

Assurance

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Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

"Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God."

Movement 1 – I Guarantee It!

Before you are three options, three doors, three choices that you can make. In door number one is a plaid-suit wearing, greasy hair, full-teeth grinning, hand shaking used car salesman. His hand is outstretched, his face is more smile than anything else and he is waiting to get you into the car of your dreams. In the next door is a muscle bound, raging, shouting, energetic and demanding exercise freak and health nut. He is holding, rather he is brandishing a contraption which looks more like a torture device than exercise equipment speaking of the many wonders said equipment will offer. He is waiting to get you into the body of your dreams. Behind the third door is a mustachioed man in a white suite and bola tie sporting a straw hat and looking sincere. Standing in front of a 1920s trailer with the description "Doc Watson's wonderful whimsical winning, working, weekly balm," he is holding up a bottle and speaking quickly, rapidly about the benefits of the balm in question. He is waiting to offer you the cures of your dreams. Three options, three choices to make, and I have one question, "Whom do you trust?"

Do you trust that the car you purchase from the used car salesman will be reliable, dependable, and get the mileage that is promised? Do you trust that it was only driven on Sundays and Wednesdays to church and to the store by a little old lady?

Do you trust the health nut? Do you trust that the piece of exercise equipment he is pushing will give you the body you desire, the self-confidence you yearn for, the promotion you need and find for you the friends you do not have. Do you trust that this one piece of equipment will solve all your health issues, your relationship issues, your life issues for just twenty minutes a day?

Do you trust the snake-oil dealer? This character out of a Flannery O'Connor story, this southern selling gentleman is offering a cure-all, healing all balm that will solve your acne, your rheumatoid, your bronchitis, your marital problems, your school problems, your pet problems and make life better than you have ever imagined. Do you trust this smooth talking gentleman with the bottle of Doc Watson's wonder balm?

Whom do you trust? You are facing three options and all are offering a guarantee, an assurance and a better life. Whom do you trust?

We look for guarantees whenever we take chances in life. We look for something that can give us the assurance that things will be ok. We would like to go through life with some sense that things will be ok. We want some guarantee that we can trust. Christians are known as trusting people, but how far does that trust really go? Mark Twain once said, "I admire the serene assurance of those who have religious faith. It is wonderful to observe the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces." Do we trust with assurance, with something we can touch and see?

Maybe it is something that is more than faith, maybe, when we are realistic, it is something concrete that we can rest upon. We would not even begin to trust the three

characters introduced at the beginning of this message without an assurance or a guarantee. We want a guarantee.

In the psalm for today we find a yearning for assurance, for help and for salvation. In the psalm for today we find someone petitioning the Lord. We hear some words of assurance, some words of trust, “You are indeed my rock and my fortress...” We hear these words and words elsewhere and want to embrace them as the guarantee of our lives. We want to rest on them as a hope that we can embrace. We want to look to our faith as an assurance, and look to scriptures as a guarantee for our lives. We want to trust the Lord.

Yet do we still look for assurance? Can we fully trust the Lord? When God called Moses to go into Egypt, Moses kept complaining and whining, and looking for reasons not to go. “...suppose they do not believe me or listen to me,” cried Moses. He was worried and afraid to return with such a bold message to the place where he was known as a murder, where his people were enslaved. Again and again God gave Moses a sign, a stick turning into a snake, God inflicted a plague onto Moses and then cured him, water turning into blood, and still Moses was looking for an assurance that he would be heard (Exodus 4).

When we buy the car from the salesman, we want the stamp of assurance that if the car should happen to break down we can bring it back – we want the guarantee. We want the guarantee that the exercise equipment will improve our health. We want the assurance that the healing balm will have a positive effect. We want the assurance that God will indeed deliver us, save us and protect us. In life we want that guarantee that things will go well. We want the guarantee that we will be ok. We want assurance.

Movement 2 – Troubled Times

Yet there are times when we question and wonder about the assurance upon which we rest. There are times when we question the guarantee and we wonder if God is really present, with us and taking care of us. When Hagar and Ishmael were sent away from Abraham and Sarah into the desert things were desperate. As their food dwindled and their water diminished the situation went from bad to worse. In what was her final moment of desperation, a moment when Hagar believe that all was lost, when she and Ishmael were out of food and out of water, Hagar set her son down and walked away so as not to hear his cries. She looked at her son for what she thought would be the last time and left him to die. Her heart was heavy, her hope was gone and we have to wonder if she found any assurance, any trust in the Lord. Where could she find her assurance? Where could she find her hope? We could easily hear her say, “In you, O Lord, I seek refuge,” be can we hear her saying, “you are indeed my rock and my fortress?” (Genesis 21:15-19). In desperate times, where was Hagar’s assurance?

It is easy for us to claim to trust the Lord in good times. It is easy for us to place our hope in the Lord when things are moving in a positive direction, but what about when things change? What about when life gets difficult and challenging and seems more than we can handle? Can we then rest on the guarantee we find in scriptures? Can we find the assurance that will keep us going through the difficulties of life; can we continue to trust the Lord? Think of the thousands of individuals who are facing the very real possibility of foreclosing on their home. Individuals who, for one reason or another, do not have the resources to keep up with the monthly payments and are wondering where they will live

after they lose their home may not be so quick to claim God as their rock. They are in a time when all foundation is gone, when life is chaos. Can they trust the Lord?

Think of the individual who is facing one health issue after the next. This is the person who seems to spend more time in the hospital than out of the hospital. This is a person who cannot have a personal life because of his or her health. Where is the trust, where is the faith and where is the assurance one can have to rest on the Lord? Can he or she find assurance in the Lord?

Think of the couple who is struggling with their relationships. They fight, and fight and speak past each other. Maybe they remember a time when their love was new and they believed that their relationship could last past anything. Maybe they remember the time when they believed God have brought them together, they believed that God was a part of their family, but things have changed in such a way, they have grown so far apart that now they wonder. They wonder if God could still be a part of something that is so hurtful, so broken. Can they find assurance in the Lord?

We have all faced, and maybe are now facing times of difficulties. We have encountered financial difficulties, health difficulties, tension with our family, struggles with our job and have found ourselves on those rough roads in life. In those times of difficulties, those times of hardships, where do we find our assurance, our embrace of God's guarantee? In those times of hardships, how can we trust the Lord? It is that time when the very foundation upon which you stand, the rock that you believed would always hold you up has been taken away and find yourself falling. It is a time of despair which Paul Tillich describes as a loss of a sense of being. It is a time when your identity, your understanding of yourself is lost because the difficulties of the world, the difficulties of your life are that great and that overwhelming. When you do not know who you are any more, can you rest on the guarantee you looked to in the past? When you are, as the psalmist says, in the net, captured, persecuted and hurt, can you trust the Lord?

Commentators describe this psalm as an alternation of petition and assurance. The petition seems to come out of a place of deep need and fear. The petitions seem to emerge from a place of despair and distress. The psalmist fears for his life. We can read with the psalmist and find ourselves saying the words with him and maybe find it difficult to find our assurance. In those moments of hardship, how can we trust the Lord?

Movement 3 – Please Sir, May I have Some More?

Maybe, at midnight's hour, we make that final prayer, that final petition for hope and for help. Maybe, when the water is up to our neck and threatening to drown us, we make that final prayer. We find ourselves on our knees saying, "In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me." We make that final prayer for hope and for help, but maybe the assurance is not there and the prayer is in desperation.

Yet that is the honest and perhaps the difficult prayer. Not only do you pray your concern, but you are also sharing your doubt and perhaps your acceptance of what seems to be the inevitable. It is not an easy thing to do; it is not an easy prayer to make when we are honest with our fears and our concerns. Even up to 11:55 we may be praying the words of trust and assurance. Even up to the final minute we may be saying that we still trust God, until that moment when all seems lost and then we are honest.

You may have seen the *Simpsons* episode when Bart was running the risk of failing the fourth grade. If he failed one more test, then he would be held back, the idea of which is a nightmare for a 10-year-old boy. So Bart tried and tried and tried to study, and still wasn't ready. He really focused, he really put forth the effort but he knew that he was not going to pass the test. In a moment of desperation, Bart fell on his knees and prayed. He prayed to God for help, for a break. He admitted that he wasn't the most holy person. He admitted that he wasn't the most deserving person, but he had nowhere else to go. It was an honest open and humbling prayer that Bart offered in a time of hopelessness.

When we are in that time of desperation and we look to the Lord for help we have to offer the same humility and honesty, and that is not easy. Like asking in-laws for money, or when you admit to your parents that you need help, it is not easy. It can be shameful when we have to admit that we are at the end of our rope. We may feel like Oliver did when he walked down the long hall with his empty bowl in his hands, all eyes on him, going before the looming and foreboding cook standing behind the heavy pot of gruel. Before we would just sit at our table and assume that we would get more without asking. Before we would shout from our end of the hall, trusting that the din of the cafeteria would drown out our prayers. But now we walk up to the Lord as we are, exposed and vulnerable. Meekly and humbly we hold out the bowl in our shaking hands and say so softly, "please sir, may I have some more?"

As I already mentioned, the Psalmist alternates between assurance and petitions, and the petitions may be the difficult part for us to utter and to declare. The psalmist is in a place of desperation, a place of difficulty and is asking for deliverance and help from the Lord who has been a help in the past. "Please sir, may I have some more?"

When we are in our own times of difficulty and challenges we go to the Lord, the one in whom we had such hope and assurance. We want that assurance we had when life was good. We want that hope which we had when things were going well. "Please sir, may I have some more?" May I have that assurance; may I have that guarantee that all will be well? May I be showered with the surety that I need not fear? When I say with the psalmist, "you are indeed my rock and my fortress," may I fully and completely believe what I am saying. May I have that faith and that grace that will carry me through this time of darkness. May I have some more. This isn't a prayer of a bold individual. This isn't the prayer of someone who has a super-strong faith, but one who is yearning for it. This is the prayer of someone who is looking for that help. This is the prayer of the man who shouts, "I believe, help my unbelief."

This is a prayer looking for hope, for help and for the assurance that maybe we once had, but as the waves of difficulty crash down upon us, so often our trust in the guarantee has slowly ebbed away. Can we, in our honest self ask the Lord again for help?

Movement 4 – Stay with the Ship or Abandon Ship

So we pray, we open ourselves to God, we are honest with God in the depth of our hopelessness, and then what? Where do we go, what do we do, and how do we continue to live our life after making such a hard and honest prayer to our Lord?

We could sit and wait. We could wait out our problems, determined to stay the path before us. Don't give up. Don't throw in the towel we may say don't look for a way out, but stay with the course set before us.

While I would not like to use Captain Bligh as a positive example, I am reminded of the scene in the classic version of *Mutiny on the Bounty* when Captain Bligh and those loyal to him were placed in a small boat, with few supplies and sent out to sea with no charts or compass. In what seemed to be a hopeless situation, Captain Bligh was resolute to not give up hope and to continue to find land. He held to the rudder when all seemed lost, even when the situation seemed dire, he would not give up.

Perhaps we are to do the same? We continue on the path before us, even when the difficulties mount. We take up our pencils and continue with the difficult work ahead of us. We go home, pay what bills we can and get through today, not worrying about tomorrow. We continue to live life to the fullest possibility that we can not worrying about our health, not letting our situation paralyze us from life. We don't give up.

On the other hand, we could make a change. We could decide to walk a different path, to abandon ship and find a different way to live. We could go a different way and leave the despair behind us. There is a children's book about a bear and an eagle who are engaged in a shouting match, then a stone throwing match, and are just angry at each other. They enlist the animals to help them as they toss stones and sticks at each other, engaged in a war of words and materials. In between the two is Moose who does not want to take part, but just live peacefully. The animals are devoted to Eagle and Bear, living an angry life that does not seem to have any promise or hope. They seem stuck until they see Moose picking up the sticks and stones and building a structure. Where they are is hopeless and what Moose is doing is offering hope. So they leave Bear and Eagle and join Moose in building a wonderful structure for all to enjoy.

Perhaps we need to change, to move on, to leave if that is possible. How many women stay in a situation of domestic abuse hoping things will change and only enduring more and more violence? Sometimes we need to change.

How do we decide? How do we decide what to do, where to go and how to act? How do we follow the will of the Lord? This is a dangerous question because what if we get it wrong? What if we pray and pray and then move on and God wants us to stay? Will things get worse? Will we be punished?

What if we stay and God wants us to move on? What if we make the wrong decision, when if we do not hear God clearly? How do we follow God's will and where will we find the assurance that we are indeed on track with God?

Think of Christ on the cross. He was in a dire situation. He was in a hopeless situation as he hung on the cross. Some were sure that he had lost. Some were sure that all hope was gone and that Christ should give up whatever vision he might have had. Yet from the cross, Christ uttered the words from this psalm, "Father, into your hand I commit my spirit." Christ was giving his life not to the Romans, not to the Jews, but to God and letting God take his life. Christ was saying that even to death and beyond death he would trust the Lord – into God's hands he commended his spirit.

This isn't a prayer that things would improve. This is a prayer that God would still be present and in the end would guide and lead and never leave. When we pray for support, maybe part of our prayer is that things would change, but that isn't the prayer of the psalm. The prayer of the psalm is for assurance, for assurance that in the end you will be delivered and redeemed. The prayer of the psalm is that through the darkness of the night, you will not stay there, but see the brighter day, the other side. The prayer is that no matter what decision you make, if you listen to the Lord, if you give your life to the

Lord, and then God will be with you. Your situation might change, you might change, but in the end you will find glory with your Lord. Don't give up, but stay on the path of the Lord.

Movement 5 – Blessed Assurance

Trust that when your life, when your times are in God's hands, you will be delivered. In this life or the next, you will be redeemed, and so we can stay on the path of the righteousness because of the Lord. What kind of assurance are we really looking for? Are we looking for the assurance that our life will be easy? Are we looking for the assurance that things will get better by our standards? Or are we looking for the assurance that we are indeed doing the Lord's work, that we are indeed the Lord's servants? We may suffer, we may struggle, but when we are doing the work of the Lord, we will find and experience glory. The psalm reminds us that God is a rock and a fortress upon which we can rest. The psalm reminds us that God is faithful. This prayer for assurance is based upon the nature of God – give your life to the Lord, and you can trust the Lord. Devote all of your actions to God's glory and you can trust the Lord. This prayer, this psalm can be uttered because we can trust in the Lord; we can have that assurance.

Lois Lane lived with an assurance that she would always be ok. She lived with the assurance that no matter where she found herself, no matter how high the building or desperate the situation Superman would somehow show up and save her. Lois lived with this assurance, this trust as she poked he noise in places that would be dangerous.

We have the assurance from the prayer as well. It is an assurance that we will be saved, we will be guided and we will meet our hope and glory. It may not be in this life, but we will be delivered in our life. We have that assurance, that foundation, that reliability upon which we can rest and live with hope.

*Why should I feel discouraged
Why should the shadows come
Why should my heart feel lonely
And long for heaven and home
When Jesus is my portion
A constant friend is He
His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watches over me
His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watches me*

*I sing because I'm happy
I sing because I'm free
His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watches me
His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watches me*

When we give our life to the Lord, when we say, "Into your hand I commit my spirit" when we say, "my times are in your hand," then we no longer have to worry about tomorrow, about next year, or the rest of our life. We have the assurance that even on the cross, even when we think all hope is lost, we can trust and believe that we will be

redeemed. Christ is risen, and we can hope. Christ is alive and we can sing. We have that assurance from the cross we live.

God watches us, looks out for us and takes care of us. God will not leave us but support us. Rest on that assurance of hope and grace of the Lord.

Movement 6 – Coda

Trust in the Lord. Trust in the Lord that even the times of difficulty will not pull you down. Trust in the Lord that even in times that seem desperate, God is still with you. Trust in the Lord.

John Calvin said of the fifth verse, “Into your hand I commit my spirit,” that it is “one of the principle places of scripture which are most suitable for correcting distrust.” Look to this scripture and reclaim your trust in the Lord. I know you face challenges, I know you face difficulties; offer those difficulties to the Lord. I know life is hard, place your trust in the Lord. This psalm has been uttered and prayed by saints and martyrs before us. People such as Jerome, Martin Luther and John Knox have looked to this psalm for hope and assurance in times of difficulty. Stand next to them, even in the face of adversity and trust in the Lord.

Things may not change, but God will still be with you. It may feel as if nothing is getting better, but God has not left you. You can stand upon a faith in the Lord who is always at your side. Trust in the Lord.

Trust in the Lord with your ministry, with the church, with your family, with your friend, with your very life. Trust in the Lord and know that you will find hope, you will find grace and you will find peace. Place your hope and your trust in the Lord.

AMEN