

INTRODUCTION

So Much at Stake

After receiving a Bible from a Christian businessman following a show, magician and atheist Penn Jillette of Penn & Teller aired a podcast entitled “A Gift of a Bible.” In it, he said,

If you believe that there’s a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell, or not getting eternal life, or whatever, and you think that it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward...how much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed beyond the shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you, and you didn’t believe it—as that truck was bearing down on you there’s a certain point where I tackle you. And this is *more important* than that.¹

Is it possible that there’s a truck bearing down on you or on someone you love, and you or they don’t realize it?

It can be socially awkward to raise that kind of question with someone who’s a professing Christian, but Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 7:21). There will be those who are surprised to hear those seven words you never want to hear: “I never knew you; depart from me” (Matt. 7:23).

Amy Carmichael wrote about “a false suavity” that

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holds us back. “We are so afraid to offend, so afraid of stark truth that we write delicately, not honestly.”²

The great burden of my heart is that you or your loved ones not be on the receiving end of those terrible seven words. It’s easy to live as if there’s always going to be another day, yet one day this life will be over for each of us. I want heaven to be packed with my friends, your friends, and you.

The Bible gives us many tests that can be used to determine if a profession of faith is real. Paul said, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor. 13:5). Since God’s Word is the final authority, we’ll go through a series of scriptural tests to determine what true faith looks like. I’ll also share stories of people whose lives have been transformed by the gospel.

My greatest desire in writing this book has been that it would be a true reflection of the heart of God for the glory of God. It has been written in love and with a sense of urgency. There’s so much at stake. Don’t wait until death to find out if you got it right.

Denise Wilson

CHAPTER ONE

The Christian Home Syndrome

*Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord,"
will enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Matthew 7:21

The sermon ended, and the preacher closed with these words: "All you have to do is pray this simple prayer, and your name will be written in the Lamb's Book of Life." Then he led in a variation of the sinner's prayer:

Dear Lord, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe you died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite you to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow you as my Lord and Savior. In your name, amen.

Most children who grow up in the church (as I did) are given multiple opportunities to pray similar prayers. Often the invitation to ask Jesus into your heart is prefaced with, "Do you want to go to heaven?"

Who doesn't want to go to heaven? Most children, when encouraged to repeat back words that are parroted to them, will comply. I've lost count of the number of times I prayed the sinner's prayer as a child. After a while, I recall I would end my prayer with these words: "This time, I really mean it!"

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Perhaps you can relate.

Despite repeating all those prayers, I believe I wasn't truly born again until I was fourteen. It happened while I was attending youth camp at Camp Medeba, a Christian camp in Haliburton, Ontario. It was then that I realized I needed to make a choice, and I decided to follow Christ. My memories are unclear as to the when and how. I just know I've always looked back on that summer as the beginning of my relationship with Jesus. I remember no specific prayer or date, but I do know my life began to change.

Before this, I was a somewhat typical church kid. I had lots of Bible knowledge, knew the "way of salvation," and had a fairly clean facade. But after camp that summer, a strong desire developed in me to please the Lord and to share him with others. My beliefs slipped down from my head to my heart and became personal. It wasn't just that "all have sinned," but that *I* had sinned. Jesus didn't just die for the world; he died for me. I needed saving, and I embraced Jesus as my Savior and Lord.

It's easy to assume that good kids from Christian homes are saved, since many of them know all the right words to say and many live moral lives. But as my father used to say, "God doesn't have any grandchildren." Everyone must come to God on their own. My parents' faith could never save me.

The Boy Who Couldn't Get Saved

The following true story first came to me via my mother, who lives in Northern Ireland. Simon and his father later wrote out their testimonies and sent them to me.

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Simon was born in Northern Ireland to a loving Christian family who taught him from an early age to love the Lord and to follow him. He was that kid who always knew the answers in Sunday school. Whenever an invitation was given to accept Christ, Simon was sure to respond, since he was never sure his previous prayers had worked.

He remembers telling his friend Andrew, on the playground in primary school, how he needed to accept Christ as Lord and Savior.

In the seventh grade, he drew a line on a piece of paper. That line represented salvation. Despite having previously prayed to accept Jesus, he knew he was on the wrong side of that line.

He sometimes tried to make himself feel emotional in church because he'd heard testimonies of people crying and falling on their knees and accepting Christ. Simon tried to muster up those feelings, but they wouldn't come, so he concluded that it just wasn't the right time.

One day when he was twelve, after praying the prayer yet again, he hoped it was real this time and decided to tell his parents he'd become a Christian, knowing it would make them happy. He'd done everything the preacher said to do, and he hoped there would be a change in his life.

As he entered high school, it soon became apparent that nothing had changed in Simon's life. He'd heard how God works in the life of a believer, but he didn't see that as a reality in his life. He had no desire to further his relationship with the Lord.

At this point Simon genuinely concluded that he wasn't saved. He'd tried everything—saying the exact words the

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preacher said, working up tears—yet he felt no change in his life. He felt hopeless and empty.

He began to indulge in sin with little or no effect on his conscience. As he sat in the back of the church one evening, he felt resentment toward the narrow-minded Christians around him. Shaking his head, he thought, *These people are so blind*. He didn't realize it was he who was blind.

Simon loved the world—popularity, girls, and success—and he was leading a double life. His family and those in the church saw him active in church activities and Bible studies. He gave them no reason to question his salvation.

During his final year of high school, he seemed to have the ideal life. He had a girlfriend and had been accepted into four different universities to study medicine. Yet inside, he'd never felt emptier or more alone.

His girlfriend at the time was a Christian. One day Simon reluctantly went with her to a Christian concert. Between one of the songs at the concert, a band member said, "Before the throne of God, you will stand."

Simon couldn't get those words out of his head. He knew they were true and that someday he would stand before God and give account. He went home feeling very emotional and went straight to bed. The phrase *Just believe and receive* kept going through his mind.

For the first time in his life, Simon didn't have to muster up the emotion. Genuine conviction came upon him. In simple faith, he repented of his sins and was born again.

This time he knew his salvation was real! The proof was that he began to hate sin and pursue righteousness.

At first, Simon kept his salvation to himself, since his family thought he was already saved.

In September 2016, he started medical school at

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Queen's University in Belfast. On Friday afternoons, after his week of classes ended, Simon's father would pick him up to take him home for the weekend. During those car rides, Simon's dad began to notice a change in Simon's personality, demeanor, and conversation. On one of those Friday afternoons, Simon's father remarked, "Simon, you've changed."

His sister was in the car, so Simon just smiled and said, "Dad, I'll tell you about it another time."

That time finally came several weeks later, when Simon and his dad were alone in the car. Simon's dad turned to him and said, "Son, you were going to explain how this change in your life has come about."

Simon was silent for a bit as he searched for words to tell what had happened. He wondered whether his dad would be disappointed in him for having lived a lie for so long. When Simon finally got the words out, he explained that he'd been saved some five months earlier.

Rather than being disappointed, his father had nothing but thankfulness to God for his mercy and grace toward his son. He realized his son had been in danger all those years without knowing it.

Before that year was out, Simon was baptized, publicly professing his faith in the Lord.



How easy it is for kids growing up in Christian homes to have heads full of knowledge and hearts that have never been transformed by the Holy Spirit.

The sinner's prayer is the most common method today for leading a person to Christ. Many look back on that

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prayer as the time they gave their life to Jesus. But is every child or adult who has prayed the sinner's prayer actually saved?

I would contend that no one is saved by praying the sinner's prayer. Before you protest too loudly, let me explain. It's not the prayer that saves, although someone praying the prayer may get saved.

King David said, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer" (Ps. 19:14). The words of our mouth should echo what's going on in our hearts, but that isn't always the case.

When someone has repeated the sinner's prayer, the person sharing the gospel with them will sometimes add this qualifier: "If you were sincere, then your sins are forgiven, and you are on your way to heaven." On the surface, that sounds like a reasonable thing to tell a person, but since when has sincerity been a determiner of truth? The world is filled with sincere people, many of them sincerely wrong or deceived. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Feelings can't always be trusted in an emotionally charged moment.

You may be thinking, *But I was saved while repeating a sinner's prayer.* That may well be, but it was despite the prayer, not because of the prayer. No one has ever been saved, or ever will be saved, apart from the conviction of sin, repentance, and true faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 2009, Paul Washer preached a message called "Examine Yourself" in which he said,

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I have found that there is something quite amazing among parents—that if they can get some sort of a claim out of their children that they profess faith in Jesus Christ, they seem to hold on to that, and it gives them assurance and joy, and it seems that they're bothered any time someone would come and question that claim. It seems we would rather hold on to a false hope than to hear the truth.¹

A friend told me recently how her well-meaning mother-in-law had written a letter to the family, expressing her concern for the salvation of the grandkids. While deeply concerned for the spiritual state of the grandkids, she also mentioned how she didn't need to worry about her own adult children since they had made professions of faith as children. Some of them show no fruit of true conversion in their lives, yet their earlier profession gave her peace.

Too much emphasis today is on a prayer, and not enough emphasis on our lifestyles. While we aren't saved by our works, how we live is an indicator of true spiritual life.

Nowhere in Scripture do we find examples of people coming to Christ by praying a sinner's prayer. I believe this method of evangelism is partially responsible for an epidemic in our churches. So many believe themselves to be saved based on a prayer they spoke. If all you have to do is repeat some simple words, then why did Jesus tell us that entering the kingdom of God is hard and that the road is narrow and there are few who find it? (Mark 10:23; Matt. 7:14).

REMEMBER

We aren't saved by repeating a prayer. No one has ever been saved, or ever will be saved, apart from the conviction of sin, repentance, and true faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ask Yourself

1. What elements of a prayer to accept Christ do you think are essential?
2. If you prayed a prayer to accept Christ, did your life change afterward?
3. How did your life change after you professed faith?
4. Think about 2 Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." Does this describe your experience?
5. Do you believe that how we live is an indicator of true spiritual life? If so, why?