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Joe's Burden for His Family

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It was in the fall of 1987. Esther and I were 21 years old and nine months into our marriage. A few years earlier, we had come to the conclusion that **Jesus alone** could save the human soul with no amount of human effort added.

One Sunday, while Esther's parents were away at church, we packed a few belongings and moved to the city of Ashland, OH, with $600 in our pockets. Jerry and Carol Gess, people we had never met or spoken to before, opened their home to us and helped us get started in the English culture. We needed SS cards, driver's licenses, and jobs.

My parents asked us not to come onto their property or influence my siblings in any way. Dad would occasionally visit and plead with us to reconsider and return to the church of our forefathers. He wrote letters warning us that our marriage would fall apart and our children would stray from God. He was sure it would happen, because in his eyes, we had left the only true church to run with the world. To him, the worldly church allowed sex outside of marriage, accepted divorce and remarriage, went to war, dressed immodestly, and didn't wear head coverings.

We weren't always confident. I was afraid that perhaps Dad was right. Maybe we would lose our marriage or our children. We no longer had the Amish system to guide us or the security we once felt. I remember the day Esther and I realized that we were completely on our own, and if we died, we would not be buried with our family, friends, or church community. By age 24, we had purchased cemetery lots, caskets, and life insurance, just in case something happened to one of us.

Dad's harsh letters came often. Sometimes it would take me weeks to recover from his strong accusations and confident predictions. This drove us to the Bible. For the first time, we learned to underline and highlight verses that spoke to us. We both decided that **the Word of God alone** could be trusted.

During those early years, we earnestly prayed each day for my parents and my thirteen siblings. We set aside one day each week to fast and plead with the Father to save our family. One night, I found myself on my knees, face-to-face with my dad as he sat on the couch. I pleaded with him to believe the Word of God and give his life to Christ. He didn't say a word. He stood up, walked out the door, and left. It was 2 a.m.

Still, Esther and I continued to pray and fast. When our children were born, they joined us in praying for their grandparents, aunts, and uncles. We prayed for each one by name, begging the Lord to open their eyes to salvation.

Eventually, Dad and Mom moved away from the homestead in Ohio and settled in Pennsylvania. There, they built a house and a small hospital to serve Amish people across America.

About twenty years after we started praying and fasting, a stranger contacted me. As I listened to him, I cried tears of the purest joy. He said, "Joe, I wanted to tell you that God laid your parents on my heart. I've been praying for them and sharing the gospel with them. Please pray, because I truly sense that God is moving in their hearts and opening their understanding of salvation."

After the phone call, I sat weeping. For years, I had carried the heavy thought that somehow, I was responsible for my parents' salvation, that it would take one of my letters or a face-to-face conversation for them to surrender their man-made system and follow Jesus.

In that moment, God showed me that He was using complete strangers to carry His gospel to my family.

Over the years, this happened again and again. I have counted six times. All came from complete strangers. Each of them reached out to say, "Joe, I just wanted to let you know, I met your parents, and God has given me a very deep burden to share the gospel with them."

I am confident that three of my Amish sisters and their husbands are saved. Four of my brothers have left the Amish, given their lives to Christ, and are now involved in churches, ministries, and raising God-fearing families.

A little over a year ago, I received a text message from the **sixth stranger** in PA that God had given a burden for my parents. While I have never met him in person, Brian and I texted back and forth and talked on the phone this past year. Several months ago, he sent a message that said, "You're not going to believe this, but I have been with your parents for almost a full week. When I explained Eph 2:8–9 to your dad, he believed it. Joe, I really believe he understands and that he is saved."

I thought, "*It's very likely true that my dad is saved.* He has heard the gospel so many times over the years. Maybe he is saved but afraid of what others would say, or perhaps pride is holding him back from sharing openly." I was left hoping, praying, believing… but also questioning. Deep in my heart, I needed to hear it from my father's lips. That would make it sure.

At this point, I would like to go on a rabbit trail. Please don't lose me. I promise to circle back and continue where I left off. The following took place in 2023 and beautifully connects with what God is doing in our family.

In 2022 and 2023, my dad's health declined significantly, and he was hospitalized multiple times. In a way only God could orchestrate, both he and Mom were placed in a care program in Mansfield, OH, nearly **190 miles** from their home in Pennsylvania, but just **15 minutes** from ours in Ashland. God is so good! With them so close, we were able to visit regularly while they stayed at a house in Mansfield.

For many years, I carried a deep longing to receive my father's blessing, the kind we read about in the Old Testament. In today's world, that might not seem like a big deal to some, but to me, it meant everything. I yearned for my father to lay his hands on me, my wife Esther, our children, and our grandchildren, and speak words of life and blessing over us.

I've always believed there is something very special, very powerful, and very meaningful in a father's blessing. Even Jesus, God's only begotten Son, received His Father's blessing, not just once, but twice. Perhaps it's the simple truth that there is life in the tongue. When a father speaks words of life over his son, it not only becomes an unforgettable and profound moment, but has an eternal impact on the son's life on earth.

Before leaving the house to visit Dad and Mom in Mansfield, I grabbed a sticky note and jotted down the following references:

1. **Shem and Japheth (Noah's sons) -** Genesis 9:26-27
2. **Isaac blesses Jacob** - Genesis 27
3. **Jacob (Israel) blesses his 12 sons** - Genesis 49
4. **Jacob blesses Joseph's sons** - Genesis 48:8-20
5. **Moses blesses the tribes of Israel** - Deuteronomy 33
6. **At Jesus' Baptism, the Father blesses His only begotten Son out loud in front of others** - Mathew 3:16-17
7. **At the Mount of Transfiguration** - Mathew 17:5

I took the sticky note with me and sat beside my dad. I said, "Dad, would you bless me? Would you bless my children and grandchildren? You don't have to give me an answer right now. Just think about it. Read the passages I shared with you and let me know." I added, "Dad, I would be willing to bring our whole family to PA if you would give us your father's blessing."

He sat quietly, staring at the wall. He looked deep in thought, but gave me no feedback, no words, no reaction. Just silence. We left that day, thanking God that He had given us one more opportunity to connect with my parents, who are now in their eighties.

Then, several months ago, in April, **two full years** after I handed him that sticky note, I received a letter from my dad. Keep in mind, it had been **thirty-eight years** since Esther and I left the Amish system. While my dad was no longer as hard-core Amish as he used to be, or so I thought, the letter said:

Mein Lieber Son (my beloved son),

With a heavy heart, I will make an attempt to answer your request to have a blessing spoken to you from your earthly father. How truly I would long to do this. You are our firstborn child. We have a depth of love that cannot be measured. I have wondered many, many times if I was too proud of you, my son. I was guilty of exalting you above others.

I am suffering the same stress Jacob did for his oldest son, Reuben (Gen 49:3). By your fruits, I was unable to see true repentance for your defiled actions. It seems as though you have found a way to subdue your conscience.

This is not done to make you feel guilty. It is solely for our preparation for Heaven. I do not want you to feel that I am directing blame at you. I am the first to be

blamed. I pray daily that God will forgive me for my inexcusable sins that I have done knowingly and all those I have done unknowingly.

I plead to God that we can leave this earthly body without bitterness towards each other. If I am not asking too much of you, would you please explain this to the other sons who have left Mom and Me? Were it possible, we could worship together before we die?

Mom & Dad

Dad's letter opened my eyes more than ever before. I began to see at a much deeper level just how deeply rooted my parents are in their traditions and culture. Since birth, they have adhered to the rules of the Amish system, working diligently to fit in and maintain peace. Jesus is only **one element** of their entire belief system.

When Brian and others talk to Dad and Mom about Jesus, the grace of God, and salvation, it often seems like they say all the right words. When Brian brought up Ephesians 2:8–9, explaining how we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, Dad nodded his head in agreement. To Brian, that seemed like proof that Dad understood and was saved. But to me, and to others who have truly been saved, it still left a question.

Why? Why can't I just accept that Dad understands and is saved? That question led me even deeper.

I began to realize that in the Amish way of life, the **gospel**, **culture**, and **traditions** are so closely woven together that they bleed into one another. They are tangled like threads in a rope, like multiple types of liquid in a glass jar. A man living inside that system cannot easily discern the dividing lines. He cannot clearly separate one from the other. In his mind, they (culture, traditions, and Jesus) are one and the same.

To an Amish person, a man can't fully take Jesus without also taking the culture with Him. And you can't fully separate the culture and traditions from faith in Jesus. If you take one, you take them all. If you leave one, you leave all. But that being said, I want to assure everyone of us: **There are dividing lines.**

Unless the Spirit of God opens our eyes and helps us to see those lines, unless we come to the place where we completely remove Amish culture and tradition from faith in Christ alone, **we cannot be saved**. To be almost saved is the same as being totally lost. *"Neither is there salvation **in any other**: for there is **none other name under heaven** given among men, whereby we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

I am deeply thankful that God revealed those dividing lines to me on **July 28, 1985**. On that day, I forsook my own righteousness, saw only the righteousness of God, and believed with all my heart. On that day, according to the scriptures, I was transferred from death to life… from a state of lost to a state of saved… from the grip and power of being a son of Satan to the grip and the power of being a son of God.

On that day, God saved me (II Tim 1:9); He translated me from one kingdom to another. *"Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins"* (Col 1:13-14).

So, the question remains: **Are my dad and mom truly saved?** Only God knows that answer.

Where does my mom stand? I honestly don't know, but I do know this: They have both been witnessed to **many, many times**. In fact, they probably know more about salvation than most Amish people ever will.

In conclusion, I wanted to share this part of my testimony for one main reason: to encourage those who are witnessing to their Amish neighbors and friends. Sometimes, after a good conversation, you may walk away thinking, *"They're probably saved."*

But I urge you—**think twice before you're too sure**.

A great question to ask is this: **"When did you go from death to life?"**

That question demands a clear and personal response. If you receive a **generic or cloudy response**, you have every reason to question whether that Amish person truly understands salvation.

Philippians 3:4–9

*"Though I might also have **confidence in the flesh**. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might **trust in the flesh**, I more:*

__Circumcised__ the eighth day,
of the __stock of Israel__,
of the __tribe of Benjamin__,
an __Hebrew of the Hebrews__;
as touching the law, __a Pharisee__;
Concerning __zeal__, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, __blameless__.

But what things were __gain to me__, those I counted __loss for Christ__. Yea doubtless, and __I count all things but loss__ for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of __all things__, and __do count them but dung,__ that I may win Christ, and be __found in Him__, not having __mine own righteousness__, which is of the law, but that which is __through the faith__ of Christ, the __righteousness which is of God__ by faith"

FUNNIES

How's your new job at the factory?" one guy asked another.

"I'm not going back there."

"Why not?"

"For many reasons," he answered. "The sloppiness, the shoddy workmanship, the whining—they just couldn't put up with it anymore."

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Approaching a passer-by, a street person asked, "Sir, would you give me a hundred dollars for a cup of coffee?"

"That's ridiculous!" the man replied.

"Just a yes or no, fella" the beggar growled. "I don't need a lecture about how to run my business."

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Through the pitch-black night, the captain sees a light dead ahead on a collision course with his ship. He sends a signal: "Change your course 10 degrees east."

The light signals back: "Change yours, 10 degrees west."

Angry, the captain sends: ""I'm a navy captain! Change your course, sir!"

"I'm a seaman, second class," comes the reply. "Change your course, sir."

Now the captain is furious. "I'm a battleship! I'm not changing course!"

There's one last reply, "I'm a lighthouse. Your call."

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One hazard of wartime training in England was that road signs were removed when invasion seemed imminent. A cartoon in an English newspaper during the invasion scare of 1940 pictured two German paratroopers scanning a map at a railway station. Over their head was the one remaining sign: 'Gentlemen'. "I can't find this place on the map," says one to the other.

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Employee: "The stress my boss puts me under is killing me. I have migraines, my blood pressure is going through the roof, I can't sleep at night. I just found out I have an ulcer, and as long as I stay in this job, the only question is whether I'll have a stroke or a heart attack."

Friend: "So, why don't you quit?"

Employee" "I have a great health plan."

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Three men were sitting on a park bench. The one in the middle was reading a newspaper; the others were pretending to fish. They baited imaginary hooks, cast lines, and reeled in their catch. A passing policeman stopped to watch the spectacle and asked the man in the middle if he knew the other two.

"Oh, yes," he said. "They're my friends."

"In that case," warned the officer, "you'd better get them out of here!"

"Yes, sir," replied the man, and he began rowing furiously.

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An avid Cleveland Browns fan took his dog to a football game. He had a hard time getting him in the gate but since he had a ticket and the stands weren't full, they let him in. The pooch sat quietly as the game progressed. When the Browns got a field goal, the dog went crazy—barking, running in circles and doing back flips. "What does he do when they score a touchdown?" asked another fan.

"I don't know," replied the dog owner. "I've only had him two years."