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## **BAPTIZED FOUR TIMES**

**I**f there were a *Guinness Book of World Records* record for “amount of times having asked Jesus into your heart,” I’m pretty sure I would hold it.

By the time I reached the age of eighteen I had probably “asked Jesus into my heart” five thousand times. I started somewhere around age four when I approached my parents one Saturday morning asking how someone could know that they were going to heaven. They carefully led me down the “Romans Road to Salvation,” and I gave Jesus His first invitation into my heart.

Both my parents and my pastor felt confident of my sincerity and my grasp on the details, and so I was baptized. We wrote the date in my Bible and I lived in peace about the matter for nearly a decade.

One Friday night during my ninth grade year, however, my Sunday school teacher told us that according to Matthew 7:21–23 many people who think they know Jesus will awaken on that final day to the reality that He never really knew them. Though they had prayed a prayer to receive Jesus, they had never really been born again and never taken the

lordship of Jesus seriously. They would, my teacher explained, be turned away from heaven into everlasting punishment with the disastrous words, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”

I was terrified. Would I be one of those ones turned away? Had I really been “sorry” for my sins at age five? And could I *really* have known what I was doing *at age four*?

So I asked Jesus to come into my heart again, this time with a resolve to be much more intentional about my faith. I requested re-baptism, and gave a very moving testimony in front of our congregation about getting serious with God.

*I walked a lot of aisles during those days. I think I've been saved at least once in every denomination.*

Case closed, right? Wrong.

Not long after that I found myself asking again: Had I *really* been sorry enough for my sin this time around? I'd see some people weep rivers of tears when they got saved, but I hadn't. Did that mean I was not really sorry? And there were a few sins I seemed to fall back into over and over again, no matter

how many resolutions I made to do better. Was I *really* sorry for those sins? Was that prayer a moment of total surrender? Would I have died for Jesus at that moment if He'd asked?

So I prayed the sinner's prayer again. And again. And again. Each time trying to get it right, each time really trying to mean it. I would have a moment when I felt like I got it right, followed by a temporary euphoria. But it would fade quickly and I'd question it all again. And so I'd pray again.

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Because I understood baptism to be a post-salvation confession of faith, each time I gained a little assurance, I felt like I should get re-baptized. Four times, total. Honestly, it got pretty embarrassing. I became a staple at our church's baptism services. I got my own locker in the baptismal changing area.

It was a wretched experience. My spiritual life was characterized by cycles of doubt, aisle-walking, and submersion in water. I could not find the assurance of salvation no matter how often, or how sincerely, I asked Jesus into my heart.

I used to think I was alone in this struggle, but as I've shared my story over the years so many have come forward to tell me that my experience was theirs (usually minus the baptisms and the OCD tendencies) that I've concluded this problem is epidemic in the church.

Maybe that's why you've picked up this book. Maybe, despite your repeated sinner's prayers, you're still wondering if God will, in the end, open up the gates of heaven to you. You hope that He will, but enough doubt lingers to rob you of that elusive peace others seem to have.

Or maybe you have no idea whether you're going to heaven, and you are curious as to how anyone could possibly know something like that. Or maybe you wonder whether somebody who sins as much as you could ever be forgiven. Maybe you fear that you've said "no" to God so many times that you've forfeited any chance of salvation.

This book is written for all those groups, because they are all asking the same, simple question: *How can anyone know, beyond all doubt, that they are saved?*

### **The Other Side of the Problem: The Falsely Assured**

This is a very serious question, not just because it keeps some people in a state of fear, but because others are getting it dead wrong.

Jesus warned that there are a vast number of people who seem assured of a salvation they don't actually possess. My Sunday school teacher was telling us the truth: according to Matthew 7, Jesus will turn away "many" on that last day who thought they belonged to Him. There's no doubt that many of those will have prayed a sinner's prayer.

One afternoon I was at a local basketball court and started a pickup game with a guy I'd seen there a few times. He was quite a character—he cursed like a sailor and had so many tattoos on his body I wasn't sure what the actual color of his skin was. He boasted continually about how many girls he was sleeping with. He wasn't the kind of guy you'd suspect knew his way around the Bible.

As we played our game, I began to share my story of how I came to Christ. About three sentences into it, he stopped, grabbed the ball, and said, "Dude, are you trying to *witness* to me?"

Surprised he even knew the term *witness*, I said, "Uhhh . . . well . . . yes."

He said, "That's awesome. No one has tried to witness to me in a long time. . . . But don't worry about me. I went to youth camp when I was thirteen and I asked Jesus to come into my heart. And I was legit. I became a super-Christian. I went to youth group every week, I did the "true love waits" commitment thing, I memorized verses, and I went on mission trips. I even led other friends to Jesus.

"About two years after that, however, I 'discovered' *sex*. And I didn't like the idea of a god telling me who I could have sex with. So I decided to put God on hold for a while, and after a while just quit believing in Him altogether. I'm a happy atheist now."

He then added: "But here's what's awesome: the church I grew up in was Southern Baptist, and they taught eternal security—that means 'once saved, always saved.' By the way, aren't you a Baptist?"

\*\*\*\*awkward silence from me\*\*\*\*

He went on, “That means that my salvation at age thirteen still holds, even if I don’t believe in God anymore now. ‘Once saved, always saved,’ right? That means that even if you’re right, and God exists and Jesus is the only way, I’m safe! So either way, works out great for me. . . . If I’m right, then I haven’t wasted my life curbing my lifestyle because of a fairy tale. OK, it’s your shot.”

What do you say to a person like that? Consider the facts: He had indeed prayed to ask Jesus into his heart, and all indications were that he was very sincere. And it’s very possible for people to come to faith very early in life—Jesus, in fact, told adults to become like children if they want to be saved! Furthermore, this guy showed immediate “fruit” after his conversion, getting excited about Jesus and being busy for Him. And the Bible does indeed teach eternal security—once saved, always saved. So was he right? Can he, because he made a decision at some point in the past, live with the assurance that he is saved forever, regardless of how he lives now?

Here’s the short answer, one I’ll spend the rest of the book unpacking: *he cannot*. Salvation does indeed happen in a moment, and once you are saved you are always saved. The mark, however, of someone who is saved is that they maintain their confession of faith until the end of their lives. Salvation is not a prayer you pray in a one-time ceremony and then move on from; salvation is a posture of repentance and faith that you begin in a moment and maintain for the rest of your life.

In His parable about the different types of soil, Jesus spoke of a group who

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heard His word and made an initial, encouraging response of belief, only to fade away over time. These are those, Jesus explained, who hear the gospel and respond positively to it—i.e., pray the prayer, walk the aisle, get baptized, or do whatever new converts in your church do. They remain in the church for a period of time. But they do not endure when the sun of persecution comes out and will not in the end be saved (Luke 8:13).

The apostle John described a large group of people who “believed in His name” but to whom Jesus would not commit Himself because “He knew all men” (John 2:23–25). He knew their belief was a temporary fad that would not endure the test of time and trial.

These sobering stories teach us that many are headed into eternal judgment under the delusion of going to heaven. They were told that if they prayed the prayer, Jesus would save them, seal them, and never leave nor forsake them. They prayed that prayer and lived under the delusion they will go to heaven when they die. My blood runs cold just thinking about them.

A 2011 Barna study<sup>1</sup> shows that nearly half of all adults in America have prayed such a prayer, and subsequently believe they are going to heaven, though many of them rarely, if ever, attend a church, read the Bible personally, or have lifestyles that differ in any significant way from those outside the church. If the groups described in Matthew 7 and Luke 8 are not referring to them, I don’t know to whom they could be referring.

The Enemy—one of whose names in Scripture is “the Deceiver”—loves to keep truly saved believers unsure of their salvation because he knows that if he does they’ll never experience the freedom, joy, and confidence that God wants them to have. But he also loves to keep those on their way to hell deluded into thinking they are on their way to heaven, their consciences immunized from Jesus’ pleas to repent.

## An Unhelpful Gospel Cliché?

I have begun to wonder if both problems, needless doubting and false assurance, are exacerbated by the clichéd ways in which we (as evangelicals) speak about the gospel. Evangelical shorthand for the gospel is to “ask Jesus into your heart,” or “accept Jesus as Lord and Savior,” or “give your heart to Jesus.” These phrases may not be wrong in themselves, but the Bible never tells us, specifically, to seek salvation in those ways. The biblical summation of a saving response toward Christ is “repentance” and “belief” in the gospel.

“Belief,” as I’ll explain later, means acknowledging that God told the truth about Jesus, namely that He is Lord and that He has finished forever the work of our salvation.

“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” (John 3:36)

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” . . . “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:30–31 HCSB)

To him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. (Rom. 4:5)

If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. (Rom. 10:9–10)

*Repentance* (which we’ll also get into more deeply later) means “acting” on that belief. Repentance means reversing your direction based on

who you understand Jesus to be. It was the first response Jesus called for in His preaching of the gospel (Mark 1:15), and what Paul said God had commanded all men everywhere to do now that Jesus had been resurrected (Acts 17:30). Apart from repentance there is no salvation.

You can “ask Jesus into your heart” without repenting and believing, and you can repent and believe without articulating a request for Jesus to come into your heart.

Repentance and faith are heart postures you take toward the finished work of Christ. You might express the beginning of that posture in a prayer. But don’t make the mistake of equating that prayer with the posture. The sinner’s prayer is not a magic incantation or a recipe you follow to get a salvation cake. The real stuff—the stuff that matters—is the posture of repentance and faith behind the words you speak. The prayer is good only insofar as it verbalizes the posture.

Placing an overemphasis on phrases like “ask Jesus into your heart” gives assurance to some who shouldn’t have it and keeps it from some who should.

## Clarifying Two Things I Am Not Saying

### *I’m Not Saying “Asking Jesus into Your Heart Is Heretical”*

When we are “saved,” Jesus does indeed “come into our hearts,” at least in a manner of speaking (see, for example, Rom. 8:9–11; Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27–28; Gal. 2:20). But there are lots of other things that happen at the moment of salvation, too: we are washed in Jesus’ blood, sealed by His Spirit, guaranteed a dwelling place in the new heaven, grafted into the vine, have our names written in the Lamb’s Book of Life, Satan’s claims against us are nullified, etc. *Asking Jesus to do any one of these for us at the moment of salvation is not heretical, but by focusing on any one of them we run the risk of obscuring the one thing necessary for salvation—a*

*posture of repentance toward and faith in His finished work (Mark 1:15; John 3:36; Rom. 4:5; 10:9–10).*

For example, if we go around telling people that if they want to be saved they should ask Jesus to “begin construction on my home in heaven” (John 14:1–3), or “put my name in the Lamb’s Book of Life” (Rev. 21:27), that would not be wrong, per se, but it could be misleading. People with no remorse for their sin might still be excited about Jesus providing them with an eternal vacation home or getting their name onto some heavenly honor-roll list.

That said, “asking Jesus into your heart” is among the more biblical summations of salvation, if the concepts behind the words are understood. “Heart” in the Bible (Prov. 4:23) is the seat of the person. Having Jesus come into your heart, in that sense, would mean that He fuses Himself into the deepest part of who you are—that you

rest your hopes upon His righteousness, lean on Him for strength, and submit to His Lordship at your core. God fusing Himself to the believer at salvation is what the church fathers called *theosis* (translated *divinization*), whereby Christ literally unites His Spirit with ours (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 2:20). Christ is, in that sense, “in our hearts.”

Ultimately, my concern is not on what words or actions we might use to express our faith in Christ but that we don’t substitute those words or actions for repentance and faith. “Praying the sinner’s prayer” has become something like a Protestant ritual we have people go through to gain entry into heaven. As “gospel shorthand,” it presents salvation as a

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transaction one conducts with Jesus and moves on from rather than the beginning of a posture we take toward the finished work of Christ and maintain for the rest of our lives.

*I'm Not Saying We Should Hesitate Pressing for a Decision When We Present the Gospel*

Preachers in the revivalist traditions called for sinners to respond immediately to the gospel by walking an aisle or asking Jesus into

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your heart. While this may not be my preferred technique, the gospel is indeed an invitation and each time it is preached that invitation ought to be extended in some form (e.g., John 1:12; Matt. 11:28; Rev. 22:17). In fact, if we do not urge the hearer to respond personally to God's offer in Christ, I do not believe we have fully preached the gospel.

Calling on sinners to seek salvation on the spot is not something invented by the Finney-Revivalist tradition. Throughout history, even some of the most Reformed evangelists have invited hearers to pray a sinner's prayer.

For example, Charles Spurgeon ended one of his sermons by saying,

Before you leave this place, breathe an earnest prayer to God, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner. Lord, I need to be saved. Save me. I call upon thy name." Join with me in prayer at this moment, I entreat you. Join with me while I put words into your mouths, and speak them on your behalf—"Lord, I am guilty. I deserve thy wrath. Lord, I cannot save myself. . . . I cast myself wholly upon thee, O Lord. I trust the

blood and righteousness of thy dear Son; I trust thy mercy, and thy love, and thy power, as they are revealed in him. I dare to lay hold upon this word of thine, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Lord, save me tonight, for Jesus' sake. Amen.”<sup>2</sup>

George Whitefield extended the same kind of invitations.<sup>3</sup> John Bunyan described one of his characters, “Hopeful,” being led through a sinner’s prayer by another, “Faithful.”<sup>4</sup> The apostle Peter invited three thousand people to come forward for baptism in response to his first sermon (Acts 2:38). Ananias led Paul to call on God’s name for forgiveness of sins after their first conversation (Acts 22:16).

So I am not, in any way, trying to discourage calling for a decision when we present the gospel. I am saying that above all else we must emphasize the absolute indispensability of repentance and faith for salvation.

*Salvation is not given because you prayed a prayer correctly, but because you have leaned the hopes of your soul on the finished work of Christ.*

I am also saying to those who, like me, have asked Jesus into their hearts thousands of times, that they can “stop asking Jesus into their heart” and start resting in the finished work of Christ. Salvation comes not because you prayed a prayer correctly, but because you have leaned the hopes of your soul on the finished work of Christ.

Shorthand phrases for the gospel can serve a good purpose, insofar as everyone knows exactly what they mean. But in light of the fact that so many in our country seem assured of a salvation they give no evidence of having because of a prayer they prayed, and so many others are unable to find assurance no matter how often they pray that prayer, I believe

it is time to put the shorthand aside and preach simply salvation by repentance toward God and faith in the finished work of Christ. Or, at least, to be careful to explain exactly what we mean when we call for a response to the gospel.

### **The Path Ahead**

Here's where we'll go from here. First, I will show you why assurance is so important and how we know God wants us to possess it. Then we will look at the core of the gospel message, Christ's substitutionary work on our behalf. After that we will take a close look at what the Bible means by words like *belief* and *repentance*. Then we'll try to understand why if "once saved, always saved," the Bible always seems to be warning us that we can lose our salvation. After that we'll consider what the Bible tells us are the evidences that we have really believed, and finally, we'll consider what we should do if we continue to doubt.

My prayer is that by the time we're done, you'll know exactly where you stand with God. I hope to show you how to base your assurance on a promise God gave once for all in Christ and not on the fleeting memory of a prayer you once prayed.

Perhaps you are reading this and already realize that the words you once prayed to God were not accompanied by genuine repentance and faith. Like millions of "Christians," you prayed a prayer, but you have yet to submit to Him as Lord of your life. I would encourage you to settle that now, before we begin this journey. If you are ready to take Jesus seriously, He is ready to share with you the joy He has prepared for you from all eternity (Jer. 29:13).