

Testimony

Joel Hovey's Personal Testimony

Sinner's Prayer Messed Me Up

I was only four years old in 1974 when I first recall being told that I needed to be saved. I had heard that I was a lost sinner, and warned that I must be saved or suffer the judgment of God for my sins in the lake of fire for all eternity.

AFRAID OF THE RAPTURE

What had struck fear into my young heart most of all was the thought of being separated from my parents, when Jesus would come again. I began to have nightmares that my parents were whisked away, and I was left alone. For years I had the same terrible dreams of being left behind. The dreams were so real that they began to affect even my waking hours. I could never be left alone or I would begin to panic. On some occasions when separated from my parents I was sure that the Rapture had taken place. On the nights when I would awake from my dreams, I would walk softly into my parent's bedroom to see if they were still there.

A MISGUIDED PRAYER AT AGE FOUR

Frightened as I was, I knew that I had to do something. I knew that all would be well if I could just somehow become saved. I would no longer worry about being abandoned and perishing in fire. I was determined to find out what I had to do in order to get saved. Somewhere along the course of my searching for this answer I was told, "You need to ask Jesus into your heart." As I thought about what had been told me, I went into a room alone. I got down on my knees and prayed for the first time in my life, "Jesus, please come into my heart."

PRAYER STUMBLER AND CONFUSED ME

Despite my prayer, I continued to have the same fears of being left behind throughout my childhood, and with them doubts that I had been truly saved. I wondered if I had said the right words, believed hard enough, or been in the right place when I asked. "What ifs" continued to plague my young mind, so that I could not shake my uncertain feelings. This simple prayer had by now utterly consumed me with worry and frustration. The prospect of salvation was growing more complicated and it did not seem to make sense.

As I grew older, I still longed for a salvation free from fear and doubt. Over the course of my teenage years I would plead with the Lord to come into my heart, using the same prayer I used when I was four. New doubts arose. Was I sincere, was I good enough, and did God care? Many times I would break down into tears, having become frustrated with my doubts and weary of my petitions. I would remember the first prayer and the next, until the amount of times I had prayed could not be numbered, but instead blurred into an agonizing collection of innumerable, doubted prayers. "Why is it so hard? What am I doing wrong?" I asked, as I began to question myself and to doubt God.

CLEAR GOSPEL COMES MY WAY

When I was ten years old I was brought under the sound of the gospel for the first time. The words of truth were faithfully preached to me from the Word of God. I was told of my condition before God, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23. I was earnestly told of God's love for me by the giving of His Son for my sins, "But God demonstrated His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8. I was honestly warned, "He that believes on the Son has everlasting life: and he that believes not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abides on him." John 3:36

BLINDED BY THE BLIND

Unfortunately, I did not heed these wonderful words of life. Instead, I tried to assure myself that I already was saved because I had said those "asking" words. I was misled at a very early age by a blind guide. I was lost and could not see past my "sinner's prayer" to the LORD of life. All truth concerning salvation that I would hear from true Christians would be filtered through the deep mire of those few ignorant words that I had formed so many times before upon my lips. I had a little prayer but I did not have Christ.

AT EIGHTEEN A SENSE OF HOPELESSNESS

By the time I had reached age eighteen, I had come to the point where I tried to push thoughts of God out of my mind. I saw salvation as an agonizing puzzle that I could not put together, so complex was it to me, and so painful to reflect upon. If anyone asked me if I was saved, I answered in the affirmative, but deep down I felt as though I was lying. I began to wonder if others had the same doubts that I had, but I would not dare speak of it to anyone, not even my parents or the people at church. “Maybe I will never be saved,” I thought bitterly.

A NEW LIFE IN THE NAVY

Following high school, I enlisted in the Navy. It seemed that all my cares and fears were left far behind as I traveled overseas thousands of miles away from home. I was free, had new friends, a new home, and plenty of adventure to keep me occupied. Life no longer seemed complicated.

From the start I lived each day to its fullest, hung out with the guys, drank, and did whatever it took to have fun. There was an entire world to explore, with endless wonderful adventures. I was blissfully distracted from my soul’s terrible fears of a lost and painful eternity.

STAYING HIGH BECAME MY LIFE PURPOSE

After finishing four years of active service, I was far from the former soul-searching child I had once been. Gradually my attitude, language, and appetite for fun had all changed dramatically. My friends, too, had changed, and I no longer enjoyed spending time with the guys, or even going out on dates. I had one purpose in my life – to stay high. My body changed. My clothes no longer fit me as I began to lose many pounds. I could no longer tolerate public places, and stayed home most of the time surrounded by my associates and so called friends. My natural affections that I had once possessed for family and friends were gone. I no longer needed them. I had something else instead – addiction.

STILL ALIVE AT 27

At the age of twenty-seven, I was surprised that I was still alive. My habits had grown more expensive, I was in pursuit of that first-time high feeling. I was living on the verge of catastrophe. I began to get in fights; my life was in a state of perpetual jeopardy because of my declining lifestyle. I could no longer imagine a future for myself and I felt that it was only a matter of time before I would die a young man.

As I contemplated that my days were numbered, I did not want to wait for death. Instead, I wanted to meet death before enduring any more of life’s disappointments. I had by now pushed away all who ever cared about me. Those who knew me were afraid to be around me, and I was beginning to become deeply depressed about it. I was helplessly in the grip of my addiction. I could not turn from it. I was controlled by it. I would die by it. My life was spinning fast out of control.

LYING FACE DOWN ON DIRTY CARPET

It was the late morning on sixteenth day of November 1997. I had taken more than my usual amount of drugs the night before. I was lying on the dirty carpet, flat on my belly. I had no more drugs and reality was beginning to take hold of me. With no will to move, I didn’t want to face even one more day of life. I wanted to be done with it. Today, I thought, would be a good day to end my pain. It would be so easy. I knew just what to do.

As I lay there trying to put closure to my life, my thoughts were arrested by a thought. “Am I saved?” I groaned inwardly. I could not ignore the fear that was beginning to well up deep within my soul. “Where will I be one moment after death?” My heart began to pound as I realized for me it could only be hell. There was no need to lie to myself any longer. I didn’t know what it was to be saved. I was a sinner headed for hell and ultimately the lake of fire. I was lost and perishing. I rolled over onto my back, hot tears springing up. “My sins! Oh, my awful sins!” I yearned to know them forgiven.

CRIED OUT TO GOD

It was when I realized my lost condition and where I was going that I cried out to God, “God, please save me!” As I lay there looking up at the ceiling, I recalled John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life.” There it was! God

loved me so much that He gave His only Son to go to the cross for me! God meant for me to have faith in His Son that I might have what I wanted more than anything at that moment, forgiveness.

There was no more question of “What ifs” in my mind. I simply believed in the Son, and knew from that moment on that it was through Him and in Him, that I had salvation. That morning when I got up off that floor I was a truly happy man, a changed man, a forgiven man. From that day until now I have not touched drugs. God helped me overcome my appetite for all drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. My new life by grace began, I was born again and my life was irrevocably changed.

God spoke to me that morning through His Word. He answered my earnest cry by revealing to me His dear Son. Today I am reminded of the Apostle Paul’s words to Timothy his own son in the faith, “And that from a child you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” 2 Timothy 3:15, I had memorized the words of the Lord in John 3:16 from early childhood.

A SINNER’S REAL PRAYER

I know now that it was not possible to be saved through speaking out the vain words of a “sinner’s prayer.” It is only by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and not in what I may say or do. I believe with all my heart that God made known to me His provision at just the right time in my life. A time and place not expected, yet a time most wanted, desperately needed, and gladly received. Yes, it was that very moment when I saw myself as God had always seen and known me to be, a powerless, miserable, lost, hell-deserving sinner in need of a Savior, in need of His Son.

How wonderful to know forgiveness, having the eyes of my understanding opened by the light of God’s Word that shone the way through the thick darkness where I stood in my sin. Today I have the peace of God which surpasses all understanding rather than fearfully waiting for God’s eternal judgment and fiery indignation. I have obtained the promise of everlasting life with the Lord in His glory, instead of the eternal wages of sin by complete separation from God in the Lake of Fire. In the language of the Bible, I have been made a joint heir with Christ in God, having all my sin taken out of the way by faith in him.

THE JOY OF GOD’S SALVATION

The Greatest aspect of my salvation is that which I never even imagined: a Savior in the Glory, with the prints of the nails in His hands and feet, waiting to bring me unto Himself. My new life now has clear meaning, for I am no longer a stranger to God, to be occupied with self and sin. I am now a worshiper of God. This is my eternal joy and high calling.

I am awaiting my Savior’s return, when He will change this vile sin-loving flesh into a glorious new body that is made fit to be in His presence. This corruption will take on incorruption; my mortality will take on immortality. It is this sure hope that I await in wonder and expectation, never to wander again in sin, but to bring delight to the One who loved me and gave Himself for me.

I have been brought from a life of slavery to sin by a new and living way. I am no longer my own I am bought with a price, the precious blood of Christ shed on the cross for me. I can find no more pleasure in a life of sin, for each time I do for a moment stray and go my own way I feel alone and far from God.

LIVING FOR CHRIST IS MY DESIRE

I have learned that fulfilling the lusts of the flesh robs me of that precious fellowship I have with God. Each time I have taken my eye as it were from my Savior, I find myself so suddenly far away. Each sin I have committed since being saved has brought me bitter disappointment in myself, as I am aware that I have brought dishonor to my Lord. The Spirit of God that dwells within me urges me to deny myself that I may follow Him. As I wait for my Lord, I enjoy His close presence as I allow Him to lead me. When I make myself available to Him, He works with me to show more of Himself, that my joy may be full. I live by Him, too Him, and through Him. His Word is my guide, full assurance, instruction, and there He speaks to me all His love and will.

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Romans 6:23. A sinner must believe (have faith) in the Son to receive salvation, to be born again, this time into God’s family. “But as many as received Him to them gave He power to become the sons of God” John 1:12.

DO YOU HAVE A RITUAL PRAYER OR A REAL CHRIST?

Many in the world have put their faith as I did in the ritual of the sinner's prayer, or have "given their lives to Jesus," in the religious sense, never realizing that they are lost, that their sins separate them from God's acceptance. They do not know that the Bible says so plainly that we are altogether unfit, unworthy, and so unprofitable that God does not see within us any redeeming quality or merit in or of ourselves. They find their own form of merit instead of accepting that the Lord Jesus has given His own life for them at the cross for their sins.

Christ by offering Himself a spotless sacrifice for sin, (because in Him was no sin) was the only possible way that God could pardon sinners without compromising who He is: the HOLY GOD. This is God's grace, and many continue to pass by it looking for some other way. "For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Ephesians 2:8-9

Salvation for the guilty sinner was accomplished when Christ shed his blood as an offering for sin on the cross. "...the blood of Jesus Christ His (God's) Son cleanses us from all sin." 1 John 1:7 He died for me! Glory be to God and to His Son; I am a sinner saved by grace!

Naught have I gotten but what I received;
Grace hath bestowed it since I have believed;
Boasting excluded, pride I abase;
I'm only a sinner saved by grace!

CHORUS

*Only a sinner saved by grace!
Only a sinner saved by grace!
This is my story, to God be the glory,
I'm only a sinner saved by grace.*

Once I was foolish, and sin ruled my heart,
Causing my footsteps from God to depart;
Jesus has found me, happy my case,
I now am a sinner saved by grace!

Tears unavailing, no merit had I;
Mercy had saved me, or else I must die;
Sin had alarmed me, fearing God's face;
But now I'm a sinner saved by grace!

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