

Absolutely Certain

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[0 : 00] Now, some of you are like me.

You're old school when it comes to getting the news. You watch it on the TV. And the reason why you're old school is you're as stingy as I am.

And if I paid a license fee to the BBC, I'm going to watch the news on the BBC and not get it on my smartphone or Sky News or anywhere like that. But you watch it on TV. And it does happen when you pick it up on your smartphone.

You're watching the news one night. And just before the next piece comes on, the newsreader warns you that it's going to contain some very distressing images.

And she's not wrong. It's an animal welfare story containing horrific pictures of animals that have been starved and cruelly mistreated by their owners. And when they were of no further use to their owners, they've been callously abandoned by them.

[1 : 08] We've all come across stories like that. But I wonder, have you ever thought that God might do something similar to you? That you might give in to some temptation?

That you might fail so badly? That you might react so poorly to the circumstances in which you find yourself in? That God will just say, enough.

I've had enough. And just dump you. Dark thoughts like that about assurance of salvation have crossed most of our minds, at least once in our lifetimes.

And perhaps often. And perhaps they came especially when we first started off following Jesus. Or we came out of a religious background that was a church that taught the error that a true Christian could lose their faith.

Doubts about assurance of salvation are the number one problem with Christians of all shapes and sizes and varieties and stages that I've come across in my 45 years plus of gospel ministry.

[2 : 42] And I would not be surprised if there wasn't somebody here in this room tonight who was struggling with whether or not they are a Christian, whether or not God loves them, whether or not they will make it safely to heaven.

And I find that if you deal with this issue of assurance, a lot of other problems sort themselves out. So, no matter where we are in our Christian journey, even the preacher himself, we have to listen to what Paul says to us in Romans 8 verse 32.

Because in this verse, as in the verses surrounding it, but we're focusing on this verse, he explains to us how we can be absolutely certain that no matter how we feel, no matter what circumstances come our way, no matter what has happened to us or been done to us or will happen to us or will be done to us, that no matter how much Satan insinuates it, we can be absolutely certain that we are Christians and will arrive safely in heaven.

So, let's tonight unpack Romans 8 verse 32. And as we do so, the first matter it highlights is fairly obvious. It says, The father did not spare Jesus.

The father did not spare Jesus. In tight, monosyllabic words, with which Romans 8 verse 32 opens, we're told, he did not spare his own son.

[4 : 28] Reminds us only two people are involved. Only two persons are involved. Rather, at this point, there's the eternal father and the eternal son. Now, Paul does not pluck that expression, his own son, out of thin air.

Paul's doing what he does all the time in his letters. He's taking us back into the Old Testament. And what Paul says when he says he did not spare his own son, it takes us back to one of the most gut-wrenching incidents in the Old Testament, the one that Annette read a few moments ago from Genesis 22.

Isaac is not just Abraham and Sarah's wee late one to beat all wee late ones, but more importantly, Isaac is the one through whom all God's promises to bring salvation to all nations through Jesus are tied up.

That's the promise that Abraham was made, God made to Abraham. Through Isaac, all the nations would be blessed with Jesus' salvation.

But I want to sound melodramatic from a human point of view. If there was no Isaac, we wouldn't be sitting here tonight. Isaac's this important figure.

[5 : 54] But God comes to Abraham and he says, Abraham, take your son, and here's the Romans 8.32 connection, your only son, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.

And as we heard, the whole incident goes right down to the wire. Remember, the very last moment is, as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into Isaac, God restrains him.

Abraham is not to kill his son, but the ram that has got itself tangled up in a nearby bush. And Abraham, God is testing Abraham's faith, and he passes the test with flying colors.

And you remember how God praises him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld, not spared your son, your only son.

And centuries later, another father led his son, his only son, up a hill, probably the same hill as Abraham took Isaac to.

[7 : 10] And the son was impaled upon an altar, the cross. But for this son, there was no last minute reprieve.

The knife of God's judgment fell on Jesus. The father did not spare his own son. Isaac was spared.

Jesus was not. But Jesus deserved to be spared, did he not? He deserved to be spared because of who he was.

He was the eternal son, eternally loved by the father. In the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, there was an infinite, eternal, and unchangeable bond of love between the father and the son.

But the father did not spare his own son. Jesus deserved to be spared because of what he had done.

[8 : 19] To spare means to refrain from punishment. Carlos had committed a traffic offense. It was his first offense, and not a very serious one. But it was an offense.

The law had been broken. But the judge spares him from prison. He's fined and has to do community service. But Jesus had not broken the rules.

All of the time, in every area of his life, Jesus had perfectly kept God's law. His record was unblemished. No convictions. Only 100% compliance, 100% of the time.

He should have been spared. But he wasn't. The father did not spare his own son. And things take a turn when we realize that Jesus actually asked to be spared.

Three times in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Jesus is asking to be spared.

[9 : 34] Now, why he does so is a profound mystery. Was he not the eternal son who knew from all eternity that he would come to earth to die?

Yes, he was. And yes, he did. Why then is he seemingly praying for a plan B when he knew all along there wasn't one, there was only plan A?

And my answer is, I don't know. The interplay that took place between Jesus' perfect divine nature and Jesus' perfect human nature in the Garden of Gethsemane is a profound mystery.

As you can hear from my accent, I'm from Northern Ireland. I grew up during the Northern Ireland Troubles or spent most of my life growing up in the Northern Ireland Troubles. And people used to say in Northern Ireland that if you understood what was going on in Northern Ireland during the Northern Ireland Troubles, you didn't.

There were lots of people who thought they knew what was going on and told us what was going on, but they really didn't understand. And I think if we've worked out all that is going on here in the Garden of Gethsemane, we actually haven't.

[11 : 00] All we know is that the son prayed to be spared and the father replied, my son, my only son, no, there is no other way.

And the son submitted to the father and said, not as I will, but as you will. Although he repeatedly and intensely asked for it, the father did not spare his own son.

And why did the father not spare his own son? Was this a case of cosmic child abuse with a cruel and heartless father taking sadistic pleasure in watching his son being violently assaulted and inhumanely humiliated?

Of course it wasn't. It wasn't at all. The father didn't spare his son because of you and because of me.

Our salvation required that the father did not spare his own son. In order to save us, God dare not turn a blind eye to our sin or sweep it under the carpet.

[12 : 21] God's law demanded perfect obedience, a demand that we could not and cannot meet. But Jesus met the laws in flexible demand, living the perfect life we should have lived.

His death was the only sacrifice that could satisfy God's anger at our law breaking. And God did not withhold that sacrifice.

He did not spare his own son. If there'd been even the most minimal relaxing of the law's demands, even the slightest reining in of the law's requirements, even the least diluting of the law's sanctions, there would be no salvation for us.

But there was not. The father did not spare Jesus. And as a result, our salvation was accomplished and applied. So as Paul wants us to be absolutely certain, he reminds us that the father did not spare his son.

He then moves from the negative to the positive. And the second matter he zooms in on in verse 32 of Romans 8 is this, that the father gave Jesus up to death.

[13 : 47] Not only did the father not spare his own son, but he also gave him up. The Greek verb to give up can also be translated to deliver up. It pops up five times in Matthew's gospel and on each occasion it's used in connection with Jesus' death.

When the father delivered Jesus up to die, what kind of death did he give him up to? It was a death of incomparable grief, exceptional sorrow, unparalleled suffering, extraordinary humiliation, and unprecedented anguish.

And the brutality, the physical brutality that Jesus experienced was horrendous. But other human beings have suffered similar violence.

What makes Jesus' death one of a kind? It's not his physical sufferings. It's his spiritual suffering.

No one has suffered spiritually in the way Jesus suffered as the father gave him up to abandonment, to the horrors of hell on the cross, to becoming a curse, to absorbing in his own innocent person the full fury of God's judgment on sin that should have come crashing down upon us.

[15 : 18] And again we ask, why did the father give Jesus up to such a death? And here's the answer, a famous answer that a man called Octavius Winslow, who was a 19th century English Baptist preacher and a friend of C.H. Spurgeon, said, here's what he said in reply to that question.

Who was it who delivered Jesus up to die? It was not Judas for money. It was not Pilate for fear. It was not the Jews for envy.

It was the father for love. Nicholas Walterstorff is a octogenarian American Christian who's a retired philosophy professor.

And he wrote a book many years ago called Lament for a Son. It was about the death of his son in a climbing accident and the impact that it had on his life.

And he tells it in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, he would go to a conference and introduce himself as Nicholas Walterstorff, the man who lost his son.

[16 : 36] Folks, there are many gods on offer today in the global religious marketplace. And if you can't find one that ticks all your boxes, then just make one up yourself.

That's what goes on today. But there's only one God who can identify himself as the God who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all to death.

Only one God. Allah can't do that. The Buddha can't do that. The gods of Hinduism can't say that.

All the other gods and goddesses of the plethora of cults and sects and isms that shout for our attention in the world's religious marketplace today can't say that.

The God of modern self whose name is me and I and myself. You know, the God that you're constantly told to believe in.

[17 : 47] That God can't say that. Only our God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, did that.

He alone is the God who did not spare his own son, but gave him up to death for us.

And then the third matter Paul draws our attention to in verse 32 is that the Father did all this for us. See what he writes?

He did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all. Now, that preposition for carries with it the idea of substitution.

Now, even if your contact with sport is that a forced observation, you know what's going on. Everyone else in the house is watching the footy and have hidden the remote control so you can't change the channel.

[18 : 50] Even if it's a forced observation, you have a fair idea what a substitute is. A player gets injured, so the manager sends a substitute on to take the injured player's place.

And when Jesus died, he took our place. We deserve to be punished because we had broken God's law. We deserve to face the music of God's judgment because we had failed miserably to keep the law's demands.

But Jesus died as our substitute. All our sin was transferred to him and he was treated as we should have been treated.

And because he died in our place, our sin was effectively dealt with so that it was forgiven and pardoned and we're counted as righteous in God's sight.

So it was for us that Jesus acted as a substitute. But what are we like? Well, Paul has already explained, we had time to read what he said beforehand, the chapter before, and he's really explained what we're like.

[20 : 06] We sort of think good, decent, moral, upright, religious people who honor God and put God first in our lives. Paul said we're nothing of the sort.

We're the exact opposite. He describes us in very uncomplimentary terms. We're weak, ungodly, sinners, and God's enemies. Yet Jesus died for us, people who are pathetic, self-centered rebels, who are against God and everything that he stands for.

We're very comfortable with the idea of loving those people who love us. But what about loving those who hate your guts?

That love is on a different level altogether. Other, it's way outside our comfort zone. We know no one who loves like that.

Well, no one except the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is God's unique love.

[21 : 17] This is what sets God's love apart from our love. God's love. He did not spare his own son, but gave Jesus up to death for undeserving people like us.

God's love. I was in a few years ago getting a knee replaced.

And those of you who have got knees replaced know that you don't get out of hospital until you can go up and down stairs. So they were trying to get me to do it. And they said, the physio was trying to say, when you're going up the stairs, you lead with your good leg.

And when you're going down the stairs, you lead with your bad leg. You know, she said, good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell.

I said, you're not a free church member. And she looked at me strange and said, who's this odd man? And I was able to, I did explain to her that we only go to heaven because we trust in Jesus.

[22 : 27] No matter how good we are, we don't get to heaven. We don't know God's love by being good. Even if we're bad, we can know God's love. He loves sinners.

The father did not spare his son, but gave him up for us all. It's a great thing to know. And then Paul brings his argument to a climax by focusing on a fourth matter in Romans 8 32, and it's this, the father will graciously give us everything.

The father will graciously give us everything. Here Paul argues from the greater to the lesser. If God did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, the greatest thing that God could possibly do, he says, will he not also along with him graciously give us all things, in a sense, the lesser thing God could do?

And the answer to Paul's question is obvious. It's a real no-brainer. Of course God will. If he didn't spare Jesus, but gave him up to die for us, it's unthinkable that he would not also graciously give us all things.

But what does Paul mean by all things? A new home, a luxury car, a rewarding job, a fulfilling relationship, a computer upgrade, an exotic holiday?

[23 : 52] Well, the context demands what we mean, what Paul means by all things. And Paul is writing here about how we have assurance of salvation, how we can be certain that God will keep us and bring us safely to heaven and won't abandon us.

And Paul says that everything that we need, will be there for us to reassure us that God will not string us along only to dump us before we reach heaven.

He will give us all the resources we need to be absolutely certain that we will arrive in heaven and not just by the skin of our teeth, but full of inexpressible and glorious joy.

Now folks, as we travel to heaven, you don't need me to tell you that many spiritual bandits lie in wait to mug us and to rob us of our assurance of salvation.

you know they're all the usual suspects, illness, temptation, difficult circumstances, unemployment, disappointment, being let down by others, weakness in some area of our lives, worry about the future of our family, the daily struggle to make ends meet, our past bereavement, and the devil comes in and all these things and says, if God allowed all these things to happen to you, how could he possibly love you?

[25 : 38] And these spiritual terrorists can easily duff us up and leave us wondering if we're Christians, but God has given you and given me everything we need to help us reach heaven.

He's given us the assurance that he will keep us that he'll not let our foot slip, that he'll watch over our going out and coming in, and that we will arrive in heaven, and God has underwritten that promise in the blood of his Son.

For God to give up Jesus to death in order to bring us to know him, and then later down the line to abandon us at the roadside on the way to heaven, it would be a bit like a multi-billionaire rich man buying a Rolls-Royce drop tail, which, according to Google, was the most expensive car of 2025, coming in at a bargain basement price of 23 million pounds.

It would be, imagine this billionaire buying that car, and then having to leave it in the driveway of his house, because he couldn't, he didn't have the resources, the financial resources, to insure the car, or put petrol in it.

That thing's just not going to happen. It's not going to happen. And Paul says, it's absurd to think that God will send Jesus to die for us and bring us to know him and then abandon us before getting to heaven.

[27 : 39] We can be absolutely certain that God will give us everything that we need in order that we will arrive safely in heaven, because God did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all.

Now, let me bring the plane into land. I'm sure you've noticed in some ways that although he's dealing with how we can be absolutely sure when it comes to having assurance of salvation, that in Romans 8, 32, Paul doesn't mention assurance of salvation.

he talks about Jesus' death and the Father's love for us. He doesn't mention assurance of salvation.

He wants us instead to us to take a long, hard look at the cross so that we might understand what was going on when Jesus died and the extent and depth of the Father's love for us in the death of Jesus.

And Paul's methodology tells us something very important about what to do when we find ourselves unsure that we are Christians and unsure if whether we'll arrive at heaven safely.

[29 : 07] now we should listen to sermons about assurance. They can be very helpful especially when they come from a reliable source and hope you haven't slept through this sermon on assurance.

But we should listen to sermons on assurance. We should also read good books about assurance. Let me recommend two that have been very helpful to me in the past.

One is called Heaven on Earth by Thomas Brooks. Thomas Brooks was a Puritan preacher who preached in London in the middle of the 17th century.

And this book is published by the Banner of Truth. It's a great book on assurance. And the other book is a bit more contemporary. It's by a man called Donald Whitley.

Whitney who is professor of biblical spirituality at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the United States. It's published by Nav Press and it's called How Can I Be Sure I Am a Christian?

[30 : 15] And it does what it says in the tin. They're great books. However, let me say this to you that if you're struggling with assurance right now and when you will struggle with assurance assurance in the future as you will, what you need most of all is not to listen to sermons on assurance, not to even read good books on assurance, but you need to focus on the cross.

See, that's what Paul does. People who know more about Romans than I do tell me that in Romans 5 and Romans 8, Paul is dealing with this matter of assurance of salvation and in verses 31 to 39 of chapter 8, he brings his treatment to a conclusion, not by talking about assurance itself, but by getting us to think about the meaning of Jesus' death on the hill of the skull and its implications for us.

And it's as if Paul is saying to us, look, look, look, once you grasp what is going on when Jesus died on the hill of the skull, you will find your assurance of salvation growing stronger.

And the firmer you understand what it meant for God not to spare his own son, but to give him up for us all, the more solid and certain will be your assurance.

assurance. That's why older Christians tend to be more stable in their assurance. It's not that we don't suffer from doubts from time to time, but we suffer less than when we first began.

[32 : 06] Those of you who are young Christians, you tend to suffer more from the doubts about assurance because you need to grow in your understanding of the cross. And some of us have been knocking around a wee bit longer and we understand it a wee bit more.

We really can understand it a lot more, but we understand it a wee bit more and it keeps us a wee bit firmer. It's this focus on the cross. And once we sort that out and get our focus on the cross and sort out our assurance of salvation, as I said, a lot of other matters take care of themselves.

I'm a grumpy old man who's retired too many times. I look around at the Christian book scene and there's lots of books on, you know, well-being issues and health issues, you know, all the stuff that they get.

And there's some great books out there, don't get me wrong, but nobody has written a book, and I'm not going to write it when I retire, nobody has written a book, nobody has written a book recently, a great book on the cross of Jesus to get us to think about the cross.

Because when we think about the cross, lots of our problems take care of themselves, especially the issue does God love us?

[33 : 29] God loves you because a historical event took place 2,000 years ago. Jesus died on the cross and nothing that will happen to you, nothing in your circumstances, nothing you feel will change that.

God loves you. And that's how you know that God loves you. So focus on the cross and do that. Again, forgive me for talking about myself, I probably talked too much, but just after I was ordained, so it's just 45 years ago, I went through a really dark period when for a variety of reasons I wondered if I was a Christian.

You know, can you imagine that? Me standing up every Sunday morning to preach and wondering if I'm a Christian. There you are, but that's what it was like. And I listened to sermons on assurance and read good books, but my doubts wouldn't go away.

And then I went to a conference and the theme of the conference was justification by faith in Christ alone, by grace alone. And I also read a book about justification by a man called James Buchanan, who in 1847 succeeded Thomas Chalmers, as the professor of systematic theology in New College Edinburgh, which was part of the Free Church College at that time.

And the focus of that conference and that book on what Jesus had done and what his death had achieved on my behalf, it was that that lifted me out of my swamp of doubt and set my feet on the rock of God's love.

[35 : 08] And for me it was exactly as how Paul puts it in Romans 8 32, the place to regain spiritual balance and get back the absolute certainty of assurance of salvation is at the cross.

So if you're experiencing doubts about your assurance tonight, it can be the same for you. Look outside of yourself.

The whole culture of today says look into yourself and find the answer. That's the last thing you need to do. you need to look outside of yourself. You need to look away from your feelings, your circumstances, your failures, your achievement, your past, your experiences.

You need to look to Jesus and you need to survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died. And it is there that doubts about your assurance of salvation will wither.

And those of you who are gardeners know that things wither gradually. They don't wither instantaneously, but they'll wither at the cross. And there at the cross, absolute certainty that you're a Christian and will arrive safely to heaven will grow.

[36 : 29] So folks, get your eyes off yourself. Fix them on Jesus. And don't take your eyes of Jesus until that day you see him face to face.

And on that day all your worries will be gone. as