

SAVE YOURSELF SOME PAIN

Becoming a Christian is the most incredible event that will ever take place in your life. If you have obeyed the gospel by trusting in Jesus Christ, then you have made peace with your Creator. You have found everlasting life! Be assured, God will never leave you nor forsake you. He has brought you this far and He will complete the wonderful work He has begun in you. God knows your every thought, your every care, and your deepest concerns.

Let's look at some of those possible concerns. First, and of primary concern, do you have "assurance" of your salvation? The Bible says to "make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10), so let's go through a short checklist to make sure that you are truly saved:

Are you aware that God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 3:16), and that He died for the sins of the world?

Did you come to the Savior because you knew that you had sinned against God?

Are you convinced that Jesus suffered and died on the cross for your sins, and that He rose again on the third day?

Did you truly repent and put your faith in Jesus?

God acquits us from the Courtroom of Eternal Justice on the grounds that Jesus Christ paid our fine. We are "justified" (made right with God) by His suffering death. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was God's seal of approval signifying that His precious blood was sufficient to pay the fine.

Think of it this way. Imagine you have violated the law and face a \$50,000 fine, which you cannot pay. You tell the judge that you are truly sorry for your crime, but he answers, "You should be sorry; you have broken the law. Now you must pay this fine." He can acquit you only if the fine is paid. If someone else pays your fine for you, then he can let you go.

The reason we need a substitute (a Savior) to pay our "fine" is that we have broken God's moral Law. We can see that we have transgressed this Law by looking at a few of the Ten Commandments: Have you ever told a lie? Have you ever stolen something? Jesus said, "Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Have you ever lusted? If you answered "Yes" to these questions, you admit that you are a lying, thieving adulterer at heart, and you have to face a holy God on Judgment Day! If you have used His name in vain (such as "OMG"), then you are guilty of "blasphemy"—you've substituted God's holy name for a curse word. If you've hated someone, the Bible says that you are a murderer. You have violated God's holy Law and are in big trouble. On Judgment Day, you will be found guilty and end up in Hell. That's why you need the Savior.

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Merely being sorry for your sins, or confessing them to God won't help you. Your fine must be paid, and the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). However, the Bible says that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He is rich in mercy and provided a Savior: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Jesus Christ died on the cross, paying the death penalty for sinners, then He rose from the grave, defeating death. Hundreds of eyewitnesses saw Jesus after His resurrection; it's no fairy tale. Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies about the promised Savior, written in the Holy Scriptures hundreds of years before His birth.

Salvation is a free gift; it cannot be earned by good works or religious rituals. If you repent and place your faith in Jesus Christ alone—the only grounds for forgiveness—God will grant you mercy. If you're not sure of your salvation, read Psalm 51 and make it your own prayer. Then show your gratitude by obeying God's command to be baptized.

Following are several important principles that can save you a great deal of pain.

1. Feeding on the Word— Daily Nutrition

A healthy baby has a healthy appetite. If you have truly been "born" of the Spirit of God, you will have a healthy appetite. The Bible says, "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2). So feed yourself daily without fail. The more you eat, the quicker you will grow, and the less bruising you will have. Speed up the process and save yourself some pain—vow to read God's Word every day, without fail. Job said, "I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:12). Be like Job, and put your Bible before your belly. Say to yourself, "No Bible, no breakfast. No read, no feed." If you do that, God promises that you will be like a fruitful, strong and healthy tree (Psalm 1).

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Each day, find somewhere quiet, and thoroughly soak your soul in the Word of God. There may be times when you read through its pages with great enthusiasm, and other times when it seems dry and even boring. But food profits

your body whether you enjoy it or not. As a child, you no doubt ate desserts with great enthusiasm. Perhaps vegetables weren't so exciting. If you were a normal child, you probably had to be encouraged to eat them at first. Then, as you matured in life, you learned to discipline yourself to eat vegetables. This is because they nourish and strengthen you, even though they may not bring pleasure to your taste buds.

2. Prayer—"Wait for a Minute."

God always answers prayer. Sometimes He says yes; sometimes He says no; and sometimes He says, "Wait for a minute." And since God is outside the dimension of time, to Him a thousand years is no different than a day (2 Peter 3:8)—which could mean a ten-year wait for us. So ask in faith, but rest in peace-filled patience.

Surveys show that more than 90 percent of Americans pray daily. No doubt they pray for health, wealth, happiness, etc. They also pray when Grandma gets sick, so when Grandma doesn't get better (or dies), many end up disillusioned or bitter. This is because they don't understand what the Bible says about prayer. It teaches that, among other things, our sin will keep God from even hearing our prayers (Psalm 66:18), and that if we pray with doubt, we will not get an answer (James 1:6,7). Here's how to be heard:

Pray with faith (Hebrews 11:6).

Pray with clean hands and a pure heart (Psalm 24:3,4).

Pray genuine heartfelt prayers, rather than vain repetitions (Matthew 6:7).

Make sure you are praying to the God revealed in the Holy Scriptures (Exodus 20:3–6).

How do you "pray with faith"? Someone once said to me, "Ray, you're a man of great faith in God," thinking that they were paying me a compliment. But they weren't—the compliment was to God. For example, if I said, "I'm a man of great faith in my doctor," it's actually the doctor I'm complimenting. If I have great faith in him, it means that I see him as being a man of integrity, a man of great ability—that he is trustworthy. I give "glory" to the man through my faith in him. The Bible says that Abraham "did not waver in unbelief at God's promise, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, because he was fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform" (Romans 4:20,21). Abraham was a man of great faith in God. Remember, that is not a compliment to Abraham. He merely caught a glimpse of God's incredible ability, His impeccable integrity, and His wonderful faithfulness to keep every promise He makes. Abraham's faith gave "glory" to a faithful God.

As far as God is concerned, if you belong to Jesus, you are a VIP. You can boldly come before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). You have access to the King because you are the son or daughter of the King. When you were a child, did you have to grovel to get your needs met by your mom or dad? I hope not.

So don't pray, "Oh, God, I hope you will supply my needs." Instead say something like, "Father, thank You that You keep every promise You make. Your Word says that you will supply all my needs according to Your riches in glory in Christ Jesus [Philippians 4:19]. Therefore, I thank You that You will do this thing for my family. I ask this in the wonderful name of Jesus. Amen."

The great missionary Hudson Taylor said, "The prayer power has never been tried to its full capacity. If we want to see Divine power wrought in the place of weakness, failure, and disappointment, let us answer God's standing challenge, 'Call unto me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things of which you know not of'" (Jeremiah. 33:3).

How do you get "clean hands and a pure heart"? Simply by confessing your sins to God, through Jesus Christ, whose blood cleanses us from all our sin (1 John 1:7–9). God will not only forgive your every sin, He promises to forget them (Hebrews 8:12). He will count it as though you had never sinned in the first place. He will make you pure in His sight—sinless. He will even "purge" your conscience, so that you will no longer have a sense of guilt that you sinned. That's why you need to soak yourself in Holy Scripture; read the letters to the churches and see the wonderful things God has done for us through the cross of Calvary. If you don't bother to read the "will," you won't have any idea what has been given to you.

How do you pray "genuine heartfelt prayers"? Simply by keeping yourself in the love of God. If the love of God is in you, you will never pray hypocritical or selfish prayers. Just talk to your heavenly Father as candidly and intimately as a young child, nestled on Daddy's lap, would talk to his earthly father. How would you feel if every day your child pulled out a pre-written statement to dryly recite to you, rather than pouring out the events and emotions of that day? God wants to hear from your heart. And when your prayer life is pleasing to God, He will reward you openly (Matthew 6:6).

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How do you know you're praying to "the God revealed in Scripture"? Study the Bible. Don't accept the image of God portrayed by the world, even though it appeals to the natural mind. A gentle, kind, Santa Claus figure, dispensing good things with no sense of justice or truth, appeals to guilty sinners. Look to the thundering and lightning of Mount Sinai. Gaze at Jesus on the cross of Calvary—hanging in unspeakable agony because of the justice of a holy God. Such thoughts tend to banish idolatry.

3. Fellowship—Flutter by Butterfly

The Bible tells us "not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together" (Hebrews 10:25). One evidence that you have been truly saved is that you will have a love for other Christians (1 John 3:14). You will want to fellowship with them. The adage that "birds of a feather flock together" is true of Christians. You gather together for the breaking of bread (communion), for teaching from the Word, and for fellowship. You share the same inspirations, illuminations, inclinations, temptations, motivations, and perspirations—you are working together for the same thing: the furtherance of the kingdom of God on earth. This is why you attend church—not because you have to, but because you want to.

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Pray about where you should fellowship. Make sure the place you select as your church home calls sin what it is—sin. Do they believe the promises of God? Are they loving? Does the pastor treat his wife with respect? Is he a man of the Word? Does he have a humble heart and a gentle spirit? Listen closely to his teaching. It should glorify God, magnify Jesus, and edify the believer.

Don't become a "spiritual butterfly." If you are flitting from church to church, how will your pastor know what type of food you are digesting? The Bible says that your shepherd is accountable to God for you (Hebrews 13:17), so make yourself known to your pastor. Pray for him regularly. Pray also for his wife, his family, and the church leaders. Being a pastor is no easy task. Most people don't realize how long it takes to prepare a fresh sermon each week. They don't appreciate the time spent in prayer and in the study of the Word. If the pastor repeats a joke or a story, remember, he's human. So give him a great deal of grace and double honor. Never murmur about him. If you don't like something he has said, pray about it, then leave the issue with God. If that doesn't satisfy you, leave the church, rather than divide it through murmuring and complaining. God hates those who cause division among believers (Proverbs 6:16–19).

4. Thanksgiving—Do the Right Thing

For the Christian, every day should be Thanksgiving Day. We should be thankful even in the midst of problems. The apostle Paul said, "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation" (2 Corinthians 7:4). He knew that God was working all things together for his good, even his trials (Romans 8:28).

Problems will come your way. God will see to it personally that you grow as a Christian. He will allow storms in your life in order to send your roots deep into the soil of His Word. We also pray more in the midst of problems. It's been well said that you will see more from your knees than on your tiptoes.

A man once watched a butterfly struggling to get out of its cocoon. In an effort to help it, he took a razor blade and carefully slit the edge of the cocoon. The butterfly escaped from its problem...but immediately died. It is God's way to have the butterfly struggle. It is the struggle that causes its tiny heart to beat fast, sending the life's blood into its wings.

Trials have their purpose. They are a cocoon in which we often find ourselves. They make us struggle—they bring us to our knees. It is there that the life's blood of faith in God helps us spread our wings.

Faith and thanksgiving are close friends. If you have faith in God, you will be thankful because you know His loving hand is upon you, even though you are in a lion's den. That will give you a deep sense of joy, which is the barometer of the depth of faith you have in God. Let me give you an example. Imagine if I said I'd give you one million dollars if you sent me an email. Of course, you don't believe I would do that. But imagine you did, and that you knew 1,000 people who had sent me an email, and everyone received their million dollars—no strings attached. More than that, you actually called me, and I assured you personally that I would keep my word. If you believed me, wouldn't you have joy? If you didn't believe me—no joy. The amount of joy you have would be a barometer of how much you believed my promise.

We have so much for which to be thankful. God has given us "exceedingly great and precious promises" that are more to be desired than gold (2 Peter 1:4). Do yourself a big favor: believe those promises, and thank God continually for them, "that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

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5. Evangelism—Our Most Sobering Task

Late in December 1996, a large family in Los Angeles gathered for a joyous Christmas. There were so many gathered that night, five of the children slept in the converted garage, kept warm during the night by an electric heater placed near the door.

During the early hours of the morning, the heater suddenly burst into flames, blocking the doorway. In seconds the room became a blazing inferno. The frantic 911 call revealed the unspeakable terror as one of the children could be heard screaming, “I’m on fire!” The distraught father rushed into the flames to try to save his beloved children, receiving burns to 50 percent of his body. Tragically, all five children burned to death. They died because steel bars on the windows thwarted their escape. There was only one door, and it was blocked by the flames.

Imagine you are back in time, just minutes before the heater burst into flames. You peer through the darkness at the peaceful sight of five sleeping youngsters, knowing that at any moment the room will erupt into an inferno and burn the flesh of horrified children. Can you in good conscience walk away? No! You must awaken them and warn them to run from that death trap!

The world sleeps peacefully in the darkness of ignorance. There is only one Door by which they may escape death. The steel bars of sin prevent their salvation, and at the same time call for the flames of Eternal Justice. What a fearful thing Judgment Day will be! The fires of the wrath of Almighty God will burn for eternity. The Church has been entrusted with the task of awakening them before it’s too late. We cannot turn our backs and walk away in complacency. Think of how the father ran into the flames. His love knew no bounds. Our devotion to the sober task God has given us will be in direct proportion to our love for the lost. There are few who run headlong into the flames to warn them to flee (Luke 10:2). Please be one of them. We really have no choice. The apostle Paul said, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).

The “Prince of Preachers,” Charles Spurgeon, said, “Have you no wish for others to be saved? Then you are not saved yourself. Be sure of that.” A Christian cannot be apathetic about the salvation of the world. The love of God in him will motivate him to seek and save that which is lost.

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There is nothing more important to you than the salvation of your unsaved friends and family, and you probably have a limited amount of time after your conversion to impact them with the gospel. After their initial shock, they will put you in a neat little ribbon-tied box and keep you at arm’s length. So it’s important that you take advantage of the short time you have while you still have their ears. Put yourself in their position. You know that you have found everlasting life—death has lost its sting! Your joy is unspeakable. But as far as they are concerned, you have been brainwashed and become part of a weird sect. So your loving actions will speak more loudly than ten thousand eloquent sermons. Fervently pray for them, thanking God for their salvation. Let them see your faith. Let them feel your kindness, your genuine love, and your gentleness. Buy gifts for no reason. Do chores when you are not asked to. Go the extra mile.

Although it would be nice to have a loved one say, “Tell me about your faith in Jesus Christ,” that may not happen. You will have to gently and lovingly make an opportunity to speak to them. You may have only one shot, so pray for wisdom and sensitivity to God’s timing.

When sharing the gospel with your loved ones, make sure you use the Law to gently address the conscience and bring the knowledge of sin inoffensively. An effective way to soften the message without compromise is to speak in the “first person” or in testimonial form. Say something like, “I didn’t realize the Bible warns that for every idle word I have spoken, I will have to give an account on Judgment Day. I thought that as long as I believed in God and tried to live a good life, I would go to Heaven when I died. I was so wrong. Jesus said that if I as much as looked with lust, I had committed adultery in my heart, and that there was nothing I could do to wash away my sins. I knew that if God judged me by the Ten Commandments on Judgment Day, I would be guilty, and end up in Hell. It was when I acknowledged my sins that I began to understand why Jesus died. It was to take the punishment for my sins, and the sins of the world.”

Then, depending on the person’s openness, you may ask, “How do you think you will do on Judgment Day, if God judges you by the Ten Commandments?” Keep your cool, or you may end up with a lifetime of regret—believe me. Then share Christ in all of His amazing grace, explaining that if they will repent and believe, God will forgive them. Continue to persevere in prayer for them, that God would open their eyes to the truth.

In the meantime, it is important to realize that we should share our faith with others whenever we can, “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). Perhaps another Christian has prayed earnestly that God would use a faithful witness to speak to his beloved mom or dad, and you are that answer to prayer. You are the true and faithful witness God wants to use.

Keep the fate of the ungodly always before your eyes. Remember that each and every person who dies in his sins has an appointment with the Judge of the Universe. Hell opens wide its terrible jaws. There is no more sobering task than to be entrusted with the gospel of salvation, working with God for the eternal well-being of dying humanity. Have the same attitude as the apostle Paul, who pleaded for prayer for his own personal witness. He asked “that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel,...that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:19,20).