

This is How We Know (1 John 3:19-24)
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Today is Oasis Sunday, when the youth get to experience what's involved in running a service, and the rest of the congregation gets to know the youth better. And it's also when I get the opportunity to preach. I decided to address the issue of confidence, which is very culturally relevant for us today. Our society values demeanor, language, posture, and clothes that exude confidence. Many of the youth today desire to be confident in their appearance, intellect, and popularity. But confidence in faith is a much more spiritually important issue than confidence in these other areas. Are you confident in what you believe? Are you confident in your salvation? I often struggled with these questions. Although I wasn't the best behaved at church, I learned and understood quite well what was taught in Sunday school and AWANA. But despite this, during college I questioned my own salvation and my beliefs.

1 John was written to address disputes and false teachings that arose in the early church, specifically regarding the nature of Christ. Because of these disagreements many Christians were confused about what the truth was and if they could be sure of what they believed. John tells them in today's passage that they can have confidence in their salvation if they are obeying God's commands, which are to believe in Jesus and to love one another (1 John 3:23). And this is because love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, who guarantees our eternal inheritance; and this obedience is by the power of God, freely given to those who ask in Jesus' name. This idea of love as a sign of salvation is also a prominent theme in John's gospel account. Notice that, according to John, confidence doesn't come from a feeling but rather from an action, a choice. This is similar to the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, which is described by Paul with choices and actions rather than warm feelings. That which is normally associated with emotions is instead associated with actions because emotions are not trustworthy. They are subjective, often not rooted in truth. The condemnation by the heart in 1 John 3:20 refers to feelings of uncertainty about our salvation, but John makes it clear that these emotions do not equate to a lack of faith. The emotions are not an accurate measure of one's spiritual state.

In college, when I was feeling distant from God, I was being disciplined by an older brother in the church. One day while I was waiting to meet with this brother, I felt a voice compelling

me to pray. I couldn't find any words to pray, so I felt compelled again to bow before God and pray. Bowing down in public seemed embarrassing, so I just knelt. But then I suddenly felt a voice telling me it wasn't good enough. So I prostrated myself fully before God and began to praise God with words that were not my own. This experience meant to me that God was seeking me out, because I was lost. He seeks to save those who are lost, not only those who are spiritually healthy. For me, this experience is precious, but what value is it to you? Could this experience convince an unbeliever that God is real? Can't people with other religions have seemingly spiritual experiences similar to this one? Experience is subjective, so it can't be used to give objective guidance. The value of this experience for me, and for people who hear of it, is realized when it is seen in light of objective truth, which is Scripture. Our experiences alone don't tell us what God is like, or whether or not He will save us. The truth of the Bible gives us assurance of God's love and of our salvation. Our experiences serve to remind us of the truth and teach us how it plays out in our lives.

One reason why the accounts in the New Testament are so much more reliable than our own experiences of God is because they were written by eyewitnesses. They heard the truth from Jesus directly, and they saw firsthand God's plan of salvation play out. We can be certain of our salvation because the apostles witnessed Jesus' resurrection. They were so confident in the hope they had in Christ that they were willing to die for it. So we gain assurance when we believe their message from Scripture and put it into practice. We must remember that knowing the gospel doctrine is not good enough. It's when we believe the right thing, and when it translates into right living, that we have assurance of our salvation. Our lives do not earn salvation, but when we are saved our lives are transformed by it. If we believe in Jesus and love one another, then whenever we experience these unsettling emotions, we can set our hearts at rest because we know that the Spirit is in us and the power of God is working through us, as the Bible tells us. Our hearts may condemn us, but God, who is greater than our hearts, is the One who saves us, despite knowing even more than we do how sinful we are. So examine your life. Are you actively following Jesus' commandment? Are you showing His love towards others? This is how you know you are saved.