus ministries.

Sinclair B. Ferguson is professor of systematic theology at Westminster Seminary in Dallas, Texas, and is recognized as one of the world's leading Reformed scholars. He serves as senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church (ARP) in Columbia, South Carolina, and has served as an associate editor for the Banner of Truth Trust since 1976. He has authored many books, including *The Christian Life*, *The Big Book of Questions and Answers*, and *The Holy Spirit*.

John MacArthur has been since 1969 the pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, where he labors to equip believers through the systematic exposition of the Bible. His teaching ministry can be heard worldwide on the radio program "Grace to You" and through some twelve million teaching tapes. He is currently president of the Master's College and Seminary and has authored numerous books, including *The Gospel according to Jesus*, *The Battle for the Beginning*, and *Follow Me*.

Keith A. Mathison is associate editor of *Tabletalk* magazine. He received his MA from Reformed Theological Seminary and his PhD from Whitefield Theological Seminary. He is the editor of *When Shall These Things Be?* and author of *Dispensationalism*, *Postmillennialism*, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, and *Given for You*.

R. Albert Mohler Jr. serves as the ninth president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and hosts a daily radio program for the Salem Radio Network. He earned his BA from Samford

University and his MDiv and PhD from Southern Seminary. He serves as professor of Christian theology at Southern Seminary. He has contributed to several books, including *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment, Here We Stand: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals*, and *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*. He currently serves as editor-in-chief of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He is married to the former Mary Kahler; they have two children.

Burk Parsons serves as minister of congregational life at Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Florida, and is the editor of *Table-talk*, the monthly Bible study magazine of Ligonier Ministries. He holds a degree in biblical studies from Trinity College and the MDiv from Reformed Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Amber, live in Longwood, Florida, with their children.

Richard D. Phillips serves as senior minister of First Presbyterian Church in Margate, Florida. He serves on the board of directors of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and he chairs the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, founded by the late James Montgomery Boice, his mentor and former pastor. He has written several books, including *Faith Victorious, Turning Back the Darkness*, and *Holding Hands, Holding Hearts*, which he coauthored with his wife, Sharon. They and their five children live in Cape Coral, Florida.

Philip Graham Ryken is senior minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He is a council member of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and is the author of several books, including *City on a Hill, The Message of Salvation*, and *The Doctrines of Grace*, cowritten with his predecessor James Mont-

gomery Boice. He and his wife, Elisabeth, live in the Philadelphia area with their five children.

R. C. Sproul serves as minister of preaching and teaching at Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Florida. He is the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries. He holds degrees from Westminster College, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, the Free University of Amsterdam, and Whitefield Theological Seminary. He has written more than sixty books, including *Scripture Alone*, *The Intimate Marriage*, and the classic *The Holiness of God*.

OUR SURE FOUNDATION

Burk Parsons

Assurance . . . is a thing that is above the capacity of the human mind, it is the part of the Holy Spirit to confirm within us what God promises in his Word.

—John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*

“We need a liberty fortified and confirmed by the gift of perseverance, so that we may overcome this world, with all its loves, its fears, and its errors.” Toward the end of his life, Augustine penned these simple words that help us understand the profound majesty of our assurance of salvation (*On Rebuke and Grace* 35). Whether we want to admit it, we all struggle to overcome the world (John 16:33; 1 John 5:4), and we all struggle to enjoy the glorious freedoms we have in Christ (John 8:32). Many of our struggles exist because we do not fully understand that just as our salvation is a gift from God, so our perseverance is a

gift from God. In our salvation, God blesses us with assurance through his gift of perseverance (2 Thessalonians 3:5). However, many Christians lack full assurance of their salvation because their understanding of assurance is founded on the constantly changing emotions of their hearts rather than on the eternal Word of God.

The Assurance of Our Perseverance

Many Christians who are members of Bible-preaching, evangelical churches have been duped somehow into thinking that their perseverance in the faith is dependent on their own natural abilities to endure to the end. They have become practical deists, thinking that after God made us a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) he simply left us to our own devices while he just sits back observing us through life's difficulties, waiting to see if we will make it to the end.

In his first wartime address, delivered at Guildhall in London on September 4, 1914, Sir Winston Churchill (1874–1965) said: “Sure I am of this, that you have only to endure to conquer. You have only to persevere to save yourselves.” Considering what Churchill accomplished during his life, he proved this statement to be entirely appropriate. The British Prime Minister's wartime victories demonstrated time and again his ability to persevere to the end. He overcame great odds, and his self-sustained resilience enabled him to endure all the struggles of leadership during the Second World War. And while his assertion is accurate, it is accurate only insofar as it pertains to our natural human abilities. Churchill's call to persevere in order to save oneself is by all means applicable to soldiers in wartime. It is a stern charge to fight to the end in order to overcome the enemy. Moreover, it conveys a similar exhortation found in the Bible. In Hebrews,

we are called to run the race set before us (12:1). The apostle Paul likewise admonishes us to endure so that we might “reign with [Christ]” (2 Timothy 2:12). And while teaching his disciples, Christ himself said: “The one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22). In these passages and others, the Bible’s teaching is clear; we must persevere to the end in order to be saved. However, this is only one part of the biblical equation. If our perseverance in the faith is dependent upon us, we will surely fail and will by no means finish the race set before us. Moreover, our assurance of salvation will waver each and every day if we are counting on ourselves and our own natural abilities to persevere to the end (Romans 4:20; Hebrews 10:23). In order to have full assurance, we must be entirely dependent upon Christ and his Word, which he has provided for us as our only infallible rule for faith and life (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.2). In his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul writes to the saints and faithful believers in Christ at Colossae:

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:1–3)

The Foundation of Assurance

As Christians, we have not been left to our own devices “to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery,” nor have we been left to figure out for ourselves all that God requires of us. We have been blessed

with the wisdom and knowledge of our Savior, Jesus Christ, for in him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). What is more, in his sovereign wisdom God provided us with his Word; by his sovereign grace he provided us with minds to comprehend the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in his Word; and as a loving Father, he provided us with hearts to love and obey his Word. We are a people who are identified as God’s people because we are a people who are identified by his Word. We have been called to hide the Word in our hearts so that we might not sin against the Lord (Psalm 119:11), and we have been told to allow “the word of Christ [to] dwell in [us] richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in [our] hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). The Word of God is not only true and it does not merely contain truth, it is truth; that is to say, it defines truth (John 17:17).

However, many people are under the impression that the Word of God is merely a gospel tract to explain how to get a fire ticket out of hell and how to receive a golden pass so that we can get into heaven. What is more, some people think that the Bible is a step-by-step manual on how to be a nice person and how to live the good life. As such, many people keep their Bibles on their shelves and look at them only when they find themselves in serious trouble; for them, the Word of God is a big book of stories, poems, and facts that looks nice on the coffee table. But as John Piper writes in his classic book *Desiring God*, the Word of God is much more than that: “So the Bible is the Word of God. And the Word of God is no trifle. It is the source of faith and life and power and hope and freedom and wisdom and comfort and assurance and victory over our greatest enemy.”¹ The Westminster Larger Catechism explains that the Word is a means of God’s grace to his people:

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation. (A. 155)

Some Christians have studied the Word of God for many years. They know their Bibles backward and forward, and they know every doctrinal “i” that should be dotted and every systematic “t” that should be crossed. They love the theology of the Word of God, but their love for God himself has been displaced (Isaiah 29:13). This can happen in many ways. Whether it is our love of spending time studying things about God or whether it is our love of spending time serving God, such things can too easily replace our love for God himself who is our great reward, our everlasting inheritance (Genesis 15:1; Joshua 13:14).

When I was nineteen years old, I joined the staff of a large evangelical church. Many of the pastors on the staff became wonderful friends and mentors, but as I encountered some of the pastors at that church and at churches in the area, I became deeply saddened by what I observed. As I got to know some of the pastors more intimately, I observed that their love for the ministry seemed to supersede their love for God. It appeared that over the years, the ministry had become their god.

In his best-selling book *The Man in the Mirror*, Patrick Morley underscores the reality of this problem in the following story: “Ron Jensen rented a travel camper and traveled around the country with his wife while working on his doctoral thesis. His task was to interview 350 Christian leaders. At the end of this

tour he made a discouraging observation. He said, ‘I found a great deal of zeal for God’s work, but very little passion for God.’”²

As a student in Bible college, preparing for service in the church, it scared me to death to think that I could someday get to the point that my love for the ministry might take the place of my love for God. Therefore, every year since then I have dedicated myself to God, asking him to help me live for him and not for the ministry alone. In his boldly prophetic and now manifestly appropriate book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Francis Schaeffer helps to illustrate the importance of doctrinal faithfulness, not as an end in itself, but as the means to loving God rightly:

We must ask, “Do I fight merely for doctrinal faithfulness?” This is like the wife who never sleeps with anybody else, but never shows love to her own husband. Is that a sufficient relationship in marriage? No, ten thousand times no. Yet if I am a Christian who speaks and acts for doctrinal faithfulness but do not show love to my divine bridegroom, I am in the same place as such a wife. What God wants from us is not only doctrinal faithfulness, but our love day by day. Not in theory, mind you, but in practice.

For those of us who are the children of God, there can be only one end to this study concerning adultery and apostasy. We must realize the seriousness of modern apostasy; we must urge each other not to have any part in modern apostasy. But at the same time we must realize that we must love our Savior and Lord. We must be the loving, true bride of the divine bridegroom in reality and in practice, day by day, in the midst of the spiritual adultery of our day. Our call is first to be the bride faithful, but that is not the total call. The call is not only to be the bride faithful, but to be the bride in love.³

As the people of God, we cannot let our love for the things concerning God replace our love for God himself. Rather, we must be consumed with the understanding that all of our service to God and all of our understanding about God should lead us to love God more and more. Our study of God and our service to God that is accomplished for God's glory and for the good of his people should lead us to love God. In the preface of his book *The Holy Spirit*, Sinclair Ferguson quotes Thomas Aquinas as having taught that theology proceeds from God, teaches us about God, and leads us to God (*theologia deum docet, ab deo docetur, ad deum ducit*).⁴ The theology of the Word of God teaches us about God, but the process does not end there. What we learn about God from his Word teaches us how to serve him, how to love him, and how to worship him. If our service to God and our knowledge about God do not lead us to love God and praise God, then it could be said that ultimately we do not know the God of the Bible. Consider again Colossians 3:16: if the word of Christ indwells us richly, we will not be able to help but praise God with thankful hearts.

Being a Christian is not just about knowing things about God; rather, being a Christian is about knowing God. What we learn in Scripture and what we learn from our study of the doctrines of Scripture is foundational to our faith, for we can neither know God nor love God unless we know the Word of Almighty God who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. But not only is he the creator and sustainer of the universe, he is the creator and sustainer of our faith. He has created us for himself, and having chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) he has created within us new hearts—removing our hearts of stone and giving us moldable hearts to love him and serve him with all our hearts (Ezekiel

36:26). Herein is found the magnificent splendor of our salvation and the glory of our assurance of salvation in Christ.

The Assurance of Our Acceptance

Much of the reason that Christians lack full assurance of their salvation is because they do not possess a right understanding of the purpose of salvation. Most Christians think their salvation is first and foremost about them. When I begin premarital counseling with a couple in our church, one of the first things we talk about is the purpose of marriage. I usually astonish the couple when I explain to them that their marriage is not about them. After the initial shock, the young man and woman usually just look at me with blank stares. I then go on to explain that marriage is first and foremost about God and his kingdom (Ephesians 5:30–32). We spend some time talking about the creation ordinance to be fruitful and multiply, and, considering the possibility that the couple may not have children in the future, I explain that their marriage is intended to bring glory to God as each fulfills his and her covenant role in the relationship. I explain that they are getting married not just to live under the same roof with the same last name, but that their marriage is to reflect the relationship of Christ and his bride (5:25–29). When the couple understands that, they have a solid foundation on which to build a loving and full marriage.

When we begin to realize that salvation is not primarily about us, but about God’s kingdom and his glory, only then are we able to have a right understanding of assurance, for we did not become Christians so that we can just live under the same roof as other Christians or for the mere reason to be called a “Christian.” By God’s grace, we have become Christians to be a part of the glorious bride of Christ, to become the holy

temple of God and a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). We became Christians because God accepted us into his family. We were dead, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, God the Father made us alive in Christ and accepted us (Acts 10:35). Though this is quite simple, it is confusing to many people who have been tricked into thinking that they have somehow accepted God. However, the Word of God is clear, it is not that we have accepted God; rather, he has accepted us. The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:3–6 NKJV)

Paul writes that God “made us accepted in the Beloved.” It is God who accepts us, not we who accept God (Psalm 19:14; Jeremiah 14:10; Ezekiel 20:40; Romans 14:3; 1 Timothy 2:3; Hebrews 12:28; 1 Peter 2:5), and if it is God who accepts us, it is God who keeps us. Jesus Christ is our Great Shepherd, and we are his sheep who hear his voice, who follow him, and for whom he laid down his life for the express purpose that we would be accepted by the Father only as a result of the Son’s perfect and completely acceptable life and death (John 10:1–11).

A few years ago, the International Dairy Foods Association celebrated the tenth anniversary of its “Got milk?” advertising campaign. During the course of this campaign, just about everyone from Michael Jordan to the Cookie Monster has been

featured wearing a milk mustache. And the cultural influence of these advertisements is widespread, spawning similar slogans just about everywhere: “Got termites?” “Got hair?” “Got brains?” While these are generally quite harmless, one such slogan—usually seen on a bumper sticker—is not so harmless: “Got Jesus?”

The question “Got Jesus?” presumes a number of things. Fundamentally, it presumes that one should *get* Jesus—and with this presumption I am in complete agreement. My contention, however, is with the question itself. The simple question “Got Jesus?” begs the more appropriate question: “Does Jesus get you?” Although it is not nearly as trendy, and while I cannot imagine that such a question would ever make it onto a bumper sticker, the truth of the matter is that the former question tends to distort the gospel while the latter question is at the very heart of the gospel. The notion that it is incumbent upon us to accept God, or get Jesus, is at the very heart of the problem for many Christians—they actually think that they accepted God, and therefore it is only natural for them to think that they need to keep accepting God every hour of every day in order to make it as a Christian. In his timely work *The Gospel according to Jesus*, John MacArthur writes:

It may surprise you to learn that Scripture never once exhorts sinners to “accept Christ.” The familiar twentieth-century evangelistic appeal in all its variations (“make a decision for Christ”; “ask Jesus into your heart”; “try Jesus”; “accept Jesus as your personal Savior”), violates both the spirit and the terminology of the biblical summons to unbelievers.

The gospel invitation is not an entreaty for sinners to allow the Savior into their lives. It is both an appeal and a command for them to repent and follow him. . . .

The great miracle of redemption is not that we accept Christ, but that he accepts us. In fact, we would never love him on our own (1 John 4:19). Salvation occurs when God changes the heart and the unbeliever turns from sin to Christ. God delivers the sinner from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). In the process Christ enters the heart by faith to dwell there (cf. Eph. 3:17). Thus conversion is not simply a sinner's decision for Christ; it is first the sovereign work of God in transforming the individual.⁵

Ultimately, when we come before the throne of God, we will not be asked whether we accepted him as God or whether we accepted Jesus as our personal Christ. On the contrary, if we are in Christ we will be accepted only because God the Father accepted us in Jesus Christ, for only Christ is acceptable before the Father. We are in Christ on account of the Father's imputation of Christ's righteousness to us and the imputation of our sins to Christ. In the cross of Christ, the bride of Christ has been made acceptable to God, and such acceptance is the foundation of our assurance.

The Assurance of Our Victory

Just as our justification is from God, so our sanctification is from God, but unlike our justification, which is a monergistic work, in sanctification God calls us to work together with him to mature as Christians. As Christians we can never say to God: "The reason I still sin, or the reason I am not maturing as quickly as I would like, is because you have not given me enough grace." Nevertheless, it is not as if our spiritual sustenance is solely dependent upon our own ability to muster enough faith. Insofar as salvation is a gift from God, so faith is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8–10). And such faith is a faith that not only

saves us but sustains us as well. Our faith is fixed on one who has authored our faith and who will finish our faith as well. The author of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). As the author of our faith, it is not as if Jesus simply begins our faith and then stands back as we take two steps forward and then three steps back, over and over again. In fact, the author of Hebrews uses an intriguing Greek word to describe Jesus as the author of our faith: *archegos*, a compound composed of *arche* and the verb *ago*. The word *arche* is familiar to us in English words such as *archeology* and *archetype*. The general meaning of the prefix is “early,” “beginning,” or “at the outset of.” The verb *ago* is not familiar to us, but it simply means “to lead.” Together, the two make up a fascinating word, especially as the author of Hebrews uses it to describe Jesus. The word *archegos* can be strictly translated as “one who leads from the beginning,” “a pioneer,” or “a captain.”

To illustrate the significance of the word the author of Hebrews is using, it may be helpful to consider a scene from the movie *Braveheart*. In the last battle at Falkirk, the brave William Wallace stands on the front line of the Scottish army as he leads his army into battle. On the other side of the battlefield Edward I “Longshanks” sits on his horse at the very back of his troops, sending each regiment to battle with the raising of his arm. It is a magnificent scene in which William Wallace is at the forefront of his army leading them into battle.

The author of Hebrews says that Jesus is not merely one who sits back as he tells us to fight the good fight. Rather, as the Great Shepherd who calls his own sheep by name and leads them out, going before them, Jesus Christ is the captain of our souls who leads at the forefront, from the beginning, and it is he who has gained the victory for us (John 10:3–4; 1 Corinthians 15:50–58; Hebrews 2:10; 1 John 5:4). This truth is

well illustrated by the second stanza of Martin Luther's great hymn *A Mighty Fortress*:

Did we in our own strength confide
our striving would be losing;
were not the right man on our side,
the man of God's own choosing;
dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his name,
from age to age the same,
and he must win the battle.

Our assurance of salvation is established by Christ's having the battle, for he is the author and finisher of our faith. Therefore, as Paul writes in Romans 8:31–39, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. And such love is demonstrated in a special way toward us who believe. John Murray comments on this passage in his classic work *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*:

Paul is here affirming in the most emphatic way, in one of the most rhetorical conclusions of his epistles, the security of those of whom he has been speaking. The guarantee of this security is the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. And the love of God here spoken of is undoubtedly the love of God towards those who are embraced in it. . . . We see, therefore, that the security of which Paul here speaks is a security restricted to those who are the objects of the love which was exhibited on Calvary's accursed tree, and therefore the love exhibited on Calvary is itself a distinguishing love and not a love that is indiscriminately universal. It is a love that insures the eternal security of those who are its objects and

Calvary itself is that which secures for them the justifying righteousness through which eternal life reigns.⁶

Yet it is not in our own strength that we confide, for our striving would be losing. We are conquerors, not by our own means, but on account of God's sustaining grace, as Paul teaches us regarding the "Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:7–9; see also Psalm 55:22; Isaiah 59:16).

The Assurance of God's Preservation

Although we all struggle in dealing with the sinfulness of the world, it is not only the world's sinful deceptions and sinister devices that we have to worry about (Ephesians 6:12). We also are faced with the struggle of dealing with the sinfulness of those around us, even those whom we dearly love. But what is more, we are in a constant war with our own sinfulness (Hebrews 12:4). Even though we have been declared just by God, we still sin. Though we are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:15–23), we still struggle to honor God in all we think, in all we say, and in all we do (12:1–2, 10). And because we still sin, we struggle with overcoming our doubts and anxieties about the gracious provision of God in salvation (Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:38). Nevertheless, by redeeming us, the Lord secured us in his hand, from which we cannot be snatched and from which we ourselves cannot escape, even on days when we feel like running away (John 10:27–29).

The God of creation is the God of history; he is the God of Scripture and the God of the covenant. At creation and throughout history, the God of Scripture calls himself "Lord."

Central to the meaning of the name “Lord” is the idea of covenant. First and foremost, Almighty God is the covenant Lord whose word is true and whose promises are faithful. As the only Lord, he is our master and our guardian, who has entered into a covenant with us by his own initiative. Just as we did not first love him, but he first loved us, so we did not initiate our covenant relationship with him. The covenant he entered with us is a covenant to bless us and keep us for himself. He has secured us once for all in the eternal bond of the blood of his only begotten Son. Nevertheless, he has secured us in Christ not only for some future date when we will be with him at home in heaven, he has secured us in Christ for the here and now. Therefore, he not only has promised us eternal life, but he assures us of our eternal life each and every day. We are reminded constantly of his sustaining grace every time we are convicted of our sin, every time we repent, every time the fear of God comes upon us, and every time we are disciplined by our heavenly Father.

Though such means are not always warmly welcomed, our loving Father preserves us in such ways. It is by his kindness that we are brought to repentance (Romans 2:4; 2 Timothy 2:25). It is through Spirit-led confession that we are cleansed from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Indeed, by placing godly fear within our hearts, the Lord has caused us to remember the eternal security of his everlasting covenant with us to prevent us from ever turning away from him (Jeremiah 32:40). And as the author of Hebrews explains (12:4), it is through the Father’s discipline that we are reminded of his enduring love. In Psalm 86:11–13, David prayed:

Teach me your way, O LORD,
that I may walk in your truth;
unite my heart to fear your name.

I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole
heart,
and I will glorify your name forever.
For great is your steadfast love toward me;
you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

Commenting on this psalm, John Calvin writes:

In the word *unite* there is a very beautiful metaphor, conveying the idea, that the heart of man is full of tumult, drawn asunder, and, as it were, scattered about in fragments, until God has gathered it to himself, and holds it together in a state of steadfast and persevering obedience. From this also, it is manifest what free will is able to do of itself. Two powers are ascribed to it; but David confesses that he is destitute of both; setting the light of the Holy Spirit in opposition to the blindness of his own mind; and affirming that uprightness of heart is entirely the gift of God.⁷

Assurance through Purification

In Hebrews 9:11–14, the author of Hebrews explains how the superiority of Christ's sacrifice purified our consciences:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the

eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

By his work on the cross for us, Christ purified our consciences so that we might be delivered from dead works in order to serve the living God. In the next chapter, the author of Hebrews ties together “our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” with his call to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith”:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:19–25)

The Lord who promised is faithful, the author of Hebrews asserts; therefore we should hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, without doubting his faithfulness, for the covenant Lord, who is the guardian of our souls, has declared that we are righteous in Christ, that our consciences have been purified. And in order to demonstrate this truth, the Lord reveals his faithfulness each and every day by pricking our consciences so that we might continually mature as his beloved children in

whom he delights (1 Thessalonians 5:5; 1 John 3:1). It should not surprise us to know that the Lord God Almighty does not play games with our souls. He is our Father who continually demonstrates his love for us by revealing to us our sins, enabling us to repent, and reminding us of his holiness (Isaiah 5:16), for when we realize how holy he is—and thus how holy we are not—we grow in the grace and knowledge of God our Father (Ephesians 1:17; Colossians 1:10; 2 Peter 1:8).

The Word of God does not say that the Lord disciplines all people, but only those whom he loves (Hebrews 12:5–6):

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.

Such discipline is a gracious provision of the Lord whereby we are assured by God of his love for us and his protection of us. Although it sounds strange to suggest that we should long for God's discipline in our lives, when we do begin to yearn for God's loving hand of discipline and, dare I say, pray for such discipline, that is when we will experience the most wonderful growth in our lives, for it is not unto us but unto him that all glory belongs—for the sake of his steadfast love and faithfulness (Psalm 115:1). By his mercy we are not damned. By his sacrifice we have been redeemed. By his grace he has set us apart. By his promise we are granted assurance. And for his glory he preserves us to the end.