

HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

An examination of accounts of conversion to Christ in
the New Testament

All quotations from the Bible are taken from the English Standard Version

For my wife Priscilla
who has been my constant and faithful companion
for more than 48 years in seeking to live out
the life of a true Christian

She has battled to overcome mental fatigue
as a result of a stroke
in order to get these studies into a format
useful for Sunday School classes

Foreword

Stories of God's abounding grace to sinners are always welcome music in a believer's ear. I love listening to testimonies of conversions when interviewing people for church membership. But when these stories are told by God himself in his own Word, they become life to others. This book *How to Become a Christian* captures nineteen biblical testimonies of conversion to Christ of various people in the New Testament. Some people were indeed brought from death to life like Zacchaeus while others had spurious faith like Simon Magus. It is a very surgical analysis.

The book divides into three parts: Conversions in the Gospels, Conversions in Acts and lastly Conversions in the Letters. Each testimony deals with different aspect of salvation so that this would make an excellent read in straightening any one's theology on the doctrine of salvation. For instance, if you consider the Conclusion which gives the order of salvation (*Ordo Salutis*) then you will see the rich and biblical soteriology that he presents so powerfully.

Education is all about the grouping of information and the classification of data. Keith Underhill, who is himself a trained educationist, has done a great job in helping us see how God moves in mysterious ways as he saves different individuals and groups of sinners in providence. There is no doubt that God turns around the lives of different people graciously, in time and space, and by the power of his gospel, to bring them to the feet of Christ. It helps to see that while some people may remember the hour of grace and may rejoice like Saul of Tarsus, yet the vast majority of believers may never really know with certainty when the Spirit replaced their hearts of stone with that of flesh like Timothy.

The author is himself a recipient of God's grace and an experienced pastor with over 40 years ministry in Kenya. He was both a pioneer missionary and a church planter, having planted Trinity Baptist Church, Nairobi in 1978 by God's help. Therefore, his wise counsel on a true testimony of conversion in the appendix is so helpful and practical. Questions such as, "What does a Biblical testimony of conversion look like? How can you know if your testimony is genuine? What should you listen for in a person who is giving a testimony in order for them to be brought into church membership?" come in handy, not just for a young believer examining one's own conversion, but also for a young pastor who is planting a church and even for a pastor who wants to panel beat a church that wants to move in a more biblical direction.

The book tells these stories with crystal clarity and toddler's simplicity and yet with deep insight, tightening each thought by a careful exegetical hermeneutic. He carefully admits the danger of getting our doctrine from experiences recorded in the Bible, and labours to back up any conclusion made with specific doctrinal statements through exposition of passages. The end result is a breath-taking tapestry of God's grace in the salvation of sinners.

May this book be used of God to draw his elect from every corner of the earth to Christ. May the church of Christ be strengthened as people see how God saves sinners. But most importantly, I pray, that all these will be to the praise of God's glory.

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INTRODUCTION

Surely the subject of *Conversion* is simple! Why does it need a book? A person just decides to follow Christianity, to believe in Christ, you might think. The fact is that there are a great variety of teachings on *Conversion*. They all claim to be based on the same Bible. Should this situation be surprising? No, because Jesus concluded His sermon with these sobering words: "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:14). There is always the effort to make it not so hard. It is not that Jesus' way is hard because only those with great intelligence, or great strength, or great resources, can successfully travel on it. As we shall see, it is because it demands **humility** that the way is hard, even impossible (Matthew 18:3-4, 19:25-26). This is not a character native to any human being. False conversion always caters to our pride by making us feel we have had some contribution to make to it.

How vital this subject is! You can be ignorant of very many things in this life. You can even get many things wrong. But you must not get conversion wrong! Eternity depends upon rightly understanding what it means to be converted and having a genuine experience of it. As you study this book may the Lord make it clear to you what genuine conversion to Christ is, and bring you to a settled assurance that you have been so converted. Jesus Himself predicted that there would be *many* on the day of judgement who, thinking they are converted, are rejected by Him (Matthew 7:21-23). Then it will be too late to think things over. Now is the time for self-examination. The possibility of being deceived is ever present, the reason why God warns us again and again (see 1 Corinthians 3:18, 6:9, 15:33, 2 Corinthians 11:3, Galatians 6:7, Ephesians 5:6, James 1:22,26, 1 John 3:7). Bank clerks look carefully at high valued notes lest they be deceived into accepting fake currency as genuine. How much more important to do this over things that have spiritual and eternal value!

The situation is dire as multitudes are actually deceived into accepting substitutes for true conversion. In 40 years of ministry, having interviewed hundreds for church membership, and having talked with so many about whether they are Christians or not, I have found so much confusion. Consider six of them:

- Conversion in name only. 'I am converted because of my background, my ancestry.' When I ask someone who claims to be a Christian the *time* when they became a Christian, often the reply is something like: 'I have always been a Christian; I was born into a Christian family and was taken to church from day one.'
- Conversion because of a good life-style. Here are the time-honoured substitutes for genuine conversion: baptism, church attendance and even membership, a respectable life of seeking to keep the Ten Commandments, etc. It is possible to have all these to a high degree yet be a stranger to true conversion, as was Saul of Tarsus (read Philippians 3:4-8). This was the false hope of so many of the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Ask the average person who claims to be a Christian today and they will stake their claim on the false idea of the goodness of their lives.
- Conversion by a decision. There are multitudes who have been to a Crusade, or some sort of evangelistic meeting, and have responded to the 'altar call' by going to the front and being prayed for, and who have been assured by the preacher that they are now converts. Their subsequent lives betray this profession. It is said that almost 30%

of Americans claim to be born-again (converted). The figure alone surely demonstrates the massive deception there is.

- Conversion by being prayed for. The Christian world today sees many giving themselves such titles as apostle or prophet. Many will reason this way: 'Such holy people are nearer to God, and if they pray God must hear them. I have been prayed for by Apostle ..., by Prophet ..., so I must be converted.' How many people have come to me and asked me to pray for them as if somehow my prayers are more availing with God, when the truth is that all have equal access to God through Jesus Christ?
- Conversion by a miracle. Today there are many who claim to have been miraculously healed and on this basis profess conversion, as they think their healing must prove that God specially loves them.
- Conversion by a dream. In the Islamic world many are claiming to have visions of Jesus, and dreams about Him. Even if we were to grant the truth of this (I cannot accept that Jesus personally appears to anyone, as Paul says he was the last in 1 Corinthians 15:8), the presence of Jesus, and even His performing mighty works, does not guarantee conversion if there is no repentance (see the cities around Galilee in Matthew 11:20-24).

There are a variety of words that are used to refer to a person becoming a Christian. We are going to use the word *conversion*, a word that emphasizes the element of change. The word 'convert' is used 4 times in the New Testament in the ESV (Acts 13:43, Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:15, 1 Timothy 3:6). In the Greek of Acts 13:43, 'convert' translates a word that is transliterated into English as 'proselyte' ¹ (see also Acts 2:11, 6:5). Such a person was one who had come to embrace Judaism ², usually from a background in Greek religion. There had been a fundamental change in their lives. Another word translated 'turn' implies the same change, and was sometimes translated as 'converted' in the old King James Version (see Matthew 13:15, Acts 3:19). Therefore, when a person who is not a Christian becomes a Christian there is a great change. This is what we are going to explore in this book. We could also use other words, such as salvation, a word that emphasizes deliverance. We could call one who is converted a believer, a disciple, a saint, or even a Christian!

To explore the subject of conversion we will use the method of exposition of passages that describe what happened to individuals and even groups of people. We shall further consider some who professed conversion but turned out to be false, and some who wanted to be saved but never reached true conversion. We shall see in each case that although there are details that are different, there are also common indispensable elements that must be present for there to be true conversion. We use this method as there are many such descriptions in the New Testament and it is so helpful to see how the doctrine of conversion practically works itself out in many different kinds of people. We are well aware that it is dangerous to get our doctrine from experiences recorded in the Bible, so we will be backing up our conclusions with specific doctrinal statements.

The impetus for writing comes from a number of things. First, at the very beginning of ministry in Kenya in 1975, at a Camp for Secondary School students, I saw the need to study the doctrine of Conversion. I gave four Bible studies from Acts on some whose conversions

¹ Proselyte – a convert to the Jewish faith.

² Judaism – the religion of the Jews.

are recorded. Then in 1990 I preached a series of ten sermons on True Conversion in Trinity Baptist Church, Nairobi, Kenya. While preparing for those sermons, the classic book, *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit*, by James Buchanan, was consulted. The last half of that book is devoted to specific examples of those in whom the Spirit worked savingly.

Ultimately, I am writing because there is no more important subject, and yet sadly there is so much confusion surrounding it. There are at least 4 things I pray will be accomplished:

- That those of you who read, some might experience genuine conversion.
- That others of you might have your eyes open to the fact that you have been deceived into thinking you are converted when you are not.
- That others of you, who have been influenced by false teaching and have become unsure about your conversion, might be reassured of the Lord's grace to you.
- That those of you who preach will make use of the different chapters to tell your hearers what true, Biblical conversion is.

To God be all the glory!

SUMMARY

This is a foretaste of what you will learn about conversion from the various accounts in the New Testament.

Conversion is praying to God as a sinner, pleading for mercy unto justification (the Tax Collector).

Conversion is being sought and saved by Jesus Christ, which results in repentance, and a totally changed life (Zacchaeus).

Conversion is being born again of the Holy Spirit (Nicodemus).

Conversion is crying out to the Lord in faith for salvation (Bartimaeus).

Conversion is humbly confessing one's sin to God (the Prodigal Son).

Conversion is following Christ above everything else (the Rich Young Ruler).

Conversion is through faith for even the worst of sinners (the Criminal).

Conversion is receiving the word of God in an honest and good heart and bearing much fruit (the Parable of the Sower).

Conversion is repenting of sin for forgiveness and being baptized in Christ's name, and then living a new life centred on God's people (the Pentecost Worshipers).

Conversion is by a faith that involves turning from all sin in repentance (Simon Magus).

Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit in giving understanding of the gospel through preaching, with the response of faith and baptism (the Ethiopian Eunuch).

Conversion is a sovereign and powerful work of God in which Jesus Christ is revealed to the sinner (Saul of Tarsus).

Conversion is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit bringing a sinner to faith and repentance made public in baptism (Cornelius).

Conversion is when the Lord opens the heart to believe the word that is being preached (Lydia).

Conversion is to believe in the Lord Jesus and to manifest that faith in a totally changed life (the Philippian Jailer).

Conversion is becoming a slave of righteousness by obeying the truth to which God commits the sinner (the Romans).

Conversion may not be a specific experience, especially by those brought up in Christian homes, but will be evidenced by faithful Christian living through trials (Timothy).

Conversion is God's work of choosing the sinner, bringing the gospel to him and working in his heart; and man's response of receiving that word in faith unto a life of service to God in view of the return of Christ (the Thessalonians).

Conversion is knowing your sin so as to know Christ (Paul).

PART I: CONVERSIONS IN THE GOSPELS

1. THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR: TWO PRAYING MEN – LUKE 18:9-14

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

TRUE CONVERSION: PRAYER FOR MERCY

This parable of Jesus is about two men, one who was accepted by God, the other rejected. Although both prayed to God, only one experienced genuine conversion. The parable must have been shocking to the first hearers, because all would have expected that the religious Pharisee would be the one accepted, and the sinful Tax Collector the one rejected.

★ *Who were the Pharisees?* They were religious leaders of the Jews who were very zealous to keep the law. They added many specific regulations to the Law of Moses as a kind of 'hedge' to make sure they kept the law. For example, on the Sabbath they specified how far a person might travel (Acts 1:12). Paul had been a Pharisee and he declared how strict he had been (Acts 22:3, 26:5, Galatians 1:14). They paid great attention to religious observances such as almsgiving, praying and fasting, and made sure others saw what they did (read Matthew 6:1-18). Jesus condemned them for their hypocrisy, teaching the Law, but not keeping it themselves (Matthew 23). The righteousness of the kingdom of God that Jesus came to bring must be far greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20ff.). For example, to obey the sixth commandment, it is not enough to refrain from killing a person. The internal acts of anger and abuse must also be avoided (verses 21-22). So, outwardly the Pharisee appeared to be the most religious of people, the ripest candidate for the kingdom of God as the ordinary person would think. This is why Jesus used him in the parable.

★ *Who were the Tax Collectors?* Jesus chose a tax collector to represent the most wicked of people in the eyes of society and thus one they would think most unlikely to be converted. In Jesus' day the Jews were ruled by the Romans. You remember that Pontius Pilate was the Roman Governor before whom Jesus was tried and sentenced. The Romans were hated because of their occupying forces (e.g. Luke 13:1), as they put down any revolt ruthlessly (see Acts 5:36-37). Because Jewish tax collectors collaborated with the Roman occupation they were seen as traitors. They further used their position to demand more payment than they ought to have done for their own enrichment. For these reasons the Jews despised any of their number who became such tax collectors. The religious leaders wondered how Jesus could even eat with such wicked men who they put in the same class as "sinners", women of the city. So they questioned when Levi (Matthew) the tax collector was converted (Luke 5:27-

30). They rejected Jesus because He was “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19, see Luke 15:1-2). When an unrepentant church member was to be put out of the church, dis-fellowshipped, he was to be treated “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). The thought would naturally arise as Jesus refers to a tax collector in this parable, ‘How can such a wicked man, obviously one offensive to God, possibly be converted?’

When the Bible records how someone experiences conversion, there is always a specific reason why it does so, and so there is a specific focus. Not everything is told about the conversion, only that which fits the context. It is not that it is ‘testimony time’, a testimony for its own sake. So for example, in this parable Jesus is speaking against people like the Pharisees and their heart attitude towards themselves and others: there were “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (verse 9). Such an attitude can never lead to true conversion. So Jesus emphasizes the only attitude that will lead to such conversion, humility and not pride. Thus He finishes by laying down the general and oft repeated principle: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (verse 14, see also Matthew 23:12, Luke 14:11). How does the conversion of the Tax Collector illustrate this?

THE CONVERSION OF THE TAX COLLECTOR

We know he was converted because we are told he “went down to his house justified”⁴ (verse 14). There were three simple steps to his conversion.

1. Prayer to God

Both the Pharisee and the tax collector go “up into the temple to pray”. This was the right thing to do for the temple was God’s house of prayer where He promised to meet with His people. It is a good start for there are many who never pray. They both know there is a God in heaven before whom they live and from whom they receive all that they need. Yet despite the Pharisee praying, and we assume he regularly prays, he is rejected by God. Don’t be satisfied that you pray before you eat, and before you sleep. Don’t think all is well because you repeat the Lord’s Prayer. Don’t think that you must be acceptable because you can pray all night. There is nothing wrong with any of these things but such a prayer by itself does not guarantee acceptance with God. Does it shock you that here is prayer that God refuses? It should not, because of what the Bible clearly says:

If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination.
(Proverbs 28:9)

So you must consider very carefully the content of your prayers. In just a few words we are told two things about the Tax Collector’s prayer: what his need was, and how he wanted God to answer that need. What a contrast it was to the prayer of the Pharisee!

2. Prayer to God because of sin

★ *The prayer of this Tax Collector.*

The first thing we are told, by way of contrast with the Pharisee, is that the Tax Collector is “standing far off”. He has no boldness to come forward but perhaps stands in the shadows apart from others. It is unlikely that he frequents the temple to pray. The way he stands and appears speak loudly of the feeling of shame. How dare he approach God in prayer being

³ Justification – to be declared righteous by God the Judge.

such a wicked man? Like a guilty child that cannot look up into parental eyes because of disobedience, so he “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven”. He “beat his breast” as an expression of deep sorrow, just as those did who had witnessed the awful spectacle of the crucifixion of Jesus (Luke 23:48). It is as if to say, ‘My heart is the real problem, and there is nothing that I can do about it’. He is filled with guilt, shame and sorrow. This is not some thoughtless statement such as, ‘I know I am a sinner’. It is something that is felt in the depths of the soul.

In his confession he literally says, ‘I am *the* sinner’, a great sinner, a real sinner as compared with others. He does not plead that he is better than some other tax collectors, or that he does not have the pride that the Pharisee so obviously manifested. Like Paul he sees himself as “the foremost” of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

It is so important to note what he does *not* pray for. There is no mention of health, prosperity, long life, and other such things that belong to this present existence. Yet countless crusades are organized claiming to bring such so-called ‘blessings’. But where are those preachers proclaiming that the great need is to do with personal sin, which unless it is dealt with will land the sinner in hell? But for the Tax Collector, whether sick or well, poor or rich, living into old age or cut off early, his one problem, we might say his *only* problem, is his sin. Sin is the great burden he carries daily, that wears him down. If only it can be removed, he can be free.

Where does this conviction of sin come from, this attitude that sin is the one great problem? Why did the Tax Collector feel this way and not the Pharisee? We shall be dealing with this in subsequent chapters, but it is the sovereign and powerful work of the Spirit who works like the wind which “blows where it wishes” (John 3:8). In referring to the Holy Spirit, Jesus promised:

And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment;... (John 16:8)

★ *The prayer of the Pharisee.*

He prays “standing by himself”. We assume that this was the time for prayer (as Acts 3:1), but he stands apart from the rest of the worshippers. It is alright to stand praying, but to separate from others is to display an attitude of religious superiority. This is precisely why Jesus told the parable (remember verse 9). Some have translated the phrase to pray ‘about’ or ‘with’ himself, so that it would point to the fact that his prayer is self-centred in which God is not involved. It is true that he addresses God by mentioning His name, and that he even thanks Him. But then it is ‘I ... I ... I’ throughout. There are two things he declares in his ‘prayer’:

- ‘I do not do the wicked things others do’ (verse 11). He compares himself with people who most others consider as wicked. We must assume he is telling the truth about his outward conduct. He is not an “extortioner” who sought to force people to hand over more than was due. He is not “unjust”, refusing to give a person what they deserve. He is not an “adulterer”, taking another man’s wife. Then he descends to the lowest of the low persons, the Tax Collector praying in the very same temple with him, the great example of wickedness. He is nothing like *him*. But even the general public will condemn a proven corrupt person even if they themselves are corrupt. And no one would want to have a faithless wife. It would have been far wiser for him to compare himself with true men of God like Abraham.

- 'I do far more than others do' (verse 12). As if it were so easy for him to keep to law of God, he confidently tells Him that he does far more than is required, what have been called 'works of supererogation' ⁴. At the most the Old Testament commanded fasting just one day a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:31). He boasts that he fasts twice a week! Further, although it was commanded to tithe ⁵ such sources of food as grain, grapes, olives and animals (Deuteronomy 14:22-23), it did not apply to every tiny herb (as Luke 11:42). He is so particular that he makes sure he tithes absolutely everything. It would be like tithing from a loaf of bread that is brought to you as a gift from a visitor.

Why did God reject the Pharisee? He obviously considers himself righteous. He does not consider he has done the things that God forbids. He thinks he has done even more than God requires of him. He is proud that he has kept God's commandments, as Paul had once been (Philippians 3:6). Even though it is God he thanks for who he is and what he does, God will not accept anyone on the basis of his own supposed righteousness. It is like filthy rags in His sight (Isaiah 64:6). His prayer contains no confession of sin. He sees no need that he wants God to supply, so he makes no request. He is satisfied with himself as he is. Neither is there anything in his prayer about inward religion. He trusts in himself that he is righteous and despises others (verse 9). "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled." He has exalted himself before God. He has no idea of the absolute holiness of God who discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart. There is no heart felt confession of sin as his greatest need before God. Rather, he looks down on others who are obviously wicked by their outward lives. Today there are those who despise ones who claim to 'be saved' as holier-than-thou. They think that they have done quite well as regards the Ten Commandments so that God must be well-pleased with them. This attitude shows itself when problems happen which we think are not deserved. 'But he was a good person', it might be said. It is again apparent when wonderful things are related about one deceased, as if God should reward him or her.

3. Prayer to God for mercy

The Pharisee does not ask for anything! He has no need before God, he thinks. He is alright as he is. What pride, what spiritual blindness!

Now consider the prayer of the Tax Collector. How simple. Just a few words. "Be merciful to me..." The word translated "merciful" is not the same one that is used in verse 38, but one that means 'to make propitiation' ⁶ (as in Hebrews 2:17). He knows God needs to be propitiated, because He has been offended by his sin, and is righteously angry. He knows this attitude of anger needs to be removed, in order to be reconciled to God. The Psalmist David was also aware that God was right to be angry (read Psalm 51:1-4), whereas the Pharisee must have thought that God is pleased with him for his supposed good life. But how could the Tax Collector have any expectation that God would show such mercy to him? Perhaps as he prays he looks upon the altar in the temple where the morning and evening burnt offerings are sacrificed (as did Elijah in 1 Kings 18:36). It was at God's command that such animals were offered, showing that it was God's desire to have mercy upon sinners. He may know that God has always revealed Himself as a God of mercy. He did at the time of the sin of idolatry with the golden calf:

⁴ Supererogation – the performance of more work than God requires.

⁵ Tithe – to give a tenth.

⁶ Propitiation – appeasing God, turning away God's anger by the sacrifice of Christ.

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,... (Exodus 34:6)

The Tax Collector has nothing good to say about himself. There are no excuses for sin. He comes humbly to God, with shame, with sorrow, before the God he has offended. His only request is that God will not be angry with him as he deserves and only on the basis of the sacrifice that God Himself had provided. As the introduction to the parable states, he does not trust in himself as the Pharisee does, not in anything he has done or will do. He can only see himself as a sinner before God. This is the real prayer in which God delights, as it is according to truth. It is from the heart, so full of humility. Mercy is the blessing requested. There is total dependence on the sacrifice God has provided. "The one who humbles himself will be exalted." This is why we pray 'in Christ's name', because by His blood He has opened up the way into God's holy presence for us (Hebrews 10:19-21).

4. Such prayer leads to justification

★ *Justification.* As the Tax Collector leaves the temple and goes home, he receives the mercy he has asked for. He enters into a permanent (implied by the tense of the verb) condition of being "justified". This great sinner is declared by God, the just Judge, to be righteous before Him, and so fully acceptable to Him! Truly amazing mercy! Although he goes home the same man as he came, having had no time for any good works, he is counted as righteous by God. When a guilty person is brought to court and fined, once the fine is paid he is set free as not guilty, as a law abiding citizen, although in himself he has not been changed. It is his relationship to the law that has changed, once guilty, now guiltless. That is justification.

Note on Justification

Many people think that justification is just the forgiveness of sins. It does include forgiveness but it is so much more. Note that the Pharisee did not come to pray for forgiveness but assumed his acceptance with God on the basis of his works. He wanted God to justify him = to declare him righteous. That was the blessing only the Tax Collector received because he trusted in God's mercy (in Christ).

★ *Justification by God's mercy.* Nor does Jesus attach any conditions, "if ..., then I will justify you in the future". Justification depends wholly on God's mercy, not on any works in order to gain God's favour.

*So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has **mercy**.* (Romans 9:16)

It is not the past record or future promises of the person that matter, but a humble attitude of heart. The very moment the Pharisee was looking down in contempt upon the Tax Collector, God was unconditionally accepting this sinner.

The Prayer that Leads to Conversion

Let us go back over this parable. How was it that the Tax Collector experienced conversion (justification)?

- He prayed. He had personal dealings with God. There can be no true conversion without prayer. You may not remember one specific time of prayer. The question is: Do you pray?
- He prayed with humility. He had nothing good to say about himself. He made no excuses for his sinful life. He was only conscious of his great sin against a perfectly holy God. Such humility is a great mark of true conversion. This is the great lesson our Lord aimed to bring from the parable. Listen how He concludes: "For everyone who exalts himself will be

humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (verse 14). Again, Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount by declaring that His kingdom belongs to those who are "poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3). These are the ones who are citizens in His kingdom. When the disciples were asking who is the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus replied, the one who "humbles himself like this child" (Matthew 18:4). True humility is to know that if God is to deal with me as I deserve then hell is my portion for ever. Have you ever come to God in prayer like this? Sadly, many have repeated endless prayers, but have never so humbled themselves in their hearts because of their sin.

- He prayed for mercy in dependence on the sacrifice God had provided. He knew God to be a merciful God. Had He not provided a sacrificial system for the forgiveness of sins? Our Lord Jesus Christ has fulfilled those sacrifices, so today we seek God's mercy because He has given His Son as a final sacrifice for our sins. Our trust is in Christ and Him crucified, and in Him alone. Is this where your trust firmly lies?

You cannot consider the teaching of this parable without asking yourself, which of these two men are you? If you are not the Tax Collector, then you are the Pharisee. If you say you do not know, or you are neither, then you are not the Tax Collector and you are not justified by God, but under His anger. Jesus teaches you that the only way to be justified by God is to come to Him as the Tax Collector came. Granted it takes great humility. But even a habitual thief knows how to plead for mercy from an angry crowd set to lynch him. Plead with God on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, for God delights to show mercy.

Summary. **Conversion** is praying to God as a sinner, and pleading for mercy unto justification.

2. ZACCHAEUS: AN INQUISITIVE TAX COLLECTOR

LUKE 19:1-10

¹ He entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small of stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. ⁵ And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. ⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." ⁸ And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." ⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:1-10)

TRUE CONVERSION: GOD SEEKING UNTO REPENTANCE

The Tax Collector in the parable was so convicted of his sin that he could do nothing else but cry to God for mercy. But we are not told why he was so convicted whereas the proud Pharisee had no thought of sin at all. It might seem that it was all the work of the man himself and that the only part God had to play was to respond to his request for mercy by showing that mercy.

In the passage from Scripture now before us we are introduced to a real tax collector and the decisive part that the Lord Jesus had in his conversion. Our Lord is on His last journey up to Jerusalem where "everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For He will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill Him, and on the third day He will rise" (Luke 18:31-33). Yet He must pass through Jericho, notwithstanding what was on His mind. There is a work to do with a very needy individual in the town.

Zacchaeus was obviously not a proud Pharisee. He has a desire to see Jesus, although we do not know why. He must have heard people talking about Jesus as He has been teaching and doing mighty works up and down the land for the past three years. Is he just curious to see this 'famous' man? Does he have a sense of his own need that he hopes Jesus can satisfy? He certainly could not have expected Jesus to come straight up to him in person. What the account shows so clearly is that Jesus knows all about him! Jesus has come "to seek and to save the lost" (verse 10). We will use this phrase to describe the divine side of conversion that results in true repentance.

It assumes the lostness of the one who is sought. Zacchaeus was lost.

★ *Zacchaeus appeared to have found life.* He has two things so many people long for:

- He has position. He is "a chief tax collector" (verse 2). He is in charge of the tax district of Jericho. History tells us that this was only one of three such districts in the whole land of Israel, so his is a very important job. But because he works for the Roman overlords his fellow Jews despise him as a 'sinner' (verse 7, see Luke 5:30, 15:2, 18:13).

- He has riches. He is simply described as “rich” (verse 2). The job itself is well paid, and the position gives ample opportunity for further enrichment through oppression and corruption. So he turns out to be a most unlikely candidate to enter the kingdom of God. He is in good company with the rich fool, the rich man who went to Hades and torment, and the rich and young ruler who sadly turned away from Jesus (see Luke 12:16, 16:19ff., 18:23ff.).

★ *But Zacchaeus was actually lost.*

Jesus says so. Despite these seeming great advantages in life, Jesus says Zacchaeus really belongs to the class of lost ones (verse 10) for whom He came into the world (see also Luke 15:6,9,24,32). Tax collectors were lumped together with sinners, and were considered to be such. They included the heathen (Matthew 26:45), and even Jews who were guilty of dishonourable conduct, such as prostitutes and tax collectors. These people were seen as hopeless as regards salvation.

Zacchaeus said so. By his own confession he shows he was lost (verse 8). He is guilty of sins of omission, for like the rich fool he has hoarded for himself and is not rich towards God (Luke 12:21). There are sins of commission, for he is guilty of defrauding others by demanding more than was required (Luke 18:11). Rightly is he termed a ‘sinner’: riches are his ‘god’ (against the 1st. commandment); he has stolen (8th. commandment); and he is covetous (10th. commandment). Remember that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).

★ *You are lost.* If a sheep gets lost two things are needed. It must first be sought and then brought back (Luke 15:4-6). It emphasizes the complete helplessness of the lost one. The spiritually lost person is away from God, is not receiving His blessings, and his certain end will be destruction. Christ came for those who are in this category of ‘lost’. The Prodigal Son had thought that real life was in a far country, but in reality he was lost. While he was having a ‘good life’ he was just as much lost as when he was starving. Can you look back on your life and confess, ‘Once I was lost’? That is the condition out of which we are all saved. If you cannot honestly say that about your former life then you are probably not converted!

The second verse of that great hymn by Francis Rawley, *I will sing the wondrous story*, starts:

*I was lost, but Jesus found me,
Found the sheep that went astray,...*

1. Conversion starts with the Lord *seeking* the sinner

★ *Jesus sought Zacchaeus.* Although in one sense the story is about Zacchaeus and the great change that took place in his life, more deeply the story is about Jesus. This is the most remarkable thing about this account of conversion. In conversion, Jesus is the most important Person! It is Jesus who is passing through Jericho (verse 1). It is Jesus who comes to where Zacchaeus is up in a sycamore tree. It is Jesus who commands him to come down quickly and informs him He will be his guest that very day (verse 5)! It is true, Zacchaeus had a desire to see who Jesus was. Perhaps he had heard that Jesus was friendly to tax collectors, but maybe it was no more than curiosity just to see what He looked like. But in Jesus a divine imperative was at work. “I *must* stay at your house today” (so also John 3:14, 4:4; Luke 2:49, 4:43, 17:25). Jesus knew the man’s name, and where he was, and so bypassed everyone else in crowd. He went straight for Zacchaeus. A lost sheep will not be saved unless the shepherd determines to go and seek for it. I have been in a Rendille village in north Kenya where an animal has not

come back with the herdsman and the rest of the herd. The owner does not resign himself to its lostness, or have the vain hope it will make its own way back. He will search all night, and with others, until it is found. In conversion it is fundamentally Jesus Himself who seeks for us, not we for Him.

★ *Why did Jesus seek Zacchaeus?* There were crowds of people in Jericho wanting to see Jesus (verse 2). As far as is recorded it was only to Zacchaeus that He went. Why only him? It was not because of anything good in Zacchaeus, for he was lost and under deserved condemnation. There can only be one answer: it was because the Lord chose to seek him and not others. We just cannot argue with this, as it is clearly what happened. Jesus did not organize a big crusade in Jericho and plaster the town with posters so that no one had an excuse if they did not 'come for their miracle'. This same emphasis on the Lord's sovereign choice is found in His words after He denounced the cities where most of His mighty works had been done because they had not repented: "All things have been handed over to me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son *chooses* to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27). When people grumbled against Him He responded: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44, see also verse 65). We are all so lost that unless the Lord seeks us in His mercy there is no hope for us. So it is strange today that all the emphasis is on sinners seeking the Lord. There is no doubt that sinners are commanded to seek the Lord (Isaiah 55:6). But it is equally clear that no one by nature will ever truly seek the Lord unless the Lord first seeks him. "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one *seeks* for God" (Romans 3:10-11). This is what is so clearly taught in the conversion of Zacchaeus. It is so clearly sung in the hymn from The Pilgrim Hymnal of 1904:

*I sought the Lord and afterwards I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Saviour true;
No, I was found by Thee.*

★ *How does Jesus seek sinners today?* Jesus came personally to Zacchaeus. He singled him out from everyone else. From heaven the Lord continues to seek today by (1) bringing His word to your attention and it is His voice you hear (Romans 10:14-15); and (2) sending His Spirit to work together with the word. Just think of what happens. Only certain people hear the gospel and only some of those believe the gospel they hear. If you are privileged to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is Him seeking you.

2. Conversion is the Lord *saving* those He seeks

Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus proved decisive in his life, as Jesus calls him down from the tree and invites Himself to his home! We do not know what they talked together although we do know what Zacchaeus said afterwards. He refers to his sinful lifestyle and what he must do to put things right (verse 8).

Zacchaeus was probably the very last person in whom people thought Jesus would be interested. Yet it is exactly such who God delights to save for His glory (1 Corinthians 1:26ff., James 2:5). What Jesus did is what the Bible terms 'calling', by which God effectually draws the sinner to Himself. It is part of the great chain of salvation from predestination to glorification (Romans 8:30). Jesus "came to call ... sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). The

Thessalonian Christians were called to salvation by the preaching of the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14). Ezekiel foretold of God seeking and saving His people from exile in Babylon (Ezekiel 34:11-16). Jesus casts Himself in this very role here. Without Him there is no hope; a lost sheep is utterly unable to find its way back home. Jesus finds the sheep and brings it back home, just as He did with Zacchaeus.

We shall use the word “salvation” for conversion, for this is what our Lord declares happened to Zacchaeus (verse 9). This is the very reason why Jesus came into the world that such as Zacchaeus might experience this conversion. “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (verse 10). Jesus is making an amazing claim, that He did not have a beginning in His mother’s womb as we do, but *came* from heaven, sent by the Father (see John 3:13). This is unique in history. Never before or after has God so intervened in human history. Jesus identifies Himself as *the Son of Man*, which means far more than just being human, although He is truly human. “Son of Man” identifies Him with the glorious Person of Daniel 7:13-14: “...there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” This is what Jesus proclaimed resulting in the charge of blasphemy: “Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven”” (Mark 14:61-62). Jesus lived 2000 years ago; He taught wonderfully and performed many miracles; He was crucified, and on the third day rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. But why? The conversion of Zacchaeus explains it, and shows us what an absolutely vital matter is true conversion. He came to bring nothing other than conversion.

3. Conversion is the sinner’s response of repentance

How do we know that Zacchaeus was saved? Did it make any difference to his life?

★ *The evidence of conversion was his repentance.*

How do we know Zacchaeus was saved or converted, as he never uses our shibboleths ³, such as, ‘Praise God, I’m saved’? It is Jesus Himself who confirms it as He proclaimed, “Today salvation has come to this house”, and Zacchaeus’ life was for ever changed. It was fitting as Jesus came for the lost sheep of house of Israel, and Zacchaeus was such a “son of Abraham” (verse 9). One may have correct language and yet not be saved; but when a life is changed from sin to righteousness it is sure proof God has been savingly at work. This is one of the great lessons from the account of the conversion of Zacchaeus. This great change is clearly shown as Zacchaeus publicly states what he is going to do as a result of Jesus’ visit. The contrast with his former life is what the Bible terms **repentance**.

Zacchaeus showed genuine and immediate repentance in three connected ways (verse 8).

- His ***mind*** began to understand about sin. Before he did not know it was sin to enrich himself and ignore the poor, that it was sin to get as much money out of people as possible.
- His ***heart*** began to hate sin, and consequently love the Saviour as he joyfully welcomed Him into his home. We are told of the deep love of the sinful woman for Jesus, so thankful for the sins that had been forgiven (Luke 7:44-47). We are told that the Tax Collector

⁷ Shibboleth – a word or phrase that identifies a group (from Judges 12:6).

prayed with a feeling of shame because of his sin (Luke 18:13). Once you see something as sin against God there will be sorrow and hatred for it. Such emotions will be stirred up.

- His **will** began to refuse sin and welcome righteousness. This is what is so clear. He had defrauded people and will pay back four times as if he were a sheep stealer (Exodus 22:1, 2 Samuel 12:6). He had not cared for the poor although he had been able to do, and so will give away half of all his goods, whereas the Old Testament tithes amounted to 20% at the most. He will remember the poor now. This is not like the Pharisees who pledged to give but only after their leaving this world (so Matthew 15:5). In the same way John the Baptist preached against an empty profession of repentance in baptism by exhorting those who came to him to, "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). One fruit will be a profound change in the way you view your possessions in this world (Luke 12:21, 16:13). You will recognize that everything you have is a gift of God to be used in His service according to His instructions in the Scriptures. You will not only use your resources to provide for your family, but you will generously support your local church and the spread of the gospel throughout the world.

How did this repentance come about? Repentance is a gift of God (Acts 5:31, 11:18). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convince us of our sins (John 16:8ff.). What did the Spirit use? Was it specifically that Jesus came to him personally; or was it something said by Jesus in his home? What was Zacchaeus doing? He was not sleeping, but was so eager to see Jesus, he climbed a tree. If you are reading this, not merely out of habit, but eager to hear what the word of God has to say, there is hope that God is already at work in you. May you meditate on the truth that you are lost by nature, and that Christ came for the purpose of seeking and actually saving such as you. But there is no hope for you in Christ, unless you cry out like Isaiah, that you are lost and helpless (Isaiah 6:5).

★ *You must repent if you are to experience true conversion.* This is a missing note in much gospel preaching, and in many testimonies of conversion. We read that Jesus urged His hearers to repent as the summary of His message:

*From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "**Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 4:17)*

*"I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to **repentance**." (Luke 5:32)*

*"No, I tell you; but unless you **repent**, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:3,5)*

Repentance is what He commanded His followers to preach:

*...that **repentance** and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:47)*

Repentance is what Peter and John preached on the Day of Pentecost:

*And Peter said to them, "**Repent** and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,..." (Acts 2:38)*

Repentance is what God commands everyone to do:

*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to **repent**,..." (Acts 17:30)*

There is no genuine conversion without repentance, and Zacchaeus is a good example of what it means to repent. If you profess to be a Christian you must ask yourself if you have really repented. Has this brought a fundamental change in your life? In Zacchaeus it showed itself in his attitude towards his riches, for that is where his great sins lay. Have you turned from

sin to righteousness? Is it now your great longing to walk according to all the commandments of God?

Summary. **Conversion** is being sought and saved by Jesus Christ, which results in repentance, and a totally changed life.

3. NICODEMUS: AN INTERESTED PHARISEE

JOHN 3:1-10

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? (John 3:1-10)

TRUE CONVERSION: THE NEW BIRTH

In Nicodemus we have a different kind of Pharisee than the one in the parable of Luke 18:9-14. This one is very positive towards Jesus, but he is not converted. Jesus makes it very clear what must happen to him in order to enter the kingdom of God. The emphasis is on what God does in conversion. Man can go so far in his own wisdom and strength but it will never bring him to conversion. Yes, a sinner must pray to God for mercy (the Tax Collector). Yes, Jesus must seek the sinner and bring him to repentance (Zacchaeus). But none of this can happen unless God does a powerful work in the sinner to enable him to pray and repent (Nicodemus).

1. Marks that do not prove true conversion

If ever a person could be mistaken for being truly converted it was Nicodemus and yet he was very far from the kingdom of God!

The story of Nicodemus, however, does not begin in John chapter 3 but at the end of the previous chapter (2:23-25). Nicodemus is an example of the type of person described there. We are told, "many believed in His name when they saw the signs that He was doing". Before we quickly conclude that such were true believers, look at Jesus' response. They believed in Him, but "Jesus on His part did not entrust Himself to them". The word 'believe' and the word 'entrust' are the same in the original language (Greek). They believed, but He did not 'believe'. He knew their hearts, that although they professed faith with their lips, it was not genuine. Their professed faith was only in response to the signs that Jesus did, and this is not sufficient. How relevant this is to today when there is such an emphasis on signs and mere verbal profession!

In four ways, Nicodemus was a very remarkable man.

★ He was a very *religious* man, "a man of the Pharisees" (3:1). Pharisees were leaders in the Jewish religion, dedicated to keeping the law of God as strictly as possible. Paul testified "that according to the strictest party ... I have lived as a Pharisee" (Acts 26:5). Here is a man who thought he had totally given himself to God. Such could be seen giving to the needy, praying

in synagogues and on street corners, and regularly fasting (remember the claim of the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-12). To the casual observer it might be thought that here was a man with whom God was pleased. Indeed, the Jews had a saying that, 'If only two men were to enter heaven, one would be a Pharisee'. There is nothing wrong with the religious activities of giving, praying and fasting in themselves, and they are to be encouraged. But they can be fully engaged in and a person still not be converted. Things have not changed! It is easy to think that because a man is a preacher and church leader, because a person is devoted to prayer and fasting, and so on, then this person is surely converted. Not so, any more than Nicodemus was converted. We must learn to think Biblically.

★ He was highly *respected* in society, "a ruler of the Jews" (3:1). He had been elevated to be a member of the Sanhedrin ⁸, the highest legal court for Jews. We find him sitting with "the chief priests and Pharisees" who had sent officers to arrest Jesus (7:45-52). It is this Court that hurriedly sat to try our Lord (Luke 22:66-71, probably Nicodemus absented himself?). They had authority to recommend to the Roman Governor the death penalty for someone who had broken Jewish laws. It was in this Court that Nicodemus was an honoured member. Surely when a person has risen to such heights in society he must be a good person? And when it is combined with a religious life surely he must be converted? Things have not changed! When a person of high rank speaks about his religion it tends to be taken more seriously. Thank God for truly converted people in responsible positions of society, but such a position by itself, does not indicate that such a person is genuinely converted.

★ He was very *learned*, "the teacher of Israel" (3:10). He is called "the" teacher, the well-known teacher, the great teacher. As such Jesus expected him to know about the new birth, but he was completely ignorant. As a Pharisee he was specifically learned about the Old Testament Scriptures. He had the knowledge that really mattered. He ought to have understood what Jesus was talking to him, but he did not. It is possible to have great knowledge about the contents of the Bible, and be able to teach others, without having real understanding. Just because a person can present a certificate of theology is no guarantee of being converted. Yet how often is it the one thing needed in the recognition of a pastor? This lack of understanding is because no one can understand truly without the working of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 2:14). This is why Nicodemus did not understand despite his great knowledge.

★ He *thought highly of Jesus*: "we know that you are a teacher come from God" (3:2). That he was very positive towards Jesus made him so different from many other Pharisees. Most Pharisees were so strongly opposed to Him, and Jesus reserves His strongest words of condemnation for them. Yet here is one who only says good about Him. He confesses Jesus to be a prophet, one come from God, therefore with a message from God. It is the signs that He was doing that convinced him. So far, so good. But he has not yet seen Him as the Word made flesh, the Son of God (1:14), the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29), the Messiah promised in the Old Testament (1:41,45). It is not enough to see in Jesus of Nazareth a good man, even a perfect man. It is not enough to find in His teaching the highest philosophy that everyone should follow, for example the so-called 'golden rule' (Matthew 7:12). Nicodemus seems to be on the way, but he has not yet experienced true conversion.

⁸ Sanhedrin – the Council, or supreme Jewish court (Matthew 26:59, John 11:47, Acts 4:15).

From Nicodemus we learn that it is very possible to be full of religious practices, to have great knowledge of the Bible, and even believe Jesus is from God, and yet not be born again. He was not a Barabbas, a murderer, the sort of person we instinctively know needs a great change. How near one can get to the kingdom as viewed from the outside, but Jesus knew all men (2:23-25). Symbolically Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night spoke of the darkness of his own soul. Jesus goes on to say that such people love the darkness and hate the light (3:19-21). With such feelings how will anyone, such as Nicodemus, ever come to the light? It was the same with Saul of Tarsus, whose conversion we shall look at later. What was it they were lacking? Why did they not come to Jesus the Light? What was it they needed? To this we shall now turn.

2. The one experience necessary for true conversion

Jesus did not respond directly to what Nicodemus professed about Him being “a teacher come from God”. He knew that, despite such a knowledge, Nicodemus was not yet converted. He needed to be “born again”, something only God could do in his life. Twice Jesus told him of this necessity:

- “Unless one is born again he **cannot** see the kingdom of God” (3:3).
- “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he **cannot** enter the kingdom of God” (3:5).

And both times Jesus introduced the statement with “Truly, truly, I say to you”. Jesus is drawing our undivided attention to these words of His. They are so important. They are the truth. Seeing and entering the kingdom of God is impossible without being born again! The kingdom of God is God’s rule that Christ came to establish. By being born again a person comes under the rule of God, together with the whole converted community. Amazingly, this one necessary experience is not something that you do. We shall call it, The New Birth, and ask four questions about it.

(1) The New Birth: what is it?

Jesus explains that being “born again” (3:3) is the same as being “born of water and the Spirit” (3:5). He also simply describes it as being “born of the Spirit” (3:6,8). The words translated “born again” can also mean “born from *above*”, which is the normal use (see the note in the ESV). By referring to “a second time” Nicodemus obviously understands what Jesus said as born “again”. However, from “above” fits in better with the emphasis on the Holy Spirit. And Nicodemus quite clearly did not understand. Jesus said he ought to have understood. He, the recognized teacher in Israel, ought to have known about the new birth from the Old Testament. Perhaps Jesus was referring specifically to Ezekiel 36:25-27:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and be careful to obey My rules.”

Here is *water* to cleanse from uncleanness (sins), and specifically the sin of idolatry which was so characteristic of the children of Israel. And here is a new heart, and a new *spirit*, which is My (God's) Spirit. Note that the putting of the Spirit within guarantees that the person will be careful to obey God's law (36:27). When God replaces the stony heart with a heart of flesh everything is changed. Stone is hard and cold. Flesh is pliable and warm. So what changes?

Many, without thinking, assume that "born of water" must mean Christian baptism. This cannot be true because:

- Water and Spirit are together as the birth again or from above, so that water is a symbol.
- In the Old Testament water is a symbol of cleansing and renewal (see Ezekiel 36:25).
- Physical baptism would be of the flesh, and Jesus denies that the flesh can produce spirit (3:6).

- The darkened *mind* is enlightened to understand.
- The *desires* for sin are replaced with desires for righteousness.
- No longer is *life* lived selfishly but now for the glory of God.

This is why the picture of birth is used; it represents a new beginning, a new life. So this new birth is becoming a new person spiritually. Peter likewise uses the language of "born again" in 1 Peter 1:3,23. John uses the language of "born" for the Christian in John 1:13, and in 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1,4,18.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that, despite all his achievements in religion, in education and in society, he must start his life all over again if he is to enter the kingdom of God. And this is something only the Spirit of God can accomplish in him. No child can give birth to itself! Jesus emphasizes that only the Spirit can give birth to "spirit" (3:6). Only God can totally change a person. Nicodemus may have the best advantages this world can offer, but he is still but flesh, highly educated flesh, deeply religious flesh, well-respected flesh, yes, but still only flesh.

(2) The New Birth: how does it come?

Our Lord does not give any instructions to Nicodemus how to be born again. He certainly does not teach that if you believe then God will respond by giving you a new birth. Faith belongs only to the new heart; the stony heart is one of unbelief. Do not appeal to John 3:16 for in that place it says that the one who believes receives eternal life, not the new birth. Faith is the result of the new birth, as is taught in John 1:12-13 and 1 John 5:1.

*But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God, who **were born**, not of blood not of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ **has been born** of God,...*

The new birth is a sovereign and powerful work of the Spirit of God in connection with the word of God. Jesus called upon dead Lazarus to come out of his tomb. He could not for he was dead! But the word of Jesus has life giving power, raising him from the dead, so that he comes out. In the same way, the message of the gospel is powerfully used by the Spirit to give a new birth so that the person comes to Jesus, that is, he believes. He likens being born of the Spirit to the wind (wind and Spirit are the same word in the original languages), that "blows where it wishes" (3:8). If you ask, 'Why are some born of the Spirit and not others?' then I can only repeat the words of our Lord, "The wind blows where it wishes."

(3) The New Birth: what is the evidence it has come?

About 30% of Americans claim to be born again. The statistics tell us that 80% of Kenyans are described as Christians. We instinctively know that can't really be true as there is so much wickedness in these countries. If such a large percentage were truly born again what

wonderful places they would be! So let us take the picture of birth. What is the evidence a new baby has come into the world? It moves and makes noise. In the case of the one born of the Spirit you cannot observe the birth taking place. Likewise you cannot see the wind, but “you hear its sound” (3:8). Jesus says “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”. What is this “spirit”? These are things that only the Spirit of God can produce; the “flesh” cannot produce them, for it can only produce “flesh” (3:6). Here is a list of “spirit” from other Scriptures.

★ *Faith in Christ* (John 1:12-13). John very clearly writes that those who believe give the evidence they “were born ... of God”.

[John’s first letter was written to give assurance to Christian believers who had been troubled by false teachers, those who John calls “antichrists” ⁹ (2:18-19). They can be assured if they are ...]

★ *Practising righteousness* (1 John 2:29). The new birth by the Spirit brings a life that loves righteousness instead of sin. This is because the Father of the new child is righteous Himself. The son is like the father. This is true repentance.

★ *Not sinning* (1 John 3:9, 5:18). Although translations have ‘make a practice of sinning’ (e.g. ESV) this is more of an interpretation. In the context, it seems to be a reference to the fact that one born of God cannot be “lawless” (3:4), like the devil (3:8). This is because “God’s seed” abides in one born of God, probably a reference to the Holy Spirit.

★ *Loving one another* (1 John 4:7-8). There are many exhortations to love the brethren. This is grounded in the very character of God, “God is love”. If God is your Father you will love like Him.

★ *Believing in Jesus* (1 John 5:1). Believing that Jesus is the Christ is the result of being born of God. The false teachers denied this about Jesus (2:22). Those born of God receive Jesus as the long promised Messiah ¹⁰, their anointed Prophet, Priest and King.

★ *Overcoming the world* (1 John 5:4). The world are those desires and values that are opposed to God (see 2:16). The one born of God has a new nature that does not seek to satisfy such sinful desires, and is therefore free to keep God’s commandments.

(4) The New Birth: how can you be sure it has come to you?

It is not difficult to tell if the new born is alive. It is obvious when a tree bears fruit. So ask yourself the following questions.

Have you received Jesus Christ? Have you believed in His name? Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? Is your faith sincere?

Are you devoted to a life of righteousness because you know that God is righteous? Are you serious about keeping the commandments of God (1 John 2:3-6)?

Are you being kept by Christ from turning away from the faith? Your perseverance in the face of many trials is a great evidence that you are born again (see Hebrews 3:6,14).

Are you genuinely loving other Christians? We have a special love for fellow Christians, as Christ loved us (1 John 3:16-18).

Is your life one of overcoming the world? Has God changed your inner life, your thoughts and your desires? Nothing can be more important, for without this experience it is impossible for you to be part of the kingdom of God.

⁹ Antichrists – those who oppose Christ by their false teaching.

¹⁰ Messiah – or Christ, the Anointed One, anointed by God to accomplish the work of salvation.

We do hear about Nicodemus again and it appears he was eventually converted (John 7:50, 19:39). He showed the evidence by refusing to be part of that judgement of Jesus without the evidence, and by honouring the Lord in His burial.

Summary. **Conversion** is being born again of the Holy Spirit.

4. BARTIMAEUS: A BLIND BEGGAR

LUKE 18:35-43

³⁵ As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. ³⁶ And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. ³⁷ They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." ³⁸ And he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ³⁹ And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁰ And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, ⁴¹ "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight." ⁴² And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." ⁴³ And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God. (Luke 18:35-43)

TRUE CONVERSION: FAITH

Another absolutely essential mark of true conversion is *faith* in Jesus Christ. Again and again Jesus remarked that it was faith through which people were saved or made well. In the Gospel of Luke alone we read the following:

*And when he saw their **faith**, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you."* (5:20) [the four men who lowered the paralytic from the roof]

*When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such **faith**." And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.* (7:9-10) [the Centurion]

*And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your **faith** has saved you; go in peace."* (7:48-50) [woman of the city]

*And he said to her, "Daughter, your **faith** has made you well; go in peace."* (8:48) [woman with a discharge]

*But Jesus on hearing this answered him, "Do not fear; only **believe**, and she will be well."* (8:50) [Jairus]

*And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your **faith** has made you well."* (17:19) [a leper]

In the account of the restoring of sight to this blind man we learn something of what this faith is. This is so important as faith is much talked about but little understood. We assume this is the same account as in Matthew's Gospel (20:29-34) where two blind men are referred to, and in Mark's Gospel (10:46-52) where one of the blind men is named as Bartimaeus. All accounts took place around Jericho as Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem for the last time.

The Tax Collector prayed for mercy, which prayer is the evidence of his faith. But we need to know more about what such faith is. This account of Bartimaeus helps us to know the character of the faith that leads to conversion. And it is vital to have the correct understanding, because in the Bible accounts many are said to have faith (to believe) when it is obviously not genuine faith. There are at least two things called 'faith' but which do not result in conversion.

- Faith in signs. We have already noted "the many" in Jerusalem of whom it is written that they "believed in His name" (2:23). They were like Nicodemus and Jesus did not "entrust"

Himself to them. Simon, the Magician, who we will consider later, was another greatly impressed by the “signs and great miracles” that Philip did (Acts 8:13). It is written that he believed and was baptized, but it was later shown to be false (8:20-23). This is a common type of faith today, and is even encouraged, but it is NOT saving faith!

- Faith in truths. It is awful to read that even the demons have what is called “faith”, because they are orthodox ¹¹ about God (James 2:19). Like Nicodemus, you can believe all the teachings of the Bible as true and yet not be converted. James describes this as a “dead” faith (2:17,26), because it does not produce living fruit of good works. True faith works through love (Galatians 5:6). True faith continues to the end through every time of testing. Of the seed that fell on the rock, we read “they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away” (Luke 8:13).

Is it a correct interpretation of the healing miracles of Christ and His Apostles to use them for teaching on True Conversion? Are they not just healing miracles? Please consider the following:

- Miracles are “signs” (e.g. John 2:11, 20:30) of who Jesus is, the Lord, with all power over nature, disease, evil spirits and death itself.
- Healing miracles are signs that the days of the Messiah have arrived (Luke 4:17-21, 7:19-23) as prophesied (Isaiah 35:5-6). Note the particular references to the blind.
- Disease, sickness and death are results of the Fall and the dispelling of them by Christ is part of His redeeming work, which will be completed in glory (Revelation 21:4).
- John uses the feeding of the 5,000 to teach that we must feed on Him (John 6), the blindness of the man born blind to speak of the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees (John 9), and the death of Lazarus to claim that He is the resurrection and the life (John 11).
- In the healing of the paralytic in Luke 5:17-26 Jesus specifically declares, “Your sins are forgiven you”.
- Healing was followed by Christian discipleship. Bartimaeus “followed Him, glorifying God”. ‘Follow’ is the language of discipleship (Luke 5:11,28, 9:23, 18:22,28).
- The emphasis on faith in the Person of Christ is a saving confession.

1. True faith begins with a conviction of personal helplessness

Here is a truly helpless person. Being blind he is forced to spend his days by the roadside in the hope that some who passed by will have mercy on him. He is even dependent on others to bring him to Jesus. There was not, and there still is not, any hope for those with congenital blindness. Poor man, condemned by his condition to live out his days with no hope of betterment.

This is a physical picture of what we all are by nature spiritually. Sin has made us spiritually blind, so we are as unable to see the truth as it is in Jesus as a blind man is unable to see the sun. So it was with the Jews (John 12:40), so it is with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4:3-6), and so it is with those who hate their brothers (1 John 2:11). And there is nothing that they themselves can do. Hear the word of God:

*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he **cannot** understand them, because they are spiritually appraised (1 Corinthians 2:14, bold mine).*

¹¹ Orthodox – having the correct doctrine.

One day you develop a headache and go to bed early in the hope of shaking it off. But it is still with you as you awake, so you take some pills to drive it away. By the end of the day you resolve to take stronger pills to get rid of it. By the next morning you feel helpless. That is when you go to the doctor to help you. It is like that with the sin problem. There is probably no one who thinks they are sinless. But most think the problem is minor, they are much better than others, so there is no need to do anything about it. But for many of you it is a bigger problem than that. So you try to deal with it yourself, like the self-help medical remedies. Some try resolutions to kick bad habits. Some think the problem can be solved by adding more religion, attending more services, praying more, even giving more. None of these can change the heart or get forgiveness of sins from God. And it is not until you are convicted of your utter helplessness to do anything to save yourself that you will exercise genuine faith. Faith is borne out of a knowledge of helplessness. You have come to the end of the rope. This describes Bartimaeus as he sat by the roadside that day.

2. True faith cries out to the only One who can help

I doubt if Bartimaeus had any idea what would transpire as he awoke that morning. He takes his usual place by the roadside and then hears the noise of a crowd coming. He cannot see anything. He wants information and is told it is “Jesus of Nazareth”. At that he is stirred into action and begins to cry out to Jesus. He says two things:

- He identifies who Jesus is – “Son of David”. This is utterly amazing. He has been told it is Jesus of Nazareth but he calls Him Son of David. David is from Bethlehem in Judah, and not Nazareth. Calling Him Son of David he is confessing that Jesus is the ruler of God’s coming kingdom, the Messiah (see Luke 1:27,32, Matthew 21:9, Luke 20:41-44). He has no physical sight but seems to be the only one with spiritual sight. Even the disciples had not understood (18:34). Faith is the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).
- He makes his plea – “Have mercy on me!” He knows he has no claim on Jesus. He is just a helpless, useless beggar. He knows there is no reason why Jesus should stop on His journey for his sake, except He is One who takes pity on the helpless (see 18:13).

We assume that as he sat by the roadside day by day he was hearing reports about this Jesus, about His teaching, about His miracles, and perhaps that He has even healed blind people like him (so Luke 7:21-22). He would have thought, ‘Then there is hope even for me, if only He passes this way’. Such reports would have made him think more deeply that this One must be the promised Messiah, the Son promised to David to sit on his throne for ever (promises such as Isaiah 9:6-7). No wonder he cries out as soon as he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth. His moment of opportunity has come, but it would all too soon be past.

This is the cry of faith, calling on the name of the only One he knew can help him. If He is the Son of David then He is the King, He rules, and has all power. He is able to do all that has been written of Him. The name of Jesus was not like a magic name to him, for he knows who He is. Faith is calling on the name of Jesus because you know who He is (Romans 10:13), the Saviour who is (1) willing to save, because He is full of pity (Mark 1:40-41), and (2) able to save because He died for sinners on the cross. Mary and the so-called saints may be willing if they could hear your cry (but they cannot), but anyway they are not able. They themselves need to believe in Jesus as the Son of David in order to be saved! Your ancestors cannot do anything to get you out of your problem of sin. Your only claim on Jesus is that He be merciful to you

(Matthew 9:27, 15:22, 17:15). Have you cried out to Him for mercy knowing that He is the One appointed by God?

3. True faith refuses to be discouraged until help is obtained

This is the unique feature of this story. Put yourself in the place of Bartimaeus. He only knows of One who can open his blind eyes and right now He is passing by. Jesus has set His face to go to Jerusalem (9:51), He is accompanied by a crowd, and this great teacher has no intention of stopping. So for Bartimaeus it is now or never! He is not able to push his way through the crowd to Jesus. All he can do is to cry out. So what does he do when those in the crowd going before Jesus 'rebuke him and tell him to be silent'? 'He cries out all the more'!

Faith is often tested in this way to show its genuineness, or otherwise. Abraham was promised a son and he had to wait 25 years for the fulfilment of the promise. He was now approaching 100 years of age, and his wife Sarah had never had a child (she was barren) and was by now far past the age of child-bearing. Yet we read, "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body ... No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised" (Romans 4:19-21). Abraham's faith was further tested after his son was born (Genesis 22:1). Job's faith was tested (Job 23:10). The faith of Peter's readers was being tested (1 Peter 1:6-7). If faith is genuine it will not stop until the mercy it seeks is granted. Those who cry out but once do not really need what they are asking for. Those who are discouraged by others and give up are not serious enough. Salvation does not just drop into your lap; it is far too precious for that. You must earnestly seek for it. This is powerfully expressed in the hymn of William Hammond, where every verse ends with the words,

Give me Christ, or else I die!

This idea that you can just repeat a prayer dictated by the evangelist and you will be saved for eternity is so far removed from the Biblical conception of faith. What is called 'The Sinner's Prayer' has deceived many into thinking that by merely saying the words they are converted when they are not. True faith is a far deeper activity of the soul than mouthing words.

This was actually Jesus' last time in Jericho. The cross was only days away. What if reading this is the last time you come to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ? Through the words on these pages He is passing by. Call upon Him in your helplessness for mercy because of your sins, and keep calling out until you know your sins are forgiven.

4. Jesus will certainly save one exercising such faith

Jesus is part of a crowd walking through Jericho. The purpose for which He came into this world, the awful cross, lies ahead of Him. There must be a great hubbub from the crowd and bystanders, an excitement because of being with Jesus, an anticipation that perhaps Jesus is going to do some great thing in Jerusalem. 'And Jesus stops'! We can understand if it is a synagogue ruler crying out, or a Roman centurion, or some other VIP. But it is a blind and helpless beggar. That is the one voice Jesus hears, because it is the cry of faith. May we say that Jesus *must* stop. He cannot close His ears to such a cry. However pitiable and hopeless your condition might be, He will stop when you cry to Him in faith.

Jesus asks him a strange question, for his need is obvious to everyone. But Jesus asks him what he wants Him to do in order to draw out his faith. Does he really believe Jesus is able

to give him sight? Bartimaeus does not need to ponder over his answer. What about you? If Jesus were to call you and ask what you want Him to do for you, how would you respond? What do you consider is your one great need? Is it your spiritual blindness, so that you might come to see both the gravity of your sin and the glory of Christ the Saviour to fully deal with that sin? This is the way Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:3-6:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Jesus does the impossible, He gives to Bartimaeus the sight for which he cries out. Note that it is immediate. He only has to speak the words, "Recover your sight!" and it is done. One word from Jesus, the Son of God, and winds cease, spirits flee, and even graves give up the dead. The power is in Jesus, yet it is in response to the man's faith. "Your faith has made you well" (literally 'saved you'). There is no other way that salvation may be experienced but through faith.

How do we know that Bartimaeus is saved, that he receives more than his physical sight? He starts to follow Jesus; he becomes His disciple. Where Jesus goes, he goes; what Jesus asks him to do, he does. He becomes his Lord and Master. Of course this is what Jesus now means to him, for He is the Son of David, the King. He is filled with joy as he constantly gives glory to God. Salvation is such a wonderful thing, all of mercy, obtained by Jesus Himself on my behalf. All who witness and hear the story likewise give praise to God (so also in 4:15, 5:26, 7:16).

Summary. **Conversion** is crying out to the Lord in faith for salvation.

5. THE PRODIGAL SON: A REBEL

LUKE 15:11-24

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11-24)

Amongst people whose conversions are recorded in the Gospels there is a great variety showing that God is no respecter of persons. There is no one who has any advantage over another, such as a religious Pharisee (Nicodemus), or a rich ruler, as compared to a beggar (Bartimaeus). Nor is there anyone who forfeits the possibility of conversion by a wicked lifestyle, for there is a tax collector (Zacchaeus), a wayward son (the Prodigal), even a convicted criminal. Conversion is open to everyone and anyone because it is by grace through faith and not by works.

TRUE CONVERSION: CONFESSION OF SIN

One is now brought before us for whom there is no evidence of any religiousness. Here is a young man who only seems interested in himself. It is to be thought of as a parable (verse 3), a story of a rebellious son who, after a season away from home, returns in humility to his father. On what basis may we say that Jesus is here teaching about what it means to be converted? There are some lines of evidence:

★ The background of Luke chapter 15 shows why Jesus told these three parables (verses 1-2). Jesus was getting too close to "tax collectors and sinners". With the emphasis in the parables on the joy of each lost one being found (verses 6-7,9-10,22-24,32), there is a great contrast with the "grumbling" of the Pharisees and the scribes. Their attitude is that of the older son (verse 25) when they ought to be rejoicing that lost ones have been found.

★ The first two parables, of the lost sheep and the lost coin, specifically mention the one sinner that repents (verses 7,10). This third parable can be entitled 'The Lost Son' and, although the word repentance is not actually used, it is what the young man does (verse 21).

★ Elsewhere Jesus makes it quite clear that His purpose in eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners is that they might repent (Luke 5:29-32).

Note on the interpretation of *Parables*.

Many mistakes are made in interpreting parables because the main purpose of each parable is not taken into account.

(1) Many of the details in the parable are there just to make up the story. The son must go away to somewhere, and do something to render him penniless so that in time of need he will consider going back to his father. There are those who want to give a spiritual meaning to various details (allegorize), so that the citizen = the devil (verse 15), the servants = gospel ministers (verse 22), and the fatted calf = the Lord's Supper (verse 23)! The specific situation out of which the parable is told must control the interpretation (verses 1-2, and the "so" in the next verse). Such specific details are given as other parables are told (see, for example, Luke 18:1 and 9).

(2) Because there is one main point many things that go up to make true Biblical conversion are not included. The purpose of the story is to paint such a bad picture of the younger son so that he is one with tax collectors and sinners. Then there is the fact that he returned to his father who received him so unconditionally and joyfully. This is the point – if even the worst sinner humbly returns to God in confession of sin then he will be fully received. It must not be concluded that because there is nothing about a mediator between the son and the father then one is not needed; or because it is only the thinking of the son that is recorded that therefore the sinner is able to return to God by himself without the power of the Holy Spirit.

What is the special contribution of this account of the Prodigal Son to our understanding of conversion? How is such a bold sinner brought to confess his sins, how should this confession be done, and what will be the reception of God to such a one?

1. The sin that needs Confession (15:11-16)

➤ The sin of the Prodigal Son. 'Prodigal' means wasteful, spending recklessly. The accusation of the older son that he has devoured your property with prostitutes was only an assumption, and may well have been true. Details of the wicked lifestyle of this younger son form the backdrop to the amazing reception of his father when he returned home.

- He fails to honour his father. To request his share of the property that was to come to him (inheritance) is the same as saying to his father, 'I wish you are dead'! It is upon the death of the father that he would expect to receive his share. Obviously he desperately wants to be away from the restrictions of home life and to go to a far country where his father would have no influence over him. Having no honour for his father it was "not many days" after his request had been granted that he leaves with everything. It seems like he cannot wait to go.
- He is utterly selfish. "He squandered his property in reckless living." He is only interested in gratifying his own desires, something he could not have done while at home.
- He is reckless. He has no thought of tomorrow, but quickly spends all that he has. So when a severe famine arises he has nothing with which to survive. How foolish he is. While he has means he has 'friends', but when he has nothing they all desert him. In his need "no one gave him anything".

- He is destitute. This is the depth to which he sinks. He has looked for freedom and happiness, but now he has to hire himself out to feed pigs. Remember that pigs were unclean animals for Jews, so he is not only feeding unclean animals but is also a servant of a Gentile. He is so hungry that he is longing to eat even the pig's food, but he is not given anything. It cannot get worse.
- Your sin. Go to that pathetic room and see the emaciated figure in death throes from AIDS. She was once at home with her father. Now go to that hospital bed and hear the groanings of one who abandoned himself to pleasure, to drinking and smoking. Finally go to that mortuary and view on the slab the body that was given to crime. All these had a father, and most had a father who cared for them. The devil never whispers in a person's ear, "The wages of sin is death" (as in Romans 6:23). Perhaps you reply, 'Yes, I know there are many like that who have turned away in rebellion, but that is not me.' And thank God that you are still alive to read this. You have been much more clever and careful. But I ask you, have you always honoured your parents from the heart? As one who was considered to be a respectful young man I did things I would not have wanted my parents to know about. Who can say they have not been living for self? Are you thinking of a time in the future when you will have to leave everything behind? Don't pretend that everything is OK with you. In principle all of us are like the Prodigal Son and need to make the same confession. There can be no true conversion until we come to know and acknowledge we are sinners.

2. The resolve to make Confession of sin (15:17-19)

(1) What makes him change his thoughts? Why does he 'come to himself' (verse 17)? Many do not change but continue headlong into destruction. Perhaps it is too humbling to admit you have been going in the wrong way. Why did this young man have to go to the very depths so that he must have even despaired of life itself? The fact is that it is easy to go through life without facing reality as we put on a good show before others. Hardship is often the means of bringing us to our senses; perhaps we should say, the means that God uses, although that is not the focus here. But it was not the famine, not even the work of feeding pigs, but that no one gives him anything, that he is utterly destitute, that turns him around. The worst ignorance is not to know yourself, your real condition. Take an honest look at yourself – are you really where you say you are? Have you turned your back on God, are you living your life just as you want, or are you submitting yourself to all that God wants of you? When you come to yourself and begin to think then there is hope!

(2) His resolve to return to his father (verse 18). Being at the end of his resources there is only one place left to go, home. There is no hope in money for it has all gone. There is no hope in friends for they have all forsaken him. There is no hope in his employer as he is given the most degrading job. As long as he thinks there is hope somewhere else, that he can do something, he will never return to his father. It is too humiliating, and anyway he cannot be at all sure he will be welcomed. Why should the father receive back such a rebellious son? Because he is his father, and even cares for his hired servants. In the same way, you will never go back to God until you cease to put any hope in what you can try to do today or think you might do tomorrow.

(3) His resolve to confess his sin (verses 18-19). He might have done what Adam and Eve did and made excuses for his situation. Adam blamed his wife, and Eve blamed the serpent. The young man could have pleaded that when he arrived in the far country he was deceived by

others, or that there was no way he could have anticipated the famine situation, or even that his father was really at fault for not properly preparing him for life in the world. No, he took all the blame upon himself. First, he knew he had sinned against God (see Psalm 51:4), at least by dishonouring his father in disobedience to the 5th. commandment. Second, he knew he had sinned against his father, whose love he had spurned, and whose possessions he had squandered. He had left home demanding his full rights, but now he resolves to return demanding nothing for “I am no longer worthy to be called your son”. He is willing to occupy the lowest place, that of a “hired servant”. As one has so aptly commented: ‘He shows himself to be worthy who confesses himself to be unworthy’, like the Roman Centurion (Luke 7:6). As good as these resolves were, there was no true conversion until he carried them out.

3. The Confession (15:20-21)

The Prodigal Son travels home and before he can arrive at the gate his father signals his delight in seeing his son again by his warm embrace. He then repeats what he has resolved to say, that he has sinned against both him and heaven, and is no longer worthy to be called his son. Note what confession involves.

(1) Confession of sin: “I have sinned against heaven and before you.” The ‘sin’ word is hard to say, yet without it there is no genuine confession. Confession is not saying I have made some bad choices, I have made a few mistakes. No doubt those things are true, but to confess sin is to say that I have broken God’s law, for sin is “lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). Sin is first of all against God. It is His law we have disobeyed. Why was David’s adultery wrong? Because God had commanded, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). By sinning against God we so often sin against others. So the son could not remain in the far country and just confess to God. He must come home and come before his father and confess to his father that he knows he has wronged him. This is often the evidence of true confession. For example, you begin to feel guilt over angry words that you uttered, that before you had excused by justifying yourself. It is right to confess the anger to God, but you must also confess to the one with whom you were angry.

Sadly, there are many who expect to be converted without any confession of sin. They come to God because they have a need; they are sick, they are poor. And because their circumstances improve they think God is so favourable to them that they must have been converted. This is deception. It is so apparent that this young man was in desperate need of the basics of life and he knows they are there in his father’s house. But it is not this need he brings to his father for he knows that it is his sin that is behind his present circumstances. Sin separates us from God like the cloud hides the sun (Isaiah 59:2). In order for there to be reconciliation with God sin must be dealt with. This is why the Scripture says, “If we confess our *sins*, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

(2) Confession of unworthiness: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Our sin means that we have no claim whatsoever on God. If He decided that we should be punished for our sins, we know that is what we deserve, even eternal hell. There is no attempt to cover up any sin, no making sin less serious than it really is, no thinking that promises for the future will in any way mitigate sins of the past. It is facing up to reality before God. I am one of those of whom it is declared, “None is righteous, no, not one ...; no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10,12), and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (verse 23). If God does anything but judge me then it can only be on the basis of His infinite mercy.

4. God's reception of such Confession (15:22-24)

This is the climax of the story, the reason why Jesus told it. What an amazing reception by the father. It ought to shock us. In reality, could it happen? If it would not happen among earthly fathers, it does happen with the heavenly Father.

(1) The father acts as if the son had done nothing wrong. We get the picture that daily this father is pining for his lost son, scanning the horizon to see if he is at last returning. Then at last he sees him! He does not wait for him to come home that he might give him a dressing down for his rebellious ways. Although an old man, he takes the initiative and runs to meet him. Before his son has the opportunity to utter a word his heart of compassion makes him embrace his son and give kisses of reconciliation. There is no making the son wait outside in humiliation, no silence for the son to make confession, no criticism of what the son has done. Rather it is the father who humiliates himself to show the genuineness of his love. Don't look at this father and think that he represents God; rather it is God who is like this father joyfully welcoming the repentant prodigal. We find the past so hard to forget, and our conscience often accuses us for past sins. But God has promised he will remember our sins no more (so Jeremiah 31:34). That means He will never act towards us as one who has been in the "far country".

(2) The father makes him a full son. The son has resolved to say that he is willing to be just a hired servant, if only he can be back in the home. Even that would be more than he deserved. The father does not accept him back conditionally with a period of apprenticeship to see if his confession is genuine. No! He is given all the external emblems of sonship, only the best robe that is worthy of a son, a ring for the hand that is the symbol of authority in the home, and shoes to show that he is a freeman and not a slave. The father is pictured as being in a hurry to get these things completed as he commands his servants to bring them "quickly". What explains why he showed such extravagant love? Let the father's words tell: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." A great feast ensues to cap it all off. What a day of rejoicing! Likewise, when you come to God in confession of sin, He gives you His Holy Spirit as the evidence He has adopted you into His family (Galatians 4:6-7). He makes you feel you are a son so that from your heart you can address Him as "Abba, Father".

What does it mean to be truly converted? There comes a time when you 'come to yourself'. You come to understand that you have been living a life of rebellion against God. You have forfeited the blessings of the Father's home. You unreservedly confess this sin to God and humble yourself. You offer no excuses. You do not seek to ingratiate yourself, as the Pharisee did, by telling God you are not as bad as others, and that you have tried your best but circumstances were against you. No, you cast yourself upon God's mercy. And deep down you know that God is merciful, for He sent His Son for sinners like you. If you come to Him in this way He will royally receive you. That is what this parable is all about.

Summary. **Conversion** is humbly confessing one's sin to God.

6. THE RICH YOUNG RULER: A DISAPPOINTED SEEKER

LUKE 18:18-30

¹⁸ And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honour your father and mother.'" ²¹ And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth." ²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²³ But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. ²⁴ Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶ Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ But he said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." ²⁸ And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you." ²⁹ And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰ who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." (Luke 18:18-30)

It is always very instructive to look at two sides of a question. We may not only examine accounts of those who were genuinely converted, but we may also learn much from those who wanted to be converted but were not. The rich young Ruler is very helpful in deepening our understanding of conversion as one who came to Christ but went away unconverted.

TRUE CONVERSION: FOLLOWING CHRIST

What a difference there is between this man and the Prodigal Son! Instinctively we would think that this is the man who will be converted. But God's ways are not our ways. This man comes of his own accord without invitation. He asks the most important question, about inheriting eternal life. He is a "ruler" (verse 18), probably in a synagogue; he is extremely rich (verse 23) that people thought was surely a sign of God's blessing on him. Matthew in his Gospel tells us he is young (19:20). How far he has come in a short span of years. And he comes to the Master Evangelist, the Lord Jesus. Surely it will only be a matter of minutes before this man is converted! That is how it is often done today. Someone comes to the Evangelist. Perhaps a few questions are asked, then a prayer is said, and the person is assured that he is now converted, and not to doubt it. But not so with the Lord. He lets the 'fish' get away. What is going on? Why was this man not converted? It is so important to see that not everyone who wishes to be converted actually gets converted. There are certain conditions, and this man was not willing to fulfil them.

Picture the next Sunday morning in your church assembly. The worship has begun when a shiny limousine enters the parking lot with a convoy of SUVs. An immaculately dressed young man emerges and, awaiting no formalities, runs up to the preacher at the front of the gathering, kneels (Mark 10:17), and bursts out that he wants to know what to do to be saved! Can you hear the echoes of 'Praise the Lord' all around? The preacher knows what to tell him in three simple steps. 'Confess you are a sinner', and every Jew knew there was no one without sin (as 1 Kings 8:46). 'Invite Jesus into your heart as your personal Saviour.' 'Now

pray this prayer after me. Never doubt that God has kept His promise of John 3:16.’ After the service the man goes away rejoicing in salvation. But none of that happened here with this young man. If Jesus did not do this, or anything like this, then it is not Jesus who is wrong but ourselves. This goes far to explain why there are so many false converts. Luke is presenting a description of those who will enter the kingdom of God. It will be the humble tax collector and not the proud Pharisee (18:9-14). It will be those who receive it like a child (18:15-17). It will be those who do not love their possessions (18:18-30).

The Altar Call and Sinner’s Prayer

All over the world crusades and other special meetings take place with the aim of seeing people converted to Jesus Christ. After the preaching the listeners are encouraged to give a physical response, e.g. by raising their hands or walking to the front. These people are prayed for or even asked to repeat a prayer (the ‘sinner’s prayer’). They will probably be given the assurance that they are now converted/saved/born again and should never doubt it. Despite it being so common, why is it wrong?

1. It is not what Jesus did. Although the rich young Ruler had wanted eternal life, Jesus let him go away without it! Why did Jesus not get him to repeat a prayer? Clearly there is much more to conversion than saying words in a prayer, as the exposition below will show. Why did Jesus not lead Nicodemus in a prayer as he seemed ripe for conversion? Jesus was not impressed by large crowds but warned them to count the cost before professing to be a disciple (read Luke 14:25-33).
2. There is no example of such a practice in the Bible. The apostles never asked for a physical response after their preaching, unless it was for baptism. Those who asked, “What shall we do?” were told, “Repent and be baptized...” (Acts 2:37-38). The man who asked, “What must I do to be saved?” was told, “Believe in the Lord Jesus,...” (Acts 16:30-31).
3. It is a new practice in the church, being only about 200 years old. For about 1800 years the church grew without such an evangelistic strategy. It was Charles Finney who brought it into prominence in the 1830s. He was not orthodox in his doctrine, believing that conversion is only a matter of persuading a person’s will. He did not believe that sin has so influenced us that we are unable to choose (as Jesus in John 6:44,65). It shows that evangelistic practice flows out of what we believe is the nature of man. Medicine is always given appropriate to the diagnosis.
4. It is against the Biblical doctrine of conversion as we hope you are beginning to understand as you read this book. The overwhelming majority of those who respond to the Altar Call turn out to be false converts as a result. We are not denying that conversion involves a choice of the will. But such a commitment depends on the work of the Holy Spirit in conviction and not on a place and time determined by an Evangelist.

If you wish to pursue this further read Elly Achok Olare, *Hell’s Best Revealed Secret, Reflections on the Invitation System*.

In considering Jesus’ dealings with this rich young Ruler, we shall see three reasons why he went away from Jesus sad, and unconverted. These three things are necessary for true conversion.

1. He does not know who God is (18:19)

He addresses Jesus as “Good” Teacher. The use of the label ‘good’ for someone standing in front of you was almost unheard of as it was reserved for God (see Psalm 34:8, 100:5, 106:1, cf. 14:1). Although this Ruler obviously has the greatest respect for Jesus he does not consider Him as Divine, as he goes away without obeying Him. It is possible he says it to flatter Jesus knowing that flattery is a useful tool in order to gain favour.

It might be assumed that every Jew knew the character of their God, but Jesus must inform him. By asking him why he calls Him good, and telling him that only God is good, Jesus is not denying that He is good, but He is making the Ruler consider what true goodness is. God Himself is the final standard of all good. All God does He pronounces as good, as at creation (Genesis 1:31). God makes no mistakes, and does not fail to complete His work. If conversion is conversion to God then we must know who God is. This is the Biblical method. So Jesus has to tell the Samaritan woman that “God is Spirit” (John 4:24). So Paul has to tell the Athenians that God does not live in temples made by man (Acts 17:24-25). If it is God who gives eternal life then you must know what **God** approves and disapproves. Unless you know who God really is you do not know why you have offended Him, and why he threatens you with judgement, or how He can save you. The Ruler desperately wants eternal life and he does not know why it is not his because he does not know God.

Today Evangelists regularly begin with the love of God. ‘God loves you,’ they say. So people hearing this naturally think that they don’t have a great problem before God. Imagine a murderer in the dock in the Court Room being assured from the start of proceedings that the State and its Magistrate love him. This would make him quite sure the outcome will be OK. So if you want eternal life, remember you must deal with the One who is Goodness in Himself, and He (not you) will determine whether you are approved or not.

2. He does not know what God requires (18:20-21)

Jesus continues by directing the Ruler to the Ten Commandments. Being of the number 10, this is a complete summary of what is “good”. The Law is described as “good” (Romans 7:12-13), and the one who obeys it fully is like God. This man thinks this is an accurate description of his life. He professes full obedience, as Paul does before he became a Christian (see Philippians 3:6). There is no doubt he is sincere – he has not committed adultery, or murder, he is not a thief, he does not bear false witness, he honours his parents. So he thinks. Jesus does not take him to task over the claim. He could have done, for as He taught, to be angry with a brother, to insult him, to say “You fool!” is as murder (Matthew 5:22). Perhaps you are like him thinking that the Law only applies to outward actions, forgetting that such actions are preceded by words and thoughts that make you just as guilty before God. Instead of showing him by this explanation Jesus takes him to the 10th. commandment and applies it to his situation. The Ruler is outwardly very moral, very well respected, full of religious zeal, and desires the most important thing – eternal life. Yet he has a fatal spiritual disease in his heart that has to be cured. Jesus puts His finger on it when He commands him to sell all he possesses, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow Him. This was the way to have treasure in heaven, or eternal life. He has not known that his love for his riches (he was “extremely rich”, verse 23) is idolatry, putting something else before the God who clearly commands, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3). Sadly his walking away shows that his riches are more important to him than eternal life.

Paul tells us that it is the same commandment through which he became convinced he is a sinner before God (read Romans 7:7-11). One of the most important uses of the Law of God is to show us our sin: “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). How will anyone want to be converted if they do not know what they need to be converted from? It is not from poverty, sickness or lack of education, but from sin. How will anyone be convinced of their sins except by an understanding of the Law of God? Have you ever read carefully through the Ten

Commandments, for example? Have you considered that it is not just outward obedience that God requires, but also obedience with the lips and in the heart? Have you considered that sin is not only doing what God forbids, but failing to do what God commands? You claim to love God, but do you love Him “with **all** your heart and with **all** your soul and with **all** your mind” (Matthew 22:37)? To only reach 90% obedience, even if that were possible, is to fall short of what God requires. And more, have you considered that if you break the Law of God in one point then you are guilty as a law-breaker (so James 2:10-11)? A murderer cannot hope to be excused because he is not an adulterer.

The Ruler wants to know what to do to inherit eternal life. He hears from the lips of the One he called “Good Teacher” exactly what he must do. He is told to do much more than confess his sin. He is to forsake his serving of his wealth, which is called repentance. “No man can serve two masters, ... You cannot serve God and money” (Luke 16:13). Many think this command to the Ruler does not apply to them, claiming that Jesus did not tell everyone to sell all their possessions. Of course, in one sense this is true, for He did not tell the rich Zacchaeus to do this (Luke 19:1-10). Yet, in another sense, Jesus has already given clear instruction that anyone wanting to be His disciple must “renounce **all** that he has” (Luke 14:33, see also Philippians 3:8). This is a basic requirement right at the outset of discipleship of Jesus Christ. It involves two things:

- As a disciple of Christ I belong to Him. I have been bought with the price of His blood, so I do not belong to myself (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Nothing that I have is mine; it is all His, in His service and for His glory. In that sense a disciple has renounced everything.
- There are specific idols that must be renounced, what we might call ‘master sins’. For the Ruler it was his love of riches. It is whatever you strive for as your great goal in life, that to which you devote your energies day in and day out. For some it is the job. It could be to obtain possessions such as land, a house, a car. It might be to have large savings in the bank. It can even be one’s family and children. Amazingly it can be religion!

How can you tell if you have renounced everything? It is when God’s will and your pursuit of any of these things come into conflict. Which do you follow? Take a simple example. You can get the job you have always striven for if only you will make a ‘contribution’ (in reality, a bribe). God clearly says don’t give a bribe (e.g. Proverbs 15:27), but you want the job. Herod had to choose between the unlawfulness of having his brother’s wife (Mark 6:18) and obeying the voice of God through John the Baptist. He chose to silence John’s tongue by having his head severed.

So true conversion involves a fundamental change in the whole attitude to life. Whatever comes between me and my God must be put aside, whatever the consequences. No doubt Peter and the apostles loved their lives. They were clearly commanded by the rulers of Israel “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18). On the other hand God had commissioned them to so speak and teach. They made it quite clear to the rulers that they will obey God rather than men (4:19, 5:29). These were the very same rulers that had condemned their Lord to death, and might well do the same to His followers. They chose to keep speaking even if it meant the forfeiture of their lives. Becoming a true Christian has implications for finance and possessions and even life itself.

3. He does not obey Jesus Christ (18:22-23)

The Ruler wants to know what to do to inherit eternal life. He is told, but he is not willing to obey. If he really thinks Jesus is the “Good Teacher” he ought to follow his instructions

unreservedly and joyfully. That is what it means to “receive the kingdom of God like a child” (verse 17). By becoming “very sad” at what Jesus told him he clearly shows he is not willing to be a disciple. This is why he falls short of true conversion. This is why he seeks eternal life but does not find it. No one can have eternal life from Christ without obeying Him as their Lord.

Amazingly, there are some who teach that it is possible to have Christ as Saviour and so be assured of eternal life, but not to have Him as Lord of life. I have even read that it has been taught that if one makes a decision for Christ to be his Saviour then later he may even become an atheist but he will still be saved on the last day! How is it possible for one to be assured of eternal life yet he continues to live as he has always lived? How few real Christians there seem to be. If you are not prepared to do whatever Jesus says, then you are not ready for eternal life. Put it the other way round. You cannot expect to inherit eternal life if you do not give yourself in unreserved obedience to your Saviour. The two are inseparable. This is not salvation by works. Why do you come to Christ in the first place? To get eternal life. You know it is because of sin that you are barred from heaven. So you come to Christ to deal with your sins. You want to be forgiven so that you may no longer live in sin. But if you continue to live in that sin you show you did not want salvation at all. When you come to understand that your possessions have come between you and God then you must start to use them in Christ’s service and even give them away. How is it possible to know something is sin against God, the very God who you say has saved you from your sins, and yet you continue in that sin? How can you continue in that relationship with an unbeliever that God says is sin?

One great lack in Christian teaching is that would-be disciples are not warned of the cost to be counted in becoming a disciple. Rather, it is only the benefits that are presented, and they *are* many and glorious! Imagine a navy recruit only being told of the wonderful skills he will learn and that he will have the opportunity to travel the world. Nothing is mentioned about the very rigid discipline and the hardship that must be endured. This is not the way Christ and His apostles dealt with seekers and professed disciples.

A person’s enemies will be those of his own household (Matthew 10:36)

The one who endures to the end will be saved (Matthew 24:13)

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26)

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22)

So here is the great question for you to face. Are you following Christ? Are you keeping His commandments? It is because of the Ruler’s refusal to do so as regards his riches that instead of inheriting the eternal life he desired he forfeited it. Do not deceive yourself into thinking that you can be careless with what Christ commands you and still be truly converted.

Summary. **Conversion** is following Christ above everything else.

7. THE CRIMINAL: A MOST WICKED MAN

LUKE 23:39-43

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

TRUE CONVERSION: ONLY FAITH

This is surely the most amazing conversion account! Who would have expected such a wicked man to have been converted while nailed to a cross and about to leave this world? Such 'death-bed' conversions are rare even though eternity is staring people in the face.

This event takes place at Calvary, literally, The Skull (verse 33), otherwise known as Golgotha (Mark 15:22), just outside Jerusalem. It is hard to imagine a more awful spectacle, three crosses, and three men slowly dying in the greatest agonies. The One in the centre is Jesus of Nazareth. He is the focus of attention, utterly shamed, universally mocked, with no one to speak a good word about Him. Even one of the criminals joins in, railing at Jesus in his desperation, but having no hope. He calls on Jesus as the Christ but does not really believe as he is only looking for their lives to be prolonged (verse 39). You would think he would keep quiet or have words of sympathy as both were suffering alike. But such is the power of example to lead people astray that he follows the others (verses 35-36). We learn that there is no automatic blessing from suffering. The same sun melts fat, but hardens mud. The emphasis in the passage is on the other criminal and his lone voice putting his faith in the dying Jesus. The spotlight is on his amazing faith, and the immediate blessings that he received.

1. THE MOST WICKED MAY BE TRULY CONVERTED

No Roman citizen was to be crucified. It was a form of punishment reserved for those considered the worst of men. This man is simply called a "criminal" (verses 32-33,39). We do not know exactly what crimes he had committed, and we do not even know his name. But we do hear him confess that his punishment is just, as he admits "we are receiving the due reward of our deeds". Of Barabbas, who ought to have been crucified instead of Jesus, we know that he "had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder" (verses 18-19,25). Such criminals will stop at nothing in order to accomplish their aims. They will allow no one to get in their way. This is the sort of man who is converted this day.

We shall see later that the man who described himself as 'the chief of sinners' (Paul) was converted. All kinds of wicked people are converted – those who live for pleasure (the Prodigal), the irreligious (the tax collector), the rich (Zacchaeus), the immoral (Luke 7:37). There is no kind of wicked person who is outside the possibility of being saved. It does not matter what you have done and for how long you have done it. Even the most wicked king

of Judah, Manasseh, was converted (2 Chronicles 33:12-13). I have often heard the testimony of one Christian who grew up in false religion that, 'If Jesus could save me, He can save anyone!' So there is hope for you.

2. IT IS FAITH AND NOT WORKS THAT LEADS TO TRUE CONVERSION

It ought to be abundantly obvious that the most wicked are not converted because of their works, for they have none. The only thing they bring to the table is their wickedness. If such are to be converted then it has to be for another reason. Actually we are all wicked. Some, thankfully not very many, are like this criminal. Many are religious and live respectable lives, but they are proud. Jesus' harshest words were reserved for such, the Pharisees. There is nothing more abominable in the sight of God than pride, trusting in oneself (remember the Pharisee in Luke 18:9).

This short conversation between Jesus and the Criminal reveals how different he was from his wicked companion dying the other side of Jesus, and thus his very great faith. Remember, this is not a cosy discussion over a cup of tea. Jesus, the One he is addressing, is dying in utter shame and weakness, everyone is speaking against Him, and not even His disciples are present. And his is the only voice on Jesus' side and he is also dying terribly! Look at five things that describe his faith.

(1) He hates sin.

He rebukes his fellow sufferer for his wickedness in reviling Jesus (verse 40). Those who have faith in Christ cannot bear to hear His wonderful name blasphemed. He understood the implication of the desperate cry to save them – if He were the Christ then He would save them, but because He is not doing so He is not the Christ that He claims to be. Here is a wicked man, justly condemned, with just a few hours to live, in agony, but lashing out against One who has not reviled in return for reviling, but who has forgiven His crucifiers. He has no idea that he is so soon to appear before the divine Judge yet he has no sense of sin or of eternity. Not so this other criminal. He shows his fear of God, for "the fear of the Lord is hatred of evil" (Proverbs 8:13).

This is where conversion begins. Up to now this man has lived a criminal life but his attitude has changed. We are not told why. Surely at least a big part is what he has been seeing and hearing concerning Jesus. He does not hear the customary words of cursing but amazing words of forgiveness (verse 34, see 1 Peter 2:22-23). There is something completely different about this man Jesus. It is most likely that he had heard stories about Him and when he is side-by-side he can only see his own wickedness.

(2) He humbles himself.

His hatred of sin makes him humble himself for his sin. He admits he deserves his punishment (verse 41). No excuses, no extenuating circumstances are pleaded, no blaming companions or the devil, no empty promises to change if Jesus could somehow get him loosed from the cross. True faith is always mixed with the confession that judgement, even the most severe, is deserved (as David in Psalm 51:3-4). This was the difference between the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the parable (Luke 18:9-14). The Tax Collector was filled with shame and sorrow because he knew what his sins deserved. So also the Prodigal Son knew he did not deserve to be received back as a son, and at best could only hope to be as a hired servant.

It is not enough to agree that you have sinned and done wickedly. Has that knowledge humbled you before God? Have you confessed to God, not only your sin, but that if He were

to condemn you it is only what you deserve? The Psalmist exclaims, "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). It is the hardest thing, shall we say impossible to the one without faith, to admit one's guilt and take full responsibility for it. It is the mark of one who is truly converted.

(3) He exalts Jesus.

Here is yet another testimony to add to that of Pilate (verses 4,14), Herod (verse 15), who found no guilt in Him, and of the "great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for Him" (verse 27). The Criminal declares that "this man has done nothing wrong" (verse 41). He has probably not met Jesus before, but he is quite sure that although being crucified together with them He is not at all like them. Despite the greatest provocation of scoffing, mocking and railing, and the suffering of crucifixion, no coarse or angry words come from His lips. This is suffering the like of which he has never witnessed before. He must have asked, 'Who is this man?' He knows there is the claim He is the King of the Jews (verse 38). He knows it is said that He is the Christ of God, His chosen One (verses 35,39). All this he accepts wanting to be part of the coming kingdom of Jesus (verse 42). What faith! Here is Jesus dying in the utmost humiliation and weakness, yet he is convinced that He is a King. The rulers scoff at Him, the soldiers mock Him, the other criminal rails at Him. All they see is a man in his weakness, one helpless, even a wicked man. But this criminal sees reality, Jesus as a King with a glorious kingdom. This is faith, "the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

Today there are many views about Jesus. Some actually claim that He never existed. Some say He was a good man with nice teaching, but His crucifixion showed that He failed. Others say He was a child of His time and had many wrong views, such as a belief in hell. Others go further and say that, although He was born an ordinary man, God adopted Him as His Son. This dying criminal did not have the privilege of full teaching but he was convinced that Jesus is a great King, the Messiah promised for long ages. Somehow he knew that Jesus would overcome death and reign and he put all his trust in Him. You today have so much more teaching about Jesus in the entire New Testament. He is clearly set forth as God, the second person of the Trinity, come in the flesh; God's anointed One to save His people from their sins and bringing them into His eternal kingdom. Is this how you exalt Jesus of Nazareth?

(4) He desires spiritual blessings.

His companion wants deliverance from the cross; this one is looking for a future, spiritual kingdom. He is not interested in a Roman-kind of kingdom, but in a Jesus-kind. It is impossible to know exactly what is going through his mind as we only have these few words here. But he is certainly saying goodbye to this present existence.

Isn't it noteworthy that the prayers of many today are more like that of the unbelieving criminal than the believing one? People are being encouraged to pray for health, long life and prosperity. Yet Jesus specifically told Pilate that His kingdom is not from the world (John 18:36). Faith is not first of all interested in how long we spend in this world, and what our outward condition is. Like Paul, we will seek to learn contentment in any and every situation (Philippians 4:11-12). Faith is much more interested in the glory of God, the coming of His kingdom, and the doing of His will (as in the Lord's Prayer). The Christian wants to hear the "Well done, good servant" (Luke 19:17). This is why when Paul started his letter of the Ephesians he gives thanks for the 'spiritual blessings in Christ' (1:3). Is this the emphasis of your faith?

(5) He prays to Jesus

As Jesus is leaving this world just as he is also, the Criminal prays to be 'remembered' at a future time. He is asking, 'Do not forget me, but bless me. I am not asking for a great position, just let me be in your kingdom.' This is an amazing prayer of faith in the presence of universal hostility against Jesus, especially of the religious leaders. He believed even though Jesus was hanging, as a cursed one, on a Roman cross.

If he believed under these circumstances, will you not believe now that Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day, and has been exalted to the right hand of God, and rules over all things as King, especially of His church? The Father was well pleased with Him and received Him back into heaven. Through faith in Him you will also be received. Call upon Him, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

3. TRUE SALVATION IS IMMEDIATE AND FULL

We are referring to this as 'salvation' for there was an immediate response from Jesus to this criminal's request. 'Conversion' better describes the whole process.

So listen carefully to the response of Jesus to this poor criminal:

Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise (verse 43).

There are two things about salvation that are contained in these words.

(1) Salvation is *immediate*. He asks, "When you come", and Jesus replies "Today"! He will not linger in agony on the cross for days, as some did. He will die that very day and as he dies will receive the blessing he asked for. Shortly after He utters these words Jesus calls out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit My spirit" (verse 46), and so He leaves this world. He does not go to hell, as some mistakenly suppose (wrongly thinking this is what 1 Peter 3:19 teaches), but to His Father in heaven. On the night of His betrayal Jesus had reiterated this fact (read John 13:3, 14:3,28, 16:5,17,28). If that very day of death Jesus goes to be with the Father, and that very day the criminal is to be with Him, the conclusion is obvious. The criminal does not have to wait some future process but immediately goes into Jesus' presence in glory. This exposes two false teachings about what happens after death.

- ★ Our souls or spirits do not sleep ¹² until the day of resurrection as many cults teach. Believers go immediately to be with Christ (see also Luke 16:22 and Philippians 1:23).
- ★ Our souls or spirits do not pass through so-called Purgatory ¹³ in preparation to be with Christ at some later time. If anyone would have needed years of purging it was this wicked man as he had no opportunity after believing of doing any good works in this life. Jesus certainly had no need to be purged, and 'Today' he was going to be with Him! Yes, there is a 'purging' and that is from ALL sin through the cross. The King James Version (KJV) translates using this word (purge) in Hebrews 1:3, 9:14,22 to show that it is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, His blood, that cleanses (or purges). The English Standard Version (ESV) translates as 'purify' or 'cleanse' (see also 1 John 1:7).

¹² Soul sleep – after death and until the judgement day souls are not conscious, which is the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists.

¹³ Purgatory – in Roman Catholic teaching, after death a middle state between heaven and hell, for both cleansing and judgement.

(2) Salvation is *full*. Jesus promises him, “You will be with **Me**”, and not just in His kingdom. Can there be anything greater throughout all eternity than to be with our beloved Saviour in the closest possible relationship?

I will come again and will take you to Myself, that where I am you may be also (John 14:3).

We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better (Philippians 1:23).

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them ... , and so we will always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

It will be wonderful to be with saved relatives, church members, and saints we know of from the Bible and the history of the church, but that will be nothing compared to being with Christ Himself. He is the eternal God, our Saviour who died and rose. All others are saved by Him, as we are. The place to where He went is called “Paradise”, a loan word from Persian that refers to a pleasant garden or park, like Eden was (Genesis 2:8 in the LXX, Isaiah 51:8). It becomes a clear symbol of heaven (in 2 Corinthians 12:2-3, see Revelation 2:7). This promise may seem too good to be true, that it should happen immediately at death. Jesus makes it a solemn declaration by beginning, “Truly, I say to you ...”. It is absolutely sure based upon the authoritative word of Christ.

There is one other thing to be added about this salvation.

(3) Salvation is by *faith alone*. The Criminal has absolutely nothing to commend him up to this moment. He has no good works. Even in the eyes of the world he is the most wicked of criminals. He knows he is thoroughly deserving what is being meted out to him. And while pinned to the cross he can do nothing except to look to Jesus and to pray. He has no opportunity to do anything in this world as he is in the very throes of death. Yet, and mark this, he is given immediate and full salvation just because he asks Jesus to remember him!! The only thing that hinders anyone’s salvation is their unwillingness. Jesus did not respond to any who hurled abuse at Him. But He did graciously respond to this criminal who came to Him in faith.

4. JESUS IS A GREAT SAVIOUR!

Someone might have retorted as Jesus hung there dying, ‘Those are empty words. How can you expect me to take such a promise seriously when you yourself are dying a cursed death, when your utter weakness is apparent to all, when all the things we hoped for when you were alive are now dashed?’

Just wait a little my friend. Wait through Friday night. Wait all the next day just until the early hours of Sunday. Then go to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea where His lifeless body was laid and you will find it gone. He arose from the dead just as He repeatedly said He would. If Jesus was able to save while hanging dying on the cross, how much more now that He is on the throne of God with all authority in heaven and on earth given to Him. He is willing to save, which is why He came into this world. He is more than able to save. But remember, this criminal was saved, not because it was his last hour, but because he believed in Jesus.

Summary. **Conversion** is through faith for even the worst of sinners.

8. THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER: FOUR HEARERS

MATTHEW 13:3-23

³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear." ¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. ¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.' ¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." (Matthew 13:3-23)

We have now considered seven accounts in the Gospels having to do with the subject of Conversion. Almost all the individuals met Jesus in Person. Jesus is no longer with us on earth but has ascended into heaven to the Father's right hand. He now speaks through His appointed messengers. When He sent out the twelve apostles He said: "Whoever receives you receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me" (Matthew 10:40). Jesus never went to Ephesus, but Paul claims He preached to them, being "far off" from the temple in Jerusalem: "And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:17). It is through such preaching that people are converted.

TRUE CONVERSION: RECEIVING THE WORD

True conversion involves hearing a message and making the appropriate response. What Matthew calls, "The parable of the sower" (verse 18), very clearly demonstrates this. Jesus tells the parable to show what different kinds of response there are to the preaching of the gospel. There are four, but only one results in true conversion. It is possible to respond

positively to the gospel yet to fall short of true conversion. So this parable is very important to understand what conversion is and what it is not.

It is the kind of soil into which the seed is put, and not the quality of the seed, that is the point of the parable. It is assumed that the seed is uniformly of the best quality, that is, that “the word of the kingdom” is faithfully preached. This word is about the coming of the kingly rule of God in Christ, that Christ is the long-expected Messiah, and that through His suffering, death and resurrection He establishes that kingdom in the hearts of all who believe. A person may hear this true word and not be converted. We shall consider each in order to know the only kind of receiving the word that results in true conversion. The only purpose of sowing seed is to get a harvest.

Matthew 13 contains various parables about the kingdom of God. The Jews expected the Messiah to come and establish the kingdom. For them that meant the end of all things with the Romans defeated and the Jews in charge of the world. So when people thought Jesus was that Messiah by His miracles and teaching they were perplexed. Why is He not dealing with the Romans? John the Baptist in prison started to question (Matthew 11:2-6). Some wanted to make Him king in Jerusalem (John 6:15). When He began to talk of suffering and death then even Peter objected (Matthew 16:21-23). Even before Pentecost they still had not fully comprehended what Jesus was doing (Acts 1:6).

These parables are designed to show that the kingdom comes in two stages. It has come with the coming of Jesus into the world (so Matthew 12:28); but it has yet to come in all its fullness, so we are taught to pray “Your kingdom come”.

- ❖ The Sower. The kingdom is present in the sowing of the word of God, and there is no harvest without sowing. There are the two stages, that of sowing, and that of harvesting. Not all seed is fruitful, but some is and this is the indication of the present power of the kingdom.
- ❖ The mustard seed and leaven. The first stage of the kingdom is so small and seemingly insignificant. But the mustard seed attains massive height, and the leaven influences all the flour. There is amazing and mysterious power to grow.
- ❖ The weeds. The field is the world (not the church). The wicked continue to exist even after the coming of the kingdom. They will not be destroyed until the time of harvest.
- ❖ The treasure and pearls. The kingdom is present in a hidden and unexpected form. It must be searched for, and to possess it will mean total sacrifice.
- ❖ The net. As with the weeds, first there is the fishing, and then the second stage of sorting out the fish.

1. YOU WILL NOT EXPERIENCE TRUE CONVERSION IF YOUR HEART IS UNRESPONSIVE

The seed is scattered but before the farmer has the time to plough it into the soil the birds come and devour it. This is the explanation:

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart (verse 19).

When the word is heard the devil is active to seek to make it ineffective. Just as birds invariably accompany the sowing of seed, so the devil does not want the word even to begin

to grow in germination. How does he do this? He seeks to make the heart like a well-trodden path of various thoughts. The message is heard in the sense that it is in a language the hearer can understand. Yet the message does not grab him because he does not really understand it; it does not seem relevant to him. He may say, 'It is just words', and he moves on. Sadly this is the experience of so many. Think of the heart as a factory of thoughts into which the message comes.

- Other thoughts are already there, the events of the past week, what is going to take place next, that unresolved problem.
- There are distractions, the heat or the cold, tiredness, noise from children or outside, totally different conversation afterwards.
- Thoughts of objections to the word arise. How can I be sure what you say is true? Why not deal with more relevant themes? I do not agree with you... (see for example Luke 5:21,33, 6:2).
- The preacher is speaking to others, not me. I am religious, I am not bad like others, I am baptized, from a Christian family, so I do not need to be converted (so John 8:33).
- Problems with the messenger. I do not like the way he looks, or the way he speaks. It could be his credentials, or certain things he does (see Luke 4:22, 5:30, 7:39).

Such distractions are not usually our experience when we are watching TV or conversing with a friend. The problem is not with the messenger or the message, but with the heart. Unknown to you the evil one is at work. Perhaps you say that you do not believe in the devil. How then do you explain the evil in the world, and why the truth can be well presented but after five minutes you cannot remember anything? Despite receiving great signs from God of His power Pharaoh could only think of retaining Israel as slaves (Exodus 14:5). Despite having been released from life-long Egyptian bondage the Israelites in the wilderness could only think of the vegetables and fish of Egypt (Numbers 11:5). As you read this, is that you? Has the word of God made any impression at all on your heart? Or has the devil all the while been deceiving you (2 Corinthians 4:4)?

2. YOU WILL NOT EXPERIENCE TRUE CONVERSION IF YOU ARE UNWILLING TO FACE TRIALS

Some of the seed falls where the soil is shallow. A bed of rock is just under the surface so as the seed germinates and begins to grow it is unable to send roots deep down. Without access to the necessary moisture it withers away. Unlike the first seed on the path, as this seed sprouts up there is an early promise of a harvest, but it soon turns out to be a forlorn hope. This is the explanation:

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away (verses 20-21).

On hearing the word these receive it with joy. They hear wonderful promises of forgiveness of all sins, of heaven for eternity, and all without cost, paid for by Another, the Lord Jesus Christ. Who would not be joyful at such a prospect? Go to any garden and notice that green shoot poking through the soil. You naturally think that it will only be a matter of time and there will be fruit to harvest. How can you tell? Just wait for the sun to shine strongly, then see what happens. In the same way, you witness someone professing faith in Christ joyfully,

but how do you know it is genuine? Just wait for that time of scorching sun to come, “when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word”. Many begin well, but after only a little while they fall away (so in John 6:66). Oh the joy of finally leaving the awful bondage of Egypt! But when they encountered the high walls of the cities of Canaan and its giants, then they were ready to ditch Moses and return (Numbers 14:1-4).

Many receive the word thinking that from now on life will be much better and easier. They do not count the cost of the tribulations and persecutions that are sure to come in one form or another. Great crowds are following Jesus and instead of telling them that everything will be OK, He turns to them with the strongest warnings to count the cost (Luke 14:25-33). He warns them that they must put Him above the nearest and dearest in their family, and even above their own life. He warns them that they must bear their own cross, a terrible instrument of torture and certain death. He gives them two examples of the necessity of counting the cost before embarking on a project. The word of God does not woo you into the kingdom without warning you of the difficulties that lie ahead. This is absolutely necessary because we are too easily swayed by our emotions, acting on impulse without due consideration. It is sad to see someone starting on a journey but then turning back because of the difficulties encountered.

Let us now apply this to our subject of Conversion.

(1) Receiving the word with joy is no sure evidence of true conversion! Here are those who “immediately receive the word with joy” but they bear no fruit. They appear to be converts but they are not. Often the joy overlooks reality. One may think that he shall never be troubled by sin again only to find temptation too powerful. Another may think that the love of God means that they will not have any difficulties. Another now believes that prayer will be answered quickly and always positively. Such expectations will soon be dashed and joy gone.

(2) The ‘altar call’ has produced so many false converts. How often at evangelistic meetings people’s emotions are played on by constant singing, by hearing the testimonies of those who claim they are now living a wonderful life, but with no mention of the difficulties of professing Christ in this world. It is claimed that multitudes are converted, but the fact is that the vast majority fall away.

(3) True conversion can not be judged by the first profession of faith. When you see someone newly rejoicing in being saved, be cautious. It is not for you to give them assurance based on the joy. Yes, tell them there is great joy in Christ, but also ask if there is a readiness for trials. When I have baptized someone and they are full of joy as they ought to be, I warn them that in the week ahead the Lord may very well test them.

So if you are to experience true conversion, you must factor in tribulations and persecutions, and not fall away because of them. The Hebrews had been undergoing persecution (10:32-35), and were being tempted to turn back. The writer makes it quite clear that if they do so it is because they were never converted (3:6,14).

3. YOU WILL NOT EXPERIENCE TRUE CONVERSION IF YOUR HEART LOVES THE WORLD

Some of the seed falls where there are also thorn seeds. They grow together but the thorns choke the seed that was planted. Once again the result is that there is no harvest. There was a hope of harvest as the seed grew, but there was disappointment. This is the explanation:

As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful (verse 22).

Luke records: "And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature" (8:14). It is as such people go on their way (of life), gradually growing until that growth is arrested by the surrounding thorns. What are these thorns?

- "Cares of the world" – These are things we are all concerned about in our present life, things like daily bread, health, children's education, land and house, retirement. These things are not wrong in themselves, only when they come to be the most important things.
- "Riches" – These are described as deceitful. They promise much but cannot deliver. They are like a dark cloud that surely promises rain but passes without a drop falling. The primary aim of life becomes thinking what such riches can buy.
- "Pleasures of life" – This word is usually used in the New Testament in a bad sense, the word from which we derive 'hedonism' (living for pleasure). Music, holidays, food are all God's gifts but they are not to be sought for their own sake.

Every field has weeds, but they must be dealt with. The problem is when the cares, riches and pleasure dominate a person's life, when they become the priority, so there is no room for the word to do its work.

Here is a young Christian, so thankful for salvation, zealous in the service of the Lord, willing to deny herself anything for the sake of the Lord. But other potentially noxious plants are growing side by side as the legitimate responsibilities in this world increase. The young Christian gets married and the home is graced with children. Greater financial power is needed for family support, children's education, a house to own for stability, etc. Job promotion means greater responsibility and more time spent at work. The latest electronic gadgets demand their share of attention. There are needs amongst the wider family circle. They all need time, and almost imperceptibly they begin to strangle the time that used to be given to spiritual things, and even to church worship and other meetings. It is not that you have given in to corruption, or that you frequent the bar, and have been trapped in immorality. There is just a gradual choking of spiritual life. You have become a Demas "in love with this present world" (2 Timothy 4:10). Do you have the love for Christ today that you professed at first? Are you as faithful with the means of grace today as five years ago? Or have you slackened? Are you being choked by the 'thorns'? This is not a case of a true Christian backsliding or getting lost. It is actually impossible for a truly converted person to be finally lost. Jesus says that this is 'unfruitfulness'. If there is no such fruit then there is no true conversion. Perseverance is the mark of the genuine Christian. Many profess Christ, look like Christians, and continue for perhaps years, but then they prove to be people for whom the world is more important than Christ.

4. YOU WILL EXPERIENCE TRUE CONVERSION IF YOUR HEART RECEIVES THE WORD WITH UNDERSTANDING

Thank God that some seed falls on “good soil”. Here there is a harvest, of differing quantities, but a harvest. This is the only soil that produces fruit that shows true conversion has taken place. This is the explanation:

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty (Matthew 13:23).

As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience (Luke 8:15).

Three things are necessary for the word to be received unto true conversion, as Luke writes.

(1) The word must be received into “an honest and good heart” (Matthew has “understands”). This is the person who does not sit in judgement upon the word when he hears it, but rather lets the word judge him. For example, you hear the good news as deliverance from sin because your sin is serious enough to send you to hell for ever. But you object. It is not fair. I am not that bad, like some others. If however you looked at it from God’s point of view you would humble yourself in the dust. The word comes from the King of kings, and the only proper attitude is one of full submission, seeking to understand how to apply the word to your life.

(2) Having been received the word must be “held fast” in the heart. It can be lost. There is scorching heat ready to dry it up. There are thorns ready to choke it. Although the seed has germinated it must be cared for by weeding and watering, lest it die. You must continually expose yourself to the influences of the word, both publicly and privately, hide it in your heart, meditate upon it, and make specific applications to your own personal situation. For example, are there any situations tempting you to give up? Are there any thorns to uproot that are starting to choke the spiritual life out of you? Be “honest” with yourself before God. In your heart value what is “good”, which is all that God says. Hold on to this word like something in danger of being blown away if you let go.

(3) A harvest will only be obtained “with patience”. This is probably active as “patience in well-doing” (Romans 2:7), rather than enduring things that are against you. It means that you keep putting into practice the word of God that you receive, with no excuses, with no exceptions. Patiently keep doing the will of God; keep running the race (Hebrews 10:36, 12:1). There is no other way to bear fruit. Let no discouragement deflect you. Let there be no unwillingness to deny yourself anything of this life that can cause spiritual choking. Jesus promises there will be harvest, a hundredfold, sixty or thirty.

What does this parable teach us about Conversion?

- It comes from hearing the word of the kingdom. There is no life-giving power in music or dance or drama. It is the word that is likened to seed. God establishes His kingdom in the hearts of sinners through the word. This is why Jesus commissioned His disciples that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations” (Luke 24:47). When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost his hearers were “cut to the heart” (Acts 2:37). When Paul preached to Lydia “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14).
- It comes by receiving that word with understanding into an honest and good heart. It is not enough to have joy at the word. It is not enough to have a profession of faith. Only time will tell whether the things of the life are second to the Lord. Perseverance in the word is a necessary mark of true conversion.

Summary. **Conversion** is receiving the word of God in an honest and good heart and bearing much fruit.

QUESTION: WERE PEOPLE CONVERTED THE SAME WAY BEFORE PENTECOST AS AFTER?

As we move from considering accounts of conversions as recorded in the Gospels (Part I) to accounts in the book of Acts (Part II) we pass those central events of redemption ¹⁴ – the cross, the resurrection, and Pentecost. It forces us to ask the question whether those events have made any difference to the way conversion takes place. There are at least two reasons why it is essential to ask:

(1) Pentecost is such a significant event in the history of God's redemptive activity. It is when the exalted Lord Jesus Christ poured out the Holy Spirit whom He had received from the Father, the Spirit who had been long promised in the Old Testament (Acts 2:33). Together with the cross, it marks the establishment of the new covenant, and is the beginning of the church as we know it. We might expect that such a change would also mean a change in conversion.

(2) The greatest misunderstandings of the teaching of the Bible may well arise from a failure to distinguish between the old and new covenants. This was my experience of ministry in Kenya. So often people, including preachers, open anywhere in the Bible and just assume that what is written is immediately applicable today. The 'prosperity' teaching is a great example of this. So what about conversion? Those who lived before Pentecost, whose conversions we have been considering from the Gospels, lived under the old covenant. That is why we find them going to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9), offering a sacrifice for cleansing as Moses commanded (Mark 1:44), celebrating the Passover (Luke 22:8), etc. We do not do those things anymore, so we again ask if there has been a change in regard to conversion. **The basic answer is that conversion is *the same* whether under old or new covenants. The difference has to do with the gift and ministry of the Holy Spirit.**

We shall ask and then answer three questions.

Were there genuine conversions before Pentecost?

There are obvious differences between the covenants. The temple and its system of sacrifices has been replaced (fulfilled) by the once for all sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 10:11-14). God's people are no longer a particular people, the Jews, and any who joined themselves to them, but all who have faith in Christ whether Jew or Gentile (Galatians 3:28-29). There is nothing special about the land of Israel for the Patriarchs were 'desiring a better country, a heavenly one' (Hebrew 11:16).

But there is no basic difference in the way they were converted. Here we need to be careful for we are not given accounts of conversions in the Old Testament, except for an outsider such as Ruth (1:16-17), or for the pagan city of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5). Jews were born in the covenant and all males had the covenant sign of circumcision on their eighth day. They were either faithful or unfaithful to that covenant. Paul makes it clear that there was a genuine spiritual Israel within the larger nation of Israel (Romans 9:6-7). This 'converted' Israel, for

¹⁴ Redemption – deliverance from an evil by the payment of a price, or ransomed (1 Peter 1:18-19).

example, Isaac and Jacob, were so because of God's election and call, the evidence of His special love (verses 8-13). The writer to the Hebrews tells us that both of these were men of faith (11:20-21). This is what made them to be 'converted' just as we are today.

There is a great danger of expecting every converted person to have an account of the exact time and place of their conversion. Obviously such conversions most clearly show what must take place for a person to know they are converted. But I think that most people do not know the day, or sometimes even the year (!), of their conversion. This is why we shall later consider the example of Timothy. We are told nothing of a specific conversion experience for Isaac. He was certainly a young man of faith when he submitted to be bound and laid on the wood of the altar by his father (Genesis 22:9). In his early life Jacob deceived his father, at the wish of his mother (Genesis 27). God met with him at Bethel as he fled from his brother Esau. Was this his conversion, or was it when he was returning and wrestled with God (Genesis 32)? What is important is not an experience that we are sure marks the beginning, but a life that shows there has been a beginning!

Consider three examples of old covenant saints:

- ★ Abraham. We have a clear statement of his faith in Genesis 15:6: "And he believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness." This is 'justification by faith', but can we call this his conversion experience? He had shown great faith in the Lord before this time, as Hebrews 11:8-10 clearly points out.
- ★ Moses. When was he converted? Was it at the burning bush when God appeared to him? But once again Hebrews 11:24-27 highlights his faith even before this event.
- ★ David. We know he was also justified by faith (Romans 4:6-8). But when? He was surely a man of faith when still young when he defeated Goliath single-handedly.

What the Bible is concerned with is their faithfulness to God's word. We may even put it the other way round and refer to God's faithfulness in fulfilling His word in their lives. It does not matter if we have details of when and how a person was converted. What matters is whether or not their life shows the evidence of genuine faith by a changed life. A person is evaluated not according to how they start but how they continue and end – perseverance. This is the emphasis in the Parable of the Sower.

We conclude that the Old Testament saints like Abraham were chosen of God, regenerated by the Spirit, and justified by faith.

What did those who lived both before and after Pentecost experience?

The most obvious examples are the disciples of Jesus. We must ask the question, 'When were they converted? There can be no doubt that they were converted, and they became followers of Jesus Christ when He called them. For example, Matthew (Levi), as it is recorded in Luke 5:27-32. He left everything to follow Jesus, and so became His disciple (verse 28, see Luke 14:33). Then on the Day of Pentecost he, with all the others, was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4). Many have concluded that this marks a 'second blessing' in the lives of the disciples, and so is an experience that every converted person should have. Their whole theology of the 'baptism of the Spirit' as a necessary experience for every converted person is built on this. But it forgets that Pentecost marks the change from the old to new covenants. How great a change is this? Just consider what Jesus declared about John the Baptist: "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matthew

11:11). How can John be the greatest born of women, and yet the least in the kingdom is greater than he? It is because he lived and died under the old covenant, and the least in the kingdom (under the new covenant) has far greater blessings than he knew. Those blessings are centred in the gift of the Holy Spirit who was given at Pentecost.

- The Old Testament looks forward to the great blessing of the pouring out of the Spirit in the new covenant (Isaiah 32:15, Ezekiel 36:26-27, 37:14, 39:29, Joel 2:28-29).
- John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus' is coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11 and parallels).
- As He was leaving his disciples, Jesus' great promise for their comfort was that He will send the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17, 26, 15:26, 16:7-15). It is better to have the Spirit come, than to have Jesus' earthly presence!
- The coming of the Holy Spirit is often called "the promise" (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:4, 2:33, Galatians 3:14, Ephesians 1:13).
- The new covenant is compared with the old in the following ways in 2 Corinthians 3:
The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (verse 6)
The ministry of death ... the ministry of the Spirit (verses 7-8)
The present "ministry" is all the activity that has to do with the new covenant, and it is one "of the Spirit".
- Jesus redeemed us by His cross so that all God's people might "receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:14).

Pentecost is not a mere 'second' blessing. It is the great blessing in the new covenant! Today, we do not enter the Christian life as the disciples did under the old covenant. No, we receive all the blessings of the new covenant upon conversion, especially the Holy Spirit, just as those received who repented on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38-39).

What are the greater blessings those who are converted receive under the new covenant?

There must be some difference, otherwise there would be nothing to distinguish the old and new covenants. Those who lived under the old covenant lived at a time of types and shadows before Christ appeared. The Holy Spirit had not been poured out by the exalted Lord as on the Day of Pentecost. The regulations of the Law were a heavy "yoke" (Acts 15:10), that Paul likens to imprisonment (Galatians 3:22-23), and slavery (4:1ff.).

Old covenant believers were saved by Christ's sacrifice to which the animal sacrifices pointed. Those continual sacrifices could not forgive sins (Hebrews 10:4). How then was God able to justly forgive sinners like David? It was because of the coming death of Christ. This shows that God was righteous/just in 'passing over former sins' (Romans 3:25-26).

Therefore, the difference in the experience of conversion has to do with these things. The Holy Spirit has been poured out, not merely more extensively on "all flesh", but He has been poured out so that all of God's true people know equal blessing.

- We have confidence to enter God's holy presence by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19). The Old Testament High Priest could only go into the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). He had to be very careful to do things in exactly the prescribed way lest he die before the Lord. No other persons were allowed to enter. Because of Jesus all Christians may now enter boldly at all times.

- We have assurance that all our sins are forgiven by the offering of Christ (Romans 8:1). The Law of Moses did not make provision for the forgiveness of any and every sin (Acts 13:38-39). That is our privilege under the gospel of Jesus Christ. On what basis were Old Testament believers forgiven? The death of Christ. So even David could be forgiven adultery and blood-guilt because of the sacrifice of Christ to come.
- We know the Spirit as the Spirit of adoption who enables us to cry “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). This is an advance on the Old Testament as Paul describes the Spirit as “the Spirit of His Son”, the Lord Jesus who has come and is now exalted. It is to assure us that we are sons and heirs.
- We have greater power (Acts 1:8). Before Pentecost the disciples did not have this power to be witnesses to the end of the earth. We are specially empowered to do the work of the Great Commission.
- We have greater understanding (John 14 - 16). There were many things the disciples were unable to understand until the Spirit was poured out on them. Even the Old Testament prophets were left with lots of questions (1 Peter 1:10-12). The Holy Spirit has been given to us specifically to teach us all that we need to know (1 John 2:20,27).

The difference is not in the way we become children of God, but in the greater blessings the Holy Spirit gives to us under the new covenant. Sin is the same from the time of the Fall. The way of forgiveness is the same, through Christ, received by faith. It is this that I want to emphasize so that it is quite clear that there only has ever been ONE way of salvation or conversion. Whether Jew or Gentile, whether with or without the word of God, there is only one way to know God and be reconciled to Him. This is what I have been seeking to show in account after account of those whose conversions are recorded for us in the Bible.

The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, chapter 21, section 1, describes the difference as follows:

Christ has purchased for all believers a liberty inherent in the Gospel. It comprises freedom from the guilt of sin, from the condemnation that follows upon guilt, from the wrath of God, and from the severity and curse of God's law. It also includes deliverance from this present evil world, and from all such things as bondage to Satan, sin's dominion, the hurtfulness of afflictions, the fear and sting of death, the victory of the grave, and eternal damnation. Furthermore, it includes free access to God and the yielding of obedience to Him, not as it were with the fear of a slave for his master, but with a childlike love and readiness.

All these blessings were more or less enjoyed by believers in Old Testament days, but under New Testament conditions Christian liberty becomes more extensive. It includes freedom from the burdens imposed by the ceremonial law to which the Jewish church was subjected, greater boldness in approaching to the throne of grace, and a larger measure of the free Spirit of God than was normally granted to saints in the pre-Christian era.

PART II: CONVERSIONS IN ACTS

9. THE PENTECOST WORSHIPPERS: THE FIRST CHRISTIANS – ACTS 2

¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. ⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians---we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." ¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke; ²⁰ the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. ²¹ And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

²² "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works

and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – ²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. ²⁵ For David says concerning him, "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; ²⁶ therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. ²⁷ For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. ²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.' ²⁹ "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. ³² This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. ³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, ³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.' ³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." ⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." ⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

TRUE CONVERSION: REPENTANCE

The Day of Pentecost is only 50 days after the Crucifixion. For a period of 40 days Jesus has been appearing especially to the apostles (Acts 1:4). After His ascension into heaven they wait in Jerusalem, devoting themselves to prayer in the upper room (verses 12-14), until the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Pentecost is one of the three annual Feasts for the Jews when all males were required by the Law to come to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:16, the Feast of Weeks). It is on this Day that we have an account of the first Christian converts. What do we learn about conversion from this account?

1. RELIGIOUS PEOPLE NEED CONVERSION

Those present are from the people of God, the Jews. They have come up to Jerusalem in obedience to God's Law for the Feast of Pentecost. Some are direct Jews by race, physical descendants of Abraham. Others are "proselytes", Gentiles who have adopted the Jewish religion (Acts 2:11). They are from near and far, "devout men from every nation under heaven" (verse 5). But although they have devoted themselves to the true religion, when

their promised Messiah came in their midst, Him they crucified and killed (verses 23,36). They could not claim total ignorance for “Jesus of Nazareth” was “a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know – “ (verse 22). It is what a person thinks of Jesus that shows whether or not he is converted. These people then are full of guilt.

In the matter of true conversion the Person of Jesus takes centre stage. If you read any of the Four Gospels the great question is, Who is this Jesus? Is He a sinner, a blasphemer? Or does His authoritative teaching, and do His miracles, show He is the long-awaited Messiah? Clearly this crowd of people assembled together on the Day of Pentecost have made their decision, and they have rejected Him. So they need to be converted.

- Maybe you are not yet sure who Jesus is. It is of the utmost importance that you examine the records about Jesus, His life, death and resurrection, that you might be convinced He is who He claims to be.
- Maybe you can repeat the words, ‘Jesus is the Son of God’, but it does not mean much to you and it certainly makes no real difference in your life. You need the life-changing conversion many had on this day when they came to be convinced who He is.

2. GOD USES MEANS IN CONVERSION

God used three specific things at this time:

(1) The prayers of the Lord’s people (1:14).

It is very noteworthy that although the coming of the Holy Spirit has been promised (thus guaranteed), the disciples are to wait and pray. It is when they are gathered together and praying that the Holy Spirit is given (2:1). The promises of God are a great encouragement to prayer. Don’t give in to that temptation that if God has promised then it will be done and there is no need to pray. Jesus encourages us to pray for the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). We need to pray that the Spirit be poured out and that thousands again be converted.

(2) The speaking in “other tongues” (2:4).

It is when the crowd hear them speaking “in their own tongues” that they come together (verse 6). The gift of tongues enables the Apostles to speak in the various native languages of the people present. This signifies that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not just for Jews, but also for Gentiles, for ALL peoples. The tongues are the evidence that God is with them, that the prophecy of Joel is now fulfilled, that Jesus is exalted at the right hand of God (verse 33). Note well that such a miracle does not by itself bring about any conversions. Many witnessed the miracles of our Lord and went away unconverted. Then others were converted without witnessing any such miracle. So here there are some who hear the tongues and conclude, “They are filled with new wine” (verse 13). How misdirected it is for many today to put such an emphasis on miracles in evangelism, as if no one can be saved unless there are miracles performed (think of movements such as Third Wave and Power Evangelism). It is the preaching of Peter that was the means of their conversion. The tongues brought people together in one place to hear the preaching.

(3) The preaching of Peter (2:14-40).

The first two are preparatory. The preaching is the direct and immediate means of conversion. As always, this is the primary means the Holy Spirit uses to convert them. See, for example, Acts 4:4, 6:7 and 11:20-21. Here is a summary of what Peter preaches.

- He *explains* that the tongues were a fulfilment of Joel's prophecy (verses 16-21).
- He *proclaims* Christ as crucified, risen and exalted, proves it from Scripture, and concludes that Jesus is the Christ, the supreme Lord.
- He *exhorts* them to repent and be baptized, in order to receive forgiveness of sins and the promised Holy Spirit. Such blessings are freely offered to all, even those who have crucified the Lord of glory (verse 23), even the very city that has rejected Him!

Note that Peter's message was not 'God loves you'. How could He say this to those who were responsible for crucifying the very Son of God? Nowhere does a preacher in the New Testament start this way. In fact in Paul's gospel message that is the letter to the Romans he begins with the wrath of God (Romans 1:18).

This shows the vital importance of sitting under the preaching of the word of God, and praying for the Spirit to use such preaching to call sinners effectually to Christ (see how Paul describes it in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). It can be said without fear of exaggeration that the history of the true church of Jesus Christ is the account of preachers and preaching. We shall keep seeing this as we look at other examples of conversions in Acts.

There are many things God may choose to use in the conversion of a sinner. We must use the means of prayer and preaching the word and expect God to use these, as He did on Pentecost. He may also do something in His providence to get the attention of people, as with the tongues (here), a dazzling light (Saul), an angelic visitation (Cornelius), an earthquake (the Jailer). But Lydia simply heard the word preached. That is the great missionary task, while the preaching is watered with prayer.

3. CONVERSION IS REPENTANCE

We are going to look carefully how the conversion of these 3,000 is described.

(1) They awake that Pentecost morning as **unconcerned**. Many are surely satisfied that the 'imposter' Jesus had finally been dealt with. Then around 9 a.m. (the third hour, verse 15) their attention is grabbed by the noise of the tongues spoken and they are "bewildered". How often the Lord brings people into a situation where, unplanned by them, they hear the gospel. It may be an invitation to a special meeting, attending a wedding or a funeral, or receiving a visitor when hospitalized.

(2) Peter's preaching brings **conviction of sin** (verse 37). On hearing the preaching about Jesus we read, "they were cut to the heart". To be 'cut to the heart' is to be accused by one's conscience. These people have been clearly told: "this Jesus, ... **you** crucified" (verse 23), and "this Jesus whom **you** crucified" (verse 36). From Peter's preaching, explaining the prophecy of Joel, that the Jesus they crucified was raised by God, exalted to God's right hand, and has poured out the Spirit this day, they accept that Jesus is "both Lord and Christ". Yet they are responsible for killing Him out of wicked rejection. No wonder they cry out, "What shall we do?" Is there any hope they can be washed clean from the stain of such a terrible sin? They had not recognized the Messiah God sent them although they had been waiting for centuries. Could there really be forgiveness with God?

Such conviction of sin is the work of the Holy Spirit.

And when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement: concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me (John 16:8-9).

This is where conversion begins in our experience. There comes a time – it may be a specific moment or something gradually developing – when we are confronted by our sin. Before, we either never thought about sin, or we brushed it off as something not so big, something that could be dealt with by a few good works or some religious practices. Then our thinking changes. We begin to see that sin is against God Himself, and is the breaking of His commandments, so that our nature is deeply stained. We may try harder to deal with it by ourselves, until we cry out in desperation, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ Coming to Jesus because you are sick or poor, or with some other such need, has nothing to do with true conversion. Sin is the issue, the one and only issue to be dealt with.

Paul tells us this was precisely his experience. Once he thought he was “alive”, doing well before God. But then when he understood the Law, and especially the tenth commandment, he “died” (Romans 7:7-11). This means that when he was convicted of his sin of covetousness he saw that instead of being under God’s favour he was under God’s wrath. Has this happened to you? Don’t analyse your past experience, but ask yourself about NOW. Do you find yourself so guilty before God that you know there is no hope in yourself but only in God in Christ? It is not the strength of conviction, but whether you have enough conviction of sin to drive you to Christ.

(3) They **receive the word** (verse 41). Peter tells them what they have to do, “Repent” (verse 38). In other words: “Save yourselves from this crooked generation” (verse 40). When it says they received the word, this is what they did. Hearing the word, and then feeling convicted, is not enough. There must be active reception by repentance.

➤ Repentance. The word literally means ‘to change the mind’. Above all they must change their minds about Jesus. They had shouted ‘crucify Him’, but now they must cry out to Him to save them. They had thought He was a wicked impostor, but now they must have Him as Lord and Christ. They had thought themselves to be righteous before God, but now they must confess their guilt. A change of mind will work its way out through the whole of life. So John the Baptist warns those who came to him to be baptized for repentance, “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8). Their whole attitude to Jesus must change. For other references to repentance in Acts:

Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out,... (3:19).

God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give **repentance** to Israel and forgiveness of sins (5:31).

Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you (8:22).

When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted **repentance** that leads to life" (11:18).

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to **repent**,... (17:30).

... testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of **repentance** toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (20:21).

but declared..., that they should **repent** and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance (26:20).

Repentance is absolutely indispensable to true conversion. Have you turned to Christ as He is brought to you in the Gospel? Have you turned from all that the word of God calls sin, whether in thought, word or deed?

➤ Forgiveness. The promise to those who repent is “the forgiveness of your sins” (verse 38). If you appear in court and agree with all the accusations brought against you and then ask for forgiveness will the court set you free? With such a humble attitude you might have your punishment lessened, but it would be unjust to release you. Now God is the Judge with whom there is never any miscarriage of justice, so how can your repentance result in forgiveness? It is not your repentance that somehow earns forgiveness, but it is looking to Christ who has paid the punishment that we sinners deserve through his death on the cross. As John Bunyan put it, this forgiveness is even available to the ‘Jerusalem sinner,’ the one guilty of crucifying the Lord of glory. If you doubt and say, ‘My sins are so great, can I really be forgiven?’ the answer is clear. If Jerusalem sinners can be forgiven anyone may be forgiven if only they repent of their sins.

➤ The Holy Spirit. Further, there is the promise to those who repent that they “will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (verses 38-39). The Holy Spirit is given at conversion, not subsequently. Jesus came and died that all the people of God might receive the Spirit (see Galatians 3:13-14). This was the promise of God to Ezekiel about the new covenant (36:26-27). It is the indwelling of the Spirit that enables us to live our Christian lives. So only those who have received the Spirit are truly converted (as in Romans 8:9). This is a promise not only for the day of Pentecost but for Jews and subsequent generations (“for you and for your children”), and Gentiles (“those who are far off”). “Your children” here does not mean children in your house but those descended from you. This reception of the Spirit is all part of the true conversion experience.

(4) They were **baptized** (v. 41). This is part of Peter’s message in response to their question, “What shall we do?” This further answer is, “Be baptized” (verse 38). It is the consistent pattern in the apostolic church that those who repent and believe the gospel are baptized.

But when they believed Philip as he preached good news ..., they were *baptized*, both men and women (8:12). [Samaritans]

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus ... and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he *baptized* him (8:35,38). [Ethiopian eunuch]

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was *baptized* (9:18, see also 22:16). [Paul]

Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be *baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ (10:47-48). [Cornelius]

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was *baptized* ... (16:14-15). [Lydia]

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house... and he was *baptized* at once, he and all his family (16:31-33). [Philippian Jailer]

And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were *baptized* (18:8). [Corinthians]

And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling people to believe in the One who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” On hearing this, they were *baptized* in the name of the Lord Jesus (19:4-5). [Ephesian disciples]

These are the final instructions of the Lord before He ascended. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ...” (Matthew 28:19). If you have repented and turned from your sins to God, have you gone the next step and been baptized? The Lord Jesus commanded it for all

disciples. The apostle of Christ, Peter, commanded it for all who repent. Once again, it is part of true conversion. Note the Biblical pattern of conversion that begins in repentance, progresses to baptism and then to being part of the local church, and this is what follows.

4. CONVERSION RESULTS IN A TOTAL CHANGE OF LIFE

Was the conversion of these 3,000 just a one day experience? How many have gone to a meeting, professed faith, and then gone home to continue living just as before, perhaps now with a little religion added. Not so these Pentecost worshippers. Their lives were totally changed. Their conversion was far more than a lot of excitement at a meeting, far more than adding church attendance to their lives once on a Sunday (if convenient).

(1) A truly converted person will centre his or her life around the local church.

We read that they now “devoted themselves” (verse 42) to certain activities. This a very strong phrase. The ‘devotion’ of a mother to her children is proverbial. She gives herself without holding back, without complaint, denying herself for the good of her child. This is the practice of the truly converted to the following four activities.

- The apostles’ teaching. At this time it was the apostles themselves who are the teachers. Now apostolic teaching is given from the Scriptures. That is where we want to be. We count it as our greatest privilege to be among the people of God when the Scriptures are being explained.
- The fellowship. This is far more than just being in the same room, talking. It involves ‘sharing’, whether by words or actions. I share with you what I have to fulfil your need, and you share with me what you have to fulfil my need. For example, Paul shared the gospel with the Philippians, and they in turn shared their money with him (ESV has “partnership” for the word which is usually translated fellowship in Philippians 1:5, 4:15).
- The breaking of bread. This is a reference to the Lord’s Supper (see Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 10:16). Gathering around the Lord’s Table is a sign of our unity in Christ so we make a commitment to always be present unless providentially hindered (e.g. by sickness).
- The prayers. This not a reference to private praying, but joining with others in the stated times of prayer (as in 3:1). Prayer with the church is a priority. There are two wonderful examples given us in the apostolic church (4:24ff. and 12:5,12).

Can it be said that you are devoted to these four activities? If not, are you truly converted?

(2) A truly converted person will show practical love towards fellow Christians (verses 44-47).

No one was forced to sell their possessions and belongings. They did it out of love for those amongst them who were needy. They loved to be together. Is it surprising that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved”? Jesus said, “All people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” What Jesus said about His own family is true for us His disciples: “Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). What evidence is there in your life of such practical love? Is it just a couple of times on Sunday that you are with your brethren in Christ? Or do your constant prayers, your interactions on social media, and your visiting especially of the needy, bear witness to how dear you hold them in your hearts?

This record of the Day of Pentecost, being the start of the Christian Church as we know it, is a pattern for all churches, and especially for how sinners are converted and become part of the local church.

Summary. **Conversion** is repenting of sin for forgiveness and being baptized in Christ's name, and then living a new life centred on God's people.

10. SIMON MAGUS: A FALSE CONVERT ACTS 8:9-24

⁹ But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. ¹⁰ They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." ¹¹ And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. ¹² But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. ¹³ Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. ¹⁴ Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, ¹⁵ who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." ²⁰ But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! ²¹ You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." ²⁴ And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." (Acts 8:9-24)

TRUE CONVERSION: FAITH & REPENTANCE

This is a very noteworthy account of a prominent man who heard the gospel message and who was at first accepted as a believer and was baptized. Yet he turned out to be a false convert. It is quite clear that not all who make a profession of conversion are genuinely converted. So what was lacking in Simon's professed faith? How was it discovered that his faith was not genuine? We will seek to answer these questions from this account in Acts 8. There is a real problem today, that if someone makes a profession of faith in Christ it is simply accepted as true. Some people falsely teach that if a person professes faith even though his life does not change he is still to be considered converted. It is thought they are Christians indeed, but only 'carnal' Christians ¹⁵. But this is not how Peter dealt with Simon Magus.

1. GREAT SPIRITUAL POWER IS NOT CONVERSION

He is described as someone who “previously practiced magic” (verse 9). He claimed to be “somebody great”, and people acclaimed him as “the power of God that is called Great” (verse 10). It is possible that by this title people thought he was an incarnation of deity. Everyone was captivated by him because for a long time they had been amazed by his magic. We are not to think that it was all deceit and trickery. Such things represent witchcraft and sorcery¹⁶ which are inspired by Satan. It is clear that Simon knew real power when he saw it.

¹⁵ Carnal Christian – the false teaching that a person can be a true Christian yet live a carnal or worldly life.

¹⁶ Sorcery – the practice of magic.

One other person is called a magician in Acts, Elymas, a false prophet (Acts 13:6,8). Such magic aligns a person with Satan and must be totally rejected. The Bible’s stand is absolutely clear in its condemnation (see Deuteronomy 18:9-14, Galatians 5:20 and Revelation 21:8 [sorcery]). Anyone involved in such things must know that they are clearly forbidden by God because they are inspired by evil, and they are used to promote oneself and even to harm others.

2. A PROFESSION OF FAITH AND BAPTISM MAY NOT BE CONVERSION

(1) Simon hears the gospel preached. Philip “proclaimed to them the Christ” (verse 5). He “preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (verse 12). There is no evidence that there was anything lacking in Philip’s message. That Jesus is the Christ (or Messiah), the anointed One promised in the Old Testament, is the emphasis of early preaching (see Acts 2:36, 3:20, 5:42, 9:22, 17:3, 18:5). The message was also about the kingdom of God that Jesus came to bring (Acts 19:8, 20:25, 28:23,31, and Jesus in Luke 4:43, 8:1, 9:11, etc.).

(2) Simon believes and is baptized (verse 13). Simon is not alone, for many others hearing this message also believe and are baptized (verse 12). Philip could not see any reason why Simon’s professed faith was not genuine and so had him baptized. At the very least he believes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, and that with Him the promised kingdom of God has finally come, for this is the message he heard.

(3) Did Simon receive the Holy Spirit? The problems that surround this question will be considered below.

The Samaritans and the Holy Spirit. Two questions arise:

(1) Why did the Samaritans not receive the Spirit when they believed and were baptized? This is certainly strange and not the usual pattern. Peter promised that those who repented and were baptized would receive the Spirit (2:38). Cornelius and those with him received the Spirit while Peter was still speaking (10:44-46), which is later interpreted as evidence of repentance (11:18). The disciples of John in Ephesus, believed, were baptized and received the Spirit (19:4-6). The key to understanding is that these were Samaritans and it is only when two apostles are sent that through them the Spirit is given. Because of the mutual hatred between Jews and Samaritans there would have always been the difficulty of Samaritan Christians being accepted as equal by Jewish Christians. This was forestalled by the delay and the bestowal through two apostles. With the first Gentile (Cornelius) an apostle was there and testified that the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us (11:15).

(2) Did Simon himself receive the gift of the Spirit through the laying on of the hands of the apostles? This is a difficult question. If he did not then he was already marked out as a false convert, of which there is no indication in the passage. If he did then we ask how he could receive the Spirit when he was not a genuine convert?

But whoever had the hands of the apostles laid on them did receive the Holy Spirit (verse 17). This was Peter's declaration: "Repent and be baptized ..., and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38). These mark the cluster of things around true conversion. The gift of the Holy Spirit is given upon faith and repentance. It does not wait until baptism. The genuineness of faith/repentance is shown in submitting to the ordinance of baptism. We totally reject the idea of 'baptismal regeneration' ¹⁷ for baptism has no such power and is not a condition for the new birth.

Some people have said that there is no mention of repentance which shows why his conversion experience is lacking. It is true that the word repentance is not used in this passage and that repentance is absolutely necessary to true conversion. We have seen that from Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost (2:38). But there are other times when repentance is not mentioned, but only faith (see 10:43, 13:38-39,48, 16:31, etc.). The fact is that faith and repentance cannot be separated; they are two sides of the same coin. Where faith is present, repentance is also there; where repentance is present, faith is also there. It is noteworthy that Peter preached faith to Cornelius and his house (10:43), but when their conversion is described it is called repentance (11:18).

- Faith includes repentance. Why does a person believe in Jesus as the Christ? Because He is the God-appointed Saviour from the great problem of sin. He turns his back on sin and looks to Christ, which is repentance.
- Repentance includes faith. Repentance is a turning from sin to God. What assurance is there that God will receive the sinner who turns to Him? It is Jesus in whom he believes.

So when Simon professes faith in Jesus as the Christ, he surely turns away from his magic practices. There is no evidence that he held on to them. He said he believed and had an outward show of repentance. But none of it was genuine.

3. FALSE FAITH DOES NOT LEAD TO CONVERSION

What is the evidence that Simon's faith was not genuine faith leading to conversion? There is great emphasis in the account on the "signs" that Philip performed (verses 6-7,13). Simon is amazed at what he saw. Note the similarity of language in the descriptions of Simon's magic and Philip's miracles.

- The crowds had "paid attention" to Simon (verses 10,11), now they "paid attention" to what Philip was saying (verse 6).
- They had been "amazed" by Simon's magical arts (verses 9,11), now Simon is "amazed" at what Philip did (verse 13).
- Simon had boasted that he was someone "great" (verse 9), and was acclaimed as the Power of God that is called "Great", now he is astonished at the "great" miracles of Philip (verse 13).
- Simon had spoken of himself (verse 9), but Philip speaks of Christ (verse 5).

Simon's power could not compete with the gospel message about Jesus. The emphasis is on the power of preaching, rather than on the signs and miracles (so verse 12). However, Simon's attention is grabbed by the signs/miracles. In professing to be a Christian his thinking about 'power' is not changed. It is only that he has seen a greater power in Philip. He wants that power, he still wants to be someone great, something normal in pagan religion.

The subsequent events clearly show that he is a false convert.

(1) He wants to buy the power to bestow the Holy Spirit (verses 18-19). He sees the apostles doing this and wants the same power. That is what he is interested in. 'Simony' is now the

¹⁷ Baptismal regeneration – the false teaching that baptism causes regeneration, as taught by Roman Catholicism and the Disciples of Christ.

word used for seeking to purchase any church office. Does this not also imply that the church of Jesus Christ should never charge for its spiritual services? Obviously this is contrary to so much practice today.

(2) When he is told to repent, he only asks for prayer that he will not be judged (verses 20-24). He shows no conviction about his sin. Peter has told him how unthinkable it ought to be to seek to obtain the gift of God with money. He will perish with his money. He has told Simon that it is wickedness, and that he should pray for forgiveness. He traces it down to the intention of Simon's heart. His heart is not right before God. In the words, "you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity", Peter is declaring that Simon is indeed unconverted.

His FAITH is lacking. His faith is for the purpose of getting something for himself. His faith was not really in Christ but in the power of miracles that he could see with his own eyes. He was amazed by the power, not by the discovery of his own wickedness.

His REPENTANCE is lacking. Repentance is far more than wanting judgement removed. It is hatred of sin because it is against God, and turning from it to God for forgiveness through Christ. We do not see any of this in Simon.

In many places there is much emphasis on signs and wonders. It is even announced beforehand that they will take place. People come with a sense of expectancy. When it is claimed that a miracle has taken place there is excitement, shouting out, because people think

they have witnessed the power of God. Surely, if God is really present in power then the attitude that leads to conversion, or that shows conversion has taken place, is one of humility and the consciousness of sin. Consider the following examples.

I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up ... And I said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips ...; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:1-5).

"I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,..." (Isaiah 57:15).

But when Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8).

When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead (Revelation 1:17).

What then should be done when the genuine gospel message has been preached and someone professes faith/repentance? If they say they have faith in Christ who died for their sins, and if they say they have repented of their sins and there is evidence that they have left things like magic arts behind (see also Acts 19:18-19), then they may be baptized if they wish to be. Every encouragement is to be given to them to continue in the faith. The question is will they grow and show they are true converts? There is no Biblical warrant for making professed disciples wait for a long time to see if they are 'genuine'. As much as baptism is an entrance into the Christian community, so excommunication is an exit from that community.

What is very clear is that baptism does not guarantee true conversion. Simon was baptized but remained unconverted. Baptism is part of the process of true conversion because it is submitted to in obedience to Christ's command. It is the response of the sinner to the working of God's grace. Baptism is not that grace. The outward actions of baptism may all be there but those actions by themselves do not convey any grace. How much more this is true when a new born baby is brought for baptism, who has no consciousness of what is going on!

Summary. **Conversion** is by a faith that involves turning from all sin in repentance.

11. THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH: A PROSELYTE ACTS 8:26-39

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [Note: Some manuscripts add all or most of verse 37: "And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."]] ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to

stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26-39)

TRUE CONVERSION: UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL

The word of God is spreading. Persecution has driven all God's people out of Jerusalem except the apostles (8:1). Those scattered "went about preaching the word" (8:4). Philip, one of the Seven, preaches in the city of Samaria (8:5), and the gospel is brought to "many villages of the Samaritans" (8:25). Now Philip is directed to go south past Jerusalem towards Gaza, to a desert place. God has someone that he wants to receive true conversion through the ministry of Philip.

1. JOINING THE TRUE RELIGION IS NOT CONVERSION

Two things mark him out as exceptional:

(1) *Socially* he is a man of high standing. We may call him the Minister of Finance in the Ethiopian Government (verse 27). Thus he is a man of great responsibility, and is being chauffeured in the equivalent of a modern-day Mercedes.

(2) *Religiously* he is a worshipper of the one true God of the Jews. Not being a physical descendant of Abraham, he is called a proselyte, having come to believe in the one God of the Jews and the ethical purity of Judaism. He is a convert to the Jewish faith. He has much against him. He is not a Jew by race, and he lives in a land of heathen darkness far from the temple in Jerusalem where God is worshipped. Because of his social position he constantly faced the temptations from having wealth and power. But he has travelled about 1,000 miles "to Jerusalem to worship" (verse 27). What devotion he shows, what sacrifice! We might wonder what his fellow Ethiopians think of him. And his religion is not one of mere outward ceremony. He is a serious reader of the Scriptures. Philip joins him in his chariot and finds him reading from the prophet Isaiah (verses 28-30). When asked by Philip if he understands what he is reading he humbly confesses his need of teaching (verses 30-31). Here is a man so desirous to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Some of you reading this are like this remarkable man. You are reading a book about true Conversion because you want to experience it for yourself. You may have been convinced that your life was going in the wrong direction and you have been seeking out a place of worship where you can come to know the truth. You may even have left former activities and companions behind in your quest for the truth. Your desire, above all things in life, is to know what the word of God says. Thank God that He has brought you thus far, but you still have further to go to experience Conversion.

2. BEFORE CONVERSION THERE IS NO UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL

The Ethiopian has one great problem. He cannot understand the Scriptures. He admits he needs someone "to guide him". Reading the words of the Scripture is not enough. Their meaning must be understood, and how that understanding of truth applies to one's life. Have you ever thought that saving faith is impossible without understanding? A positive feeling towards the Bible and a willingness to read its words is not enough. This is why Philip asks him this question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" It is not a problem of the

words being written in a language foreign to the reader, or that the style of writing is so very difficult. He just cannot understand what God is saying to him. The problem is spiritual, not linguistic, educational or intellectual.

The Bible is very clear that sin has affected our minds, our ability to understand the truth of God. Paul bluntly states, "No one understands" (Romans 3:11). The Gentiles are "darkened in their understanding" (Ephesians 4:18). "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel..." (2 Corinthians 4:4). "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). This inability is especially true when it comes to the gospel way of salvation. Isaiah had clearly spoken of salvation and the Ethiopian was providentially reading the great passage of chapter 53. But what natural man is ready to understand a salvation through the suffering on a cross of the servant of the Lord? How can he grasp that there is a salvation already purchased? Who can believe that salvation is the gift of God's free grace? The sinful understanding always tells us that I have a part to play somewhere, some good work to perform, something to do so that God will be predisposed to be merciful to me. The true way of salvation is always a stumbling block to sincere religious people like the Ethiopian. Yet without this true understanding there can be no true faith in Christ. When you read the Scriptures do you really understand what God is saying? Are you humble enough to admit that you need a guide?

3. HOW DOES UNDERSTANDING UNTO CONVERSION COME?

(1) Through Preaching (verses 32-35). Philip tells him "the good news about Jesus". It is interesting that he does not seem to have heard anything while in Jerusalem, but God graciously and personally sends him one to tell him as his heart is clearly prepared. I do not know why you are reading this book, what makes you interested in it and the subject of Conversion. But when God brings the good news, the gospel, to you, He is bringing what is an indispensable means of Conversion. If the Ethiopian had reached home never having heard he would have remained unconverted. Consider the place of hearing the gospel in the following Scriptures.

For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." But how are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Romans 10:13-14)

Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth,... (James 1:18)

You have been born again, ... through the living and abiding word of God... And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:23,25)

The good news centres on "Jesus". The Ethiopian has been reading from Isaiah 53:7-8 about one suffering silently like a sacrificial lamb, and suffering unjustly. He does not know who this refers to. So Philip tells him that it is fulfilled in Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, so that He is the Christ, the Messiah. This is precisely what Jesus did to His disciples after His resurrection. "'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into His glory?'" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:26-27). And later, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ..." (verse 46). The Ethiopian was perhaps perplexed because the thought that their coming Messiah would suffer was totally inconceivable to him and Jews in general (so Peter's reaction in Matthew 16:21-22).

Philip would have told him that although He was crucified, God raised Him from the dead. So He is both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). He would have told him, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (4:12). "God exalted Him at His right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (5:31). He would have exhorted him, "Repent and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, ..." (2:38). In short, Philip would have told him what Jesus had done, and what his response must be. He would have been confronted with the fact that he must look away from himself, his works, his religious activities, to Jesus and His death and resurrection by which alone he could become a Christian. That is why Jesus was humbled and sacrificed like a lamb.

In the Bible conversion is sometimes presented as being taught, being given an understanding of the word of God. This is something that God does, usually through human messengers as they speak. It is the experience of many, having heard much preaching that passed in one ear and out of the other, there was a time when 'it just made sense', and they came to faith in Christ.

It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me – (John 6:45).

But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge (1 John 2:20).

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

(2) Through Faith Unto Baptism (verses 36-38). What is the Ethiopian's response? It is not something that Philip had to urge on him. He himself sees the water, as there would not be much on a desert road, and asks, "What prevents me from being baptized?" It is obvious, therefore, that part of the good news that Philip told him has to do with baptism. Peter preached the same on the Day of Pentecost (2:38). Some Bibles have verse 37, Philip adding, "'If you believe with all your heart, you may.'" And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'" Even if we do not read those words about his faith, his request to be baptized is a clear expression of his faith in Jesus of whom he has heard from Philip. In the apostolic church, as we have the record in Acts, baptism is for those who profess faith. It is not an option some way down the road of the Christian life. It is inseparably linked with conversion.

To all those who profess to be following Christ, who are His disciples, He says, 'Be baptized as the outward sign that marks you as My follower. This baptism symbolizes what a Christian is, one who is united to the Triune God, who has been thoroughly washed from sin through My blood. If you ignore this command, or worse, if you refuse it, why should I count you as one of My followers?' Baptism is not something that the church decided on later. No, it is instituted by Christ for our good, for our blessing. It is a means of grace, and those who submit to baptism at least find their faith strengthened and their joy increased.

In much of today's Christianity there has been a substitution of a man-made tradition in the place of baptism. I refer to what is named as 'the Altar Call', calling people to come to the front to be saved. There are no examples of such a practice in the Bible. Rather those who respond to the message of the gospel are commanded to be baptized.

(3) By the Work of the Spirit of God (verses 26,29,39). It is necessary to consider one more thing about the conversion of this Ethiopian, something it may be easy to overlook. Here is a man who has travelled so far to Jerusalem for the sake of worshipping the true God. For

whatever reason he does not seem to have made any contact with the gospel. So he is going home. If God had not intervened sovereignly then he would have returned home as he began, a devotee of the true God, but yet unconverted. It is God who took the initiative. It was "an angel of the Lord" who instructed Philip to go where the Ethiopian was travelling. When Philip saw the chariot, it was the Spirit who told him to join with it. Then when Philip had baptized the Ethiopian "the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away."

There are multitudes of people in this world who have never heard the good news of Jesus. Multitudes more are like this Ethiopian, they have heard something or read something, but they do not understand. One essential aspect of conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit in giving such spiritual understanding.

Summary. **Conversion** is the work of the Holy Spirit in giving understanding of the gospel through preaching, with the response of faith and baptism.

12. SAUL OF TARSUS: A PERSECUTOR ACTS 9:1-19

¹ But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one ⁸ Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹ And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. ¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained

his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; ¹⁹and taking food, he was strengthened. (Acts 9:1-19)

TRUE CONVERSION: GOD'S CHOICE

We know more about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus than anyone else. In Acts the account of his experience on the Damascus Road is given three times (9:1-19, 22:3-16, 26:4-18). Paul also reflects on his experience in a number of passages in his letters (Romans 7:7-11, Galatians 1:13-16, Philippians 3:4-9, 1 Timothy 1:12-16). Perhaps he is the most wonderful and amazing example of conversion, as regards both the suddenness and the totality of the change in his life. There are obviously some unique features, such as the actual, physical appearance of the resurrected Lord Jesus (which is his qualification to be an apostle of Christ, 1 Corinthians 9:1), and then the three days of blindness. But the basic experience of conversion is common to all.

1. GREAT ATTAINMENTS ARE NOT CONVERSION

Before he was converted, Saul was very much like Nicodemus, although a fierce persecutor of Christians. But first consider his great attainments:

(1) Saul was a highly *educated* man.

- He was a native of the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, “no obscure city” as he described it (Acts 21:39). It was famed for its university. As a result he was schooled in Greek learning, and able to dialogue with the great Greek philosophers of Athens.
- But he had also sat at the feet of the highly respected teacher in Jerusalem, Gamaliel, probably to be trained to become a scribe (Acts 22:3). We might say he had attended the ‘Oxbridge’ ¹⁸ of the Jewish world.

(2) Saul was a zealously *religious* man. He belonged to the party of the Pharisees who lived most strictly to what they believed the Law of God taught (Acts 22:3, 26:5, Galatians 1:14). He considered himself as outwardly very moral (Philippians 3:5-6). In his zeal for God, as he saw it, he was the most violent persecutor of the church, considering Jesus as a blasphemer and the Way ¹⁹ as a dangerous heresy (Acts 9:1-2, 26:9-11, Galatians 1:13, 1 Timothy 1:13). No doubt he was sincere and devout.

It is obvious that he was not a converted man because he was a hater of Jesus. It is possible to have a very wide knowledge, as Paul had of both Greek and Jewish thinking, and to know deeply the word of God, and yet not be converted. Jesus refers to such: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness about Me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). You may have received distinctions in your religious studies in school, you may have a certificate from a Bible School, and even a degree from a Theological College, and yet remain unconverted. You may be outwardly very moral so that people look at you as a fine example for others to emulate. You may be absolutely convinced that God is pleased with you. And all the while you do not know God. You are unconverted. How important it is to be sure you are truly converted. A study of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus will show you the way.

2. TRUE CONVERSION IS THROUGH THE LORD'S INTERVENTION

We meet Saul “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (verse 1). The martyrdom of Stephen has energized him and he is not going to stop until the last disciple of Jesus is removed from the face of the earth. He is on his way to 150 miles north of Jerusalem to arrest any Christians he finds in Damascus (verse 2). Then God intervenes. It is as if God says, ‘Thus far but no further’. The Lord powerfully, effectually and graciously stops him in his persecuting zeal before he reaches the city gates. As with the events of the Day of Pentecost, the miraculous things are the way of arresting his attention and impressing upon his conscience the truth. But it is the truth itself that is the immediate means of his conversion.

(1) By the appearance of the Lord Jesus (verse 3).

He really sees the resurrected Lord Jesus, just as the other apostles had. This is so important as the basis for Paul’s apostleship, so please read Acts 9:17,27, 22:14, 1 Corinthians 9:1, 15:8. What a shocking sight that must have been to one who has believed that Jesus of Nazareth justly perished on a Roman cross as a punishment for his blasphemy. Paul believes he has been serving God faithfully, but in a flash, by a “light from heaven”, that is totally changed. The very One Paul was hell-bent in rejecting is the One who is alive from the dead! What can that mean except GOD has raised Jesus from the dead, exalted Him, and accepted Him in glory at His right hand? The obvious implication is that this Jesus is actually the Christ, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament prophets, the very One for whom Paul had been waiting (in 9:22 this is what Paul immediately started to preach). With all these thoughts quickly flashing

¹⁸ Oxbridge – Oxford and Cambridge Universities in England.

¹⁹ The Way is an early name for the Christian faith (Acts 9:2, 19:9,23, 24:14,22).

through his mind, no wonder he fell to the ground.

This is the central question. What do you think of Jesus of Nazareth? Is He the Christ? If He is the One written of in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings, have you received Him as such? Are you relying on Him to do for you all that was prophesied?

- ❖ He has come as the great *Prophet* like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15,18, see Acts 3:22-23). Are you submitting to all that God says as He speaks God’s final words in the Scriptures?
- ❖ He has come as the great *High Priest* like Aaron, but of the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 8:1). He has offered up Himself as the final sacrifice and intercedes for His people. Are you trusting in Him alone to reconcile you to God?
- ❖ He has come as the great *King* over His people (Luke 1:32-33). Are you looking to Him to protect you? Are you seeking to walk in the paths of all His commandments?

(2) By the voice of the Lord Jesus (verses 4-6).

What does the Lord say to him? He is devoting his life to persecuting Christians. In doing that he is persecuting the Lord Himself. It is not that the Lord does not know the answer to the question, “Why are you persecuting Me?” The question is for Saul’s sake. ‘Why would you persecute Me, the risen and exalted Lord?’ What foolishness! What rebellion! Note how closely Christ identifies with His people. What “you did to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40). Paul is ignorant of this, thinking that Jesus is only a wicked man, now dead (1 Timothy 1:13). Such a simple question is the means to convict Saul of his sin – he is fighting against God!! So he is awakened to his guilt and spiritual danger.

I ask you the very same question, 'Why?' Why are you not converted? You do not need Jesus to appear to you. You know that He rose from the dead. There are repeated testimonies to this effect in the Bible. Your conscience tells you that you have sinned against God, but perhaps so far you have refused to deal with your sin. Don't be like Saul of whom the Lord said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14). It would seem that Saul's reaction to his accusing conscience after he witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen was to redouble his persecution. Thank God for His grace in finally subduing him.

(3) By the Servant of the Lord (verses 7-19).

For three days consequent to the experience on the Damascus Road, Saul is struck with blindness. During that time he neither eats nor drinks because he is inwardly in turmoil, being under conviction of sin. His conversion is a process only begun as he journeys. Until the disciple at Damascus comes, Ananias, he remains blind. Such blindness is a symbol of his sinful ignorance and that he has not yet received the Holy Spirit who is promised to all who repent (2:38). Ananias is sent to tell Saul all that was appointed for him to do (22:10) and to complete the conversion begun by restoring his sight, a symbol that he now understands and believes. It is at this time that Saul calls upon the name of the Lord and is baptized (22:16).

If we could ask Saul the question, 'When were you converted? Was it when you saw the Lord Jesus, or when Ananias laid his hands on you, or when you were baptized?' He would answer that it was a process, at least beginning with the death of Stephen, at which he was a consenting witness (7:58, 22:20). What had he seen? Mob justice and yet the man being cruelly stoned to death cries out, "Lord do not hold this sin against them" (7:60). No cursing, no cry for vengeance, only a prayer for God's mercy. This surely made an impression on him. Yet rather than think it through he sought to fight against the conviction that maybe Stephen was right. This is a common reaction to conviction, seeking to stifle conscience by greater activity. Even the appearance of the Lord personally to him does not end the process. There are still another three days of struggle before he finally sees the light. This idea of conversion being a process is important as invariably people only think in terms of an instantaneous conversion. What is important is not that you can exactly pinpoint the moment of your conversion, but that you have been convicted of your sin and called upon the name of the Lord to save you, then have sealed it in baptism.

3. CONVERSION IS GOD'S WORK

(1) Conversion is a work of God's sovereign choice.

Of all people whose conversions are recorded here the fact of God's sovereign choice shines forth so clearly. Saul is raging as he gets near to Damascus. He has only one thought on his mind, to eradicate Christianity. But God has other plans and He stops Saul in his tracks by rendering him helpless in blindness. Pathetically, he must be led by the hand and brought into Damascus (9:8). Why did God stretch out His powerful hand in this way? Ananias, who is fearful that all this might be a trick, is assured by the Lord, "He is a chosen instrument of mine" (9:15). Then Ananias tells him, "The God of our fathers appointed you to know His will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from His mouth" (22:14). Paul can later declare that God "had set me apart before I was born" (Galatians 1:15). This was certainly not the will of Paul as he journeyed. But it was the will of God, and God's will prevailed by making Saul willing during those three heart-searching days. If you wish to ask, 'Why Saul?' The answer is, 'For so it seemed good in Your sight'.

This truth of God's election of those who are saved is found in many places in the Scriptures.

- Matthew 11:27. "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son *chooses* to reveal Him."
- John 6:37. "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me." There are those the Father has given to the Son. It is these the Son came to save (verse 39, see also 17:2,9). They will certainly come to Him. This goes together with the statement, "Whoever comes to Me I will never cast out." The "whoever" who come show that they are the ones given by the Father.
- Acts 13:48. Many Gentiles in Antioch believed. Why did those particular ones believe? "As many as were *appointed* to eternal life". It could not be made more clear.
- 1 Thessalonians 1:4. As Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians, he reasons back from their reception of the gospel, to the fact that this shows God "has *chosen* you".

(2) **Conversion is a work of God's grace** ²⁰.

Paul himself is amazed at his conversion. He writes, "Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" (1 Timothy 1:13). He goes on to describe himself as "the foremost" of sinners (verse 15). There is nothing good in the sight of God in Saul. If he is to be saved it must be grace and nothing but grace. Listen to him about himself. "But by the *grace* of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:9). God "who called me by His *grace*, was pleased to reveal His Son to me, ..." (Galatians 1:15). We could say that Saul was a worse sinner than the criminal who was crucified next to Jesus. Saul had great knowledge and privilege, yet set himself in opposition to the gospel. He had such a terrible reputation among Christians that they doubted his genuineness when he attempted to join the disciples in Jerusalem (9:26). They thought it was a trick.

²⁰ Grace – blessings, the very opposite of what is deserved.

The truth is that we are all sinners, and that if anyone is converted it is purely the grace of God. We have no part in conversion so that God responds as if to say, 'You have done your part, I will now reward you with conversion.' It is not any works that we do, nor even any decision that we make. What had Saul done to make God intervene on the Damascus Road? Only evil that was crying out for the judgement of God upon him. If you are converted, you know it is the grace of God.

He greatly helped those who through *grace* believed (Acts 18:27).

What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Corinthians 4:7).

For by *grace* you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

... who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and *grace* which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began (2 Timothy 1:9).

(3) **Conversion is centred on the truth about Jesus Christ.**

No depth of conviction, no number of experiences, would have brought about Saul's conversion if he had not been given the truth about Jesus. It is this that makes all the difference. The appearance of the resurrected Jesus convinces him that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. If Jesus is the One appointed by God to be the Redeemer, then certain things follow:

- ✓ I am the chief of sinners, for I have been ruthlessly opposing God.
- ✓ I stand condemned before God, because of the greatness of my sin.
- ✓ I can only be saved by grace, for I have nothing good to present to God.
- ✓ Christians are God's true people, for they believe in Jesus the Messiah of God.
- ✓ Gentile Christians are fellow heirs, for Jews and Gentiles are equally sinners, equally saved by grace (Romans 3:23-24).
- ✓ Fellow Jews are perishing, for they do not submit to God's righteousness in Christ, but seek to establish their own, as I used to do (Romans 10:3).

Has the truth about Jesus the Christ done these things for you? Think of it this way. If Jesus is the eternal Son of God, and if God sent Him to die for our sins on the cross, what does that say about how awful your sin is? If this is the only way anyone can be saved then sin is the most awful thing before God. Indeed, He is "of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong" (Habakkuk 1:13). If there was any other way, would God have given His only, His beloved Son? Paul writes, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Galatians 2:21). It is because there is no way to be justified before God by anything we do, that Christ's death is the ONLY way.

Summary. **Conversion** is a sovereign and powerful work of God in which Jesus Christ is revealed to the sinner.

13. CORNELIUS: A ROMAN SOLDIER ACTS 10

¹At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ²a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius. ⁴And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." ⁷When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

(Peter's Vision)

⁹The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹²In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. ¹⁷Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius,

having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate ¹⁸ and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. ¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." ²¹ And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" ²² And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." ²³ So he invited them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴ And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." ²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. ²⁸ And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me." ³⁰ And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. ³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' ³³ So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

(Gentiles Hear the Good News)

³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), ³⁷ you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

(The Holy Spirit Falls on the Gentiles)

⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. ⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" ⁴⁸ And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

TRUE CONVERSION: THE HOLY SPIRIT

We have the account of the conversion of Cornelius, and all who heard the word with him, in Acts 10. Then there is Peter's account of what happened when he went up to Jerusalem in Acts 11:1-18. There is a further short summary of what happened, when a controversy about the way of salvation developed, in Acts 15:7-11.

1. CONVERSION IS MORE THAN RELIGIOUS DEVOTION

This is the first question that naturally confronts us because he was such a religious and well-respected man (verse 22). He is called “devout”, one who “feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (verses 2,7, see verse 22). An angel of God had actually appeared to him in a vision and said, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (verses 4,31). These things cannot be discounted as abominable to God for it is specifically said that God received them. They are all part of his conversion process. Cornelius has received the true faith as far as he has heard and understood it. Now for the first time he is going to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the question is how he will receive it. Until this response is given it is quite clear from the record that he is not yet truly converted.

10:43 – Peter preached to him faith in Christ unto the forgiveness of sins.

11:14 – Cornelius told Peter that the angel told him that he “will declare to you a message by which you will be *saved*, you and all your household.”

11:18 – Receiving the Holy Spirit is interpreted as “God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

15:9 – Peter says to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem that, because these Gentiles were given the Spirit, God made “no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith”.

As the first Gentile convert Cornelius stands as a witness that God shows no partiality, so that Gentiles do not first have to become Jews by circumcision in order to be saved (see 15:11).

Do you see how near a person can get to conversion, and yet not be converted? You may have been brought up to know and understand much about the Bible, for which you should thank the Lord. You may be devoted in praying and showing mercy, and other religious acts. You may even be able to relate supernatural experiences. Yet you must face up to the reality that, like Cornelius, you might not yet be truly converted. It all depends on what you do with the message of Jesus Christ that you hear.

2. CONVERSION COMES THROUGH PREACHING ABOUT JESUS CHRIST

(1) God prepared Cornelius by **His providential workings** (verses 1-33).

God was at work both with Peter and with Cornelius to bring them together.

★ Cornelius has a vision in which he is instructed to call Peter from Joppa (verses 3-8). He immediately obeys the instruction.

★ Peter is the problem, for Cornelius is a Gentile, and Jews do not go into a Gentile home and eat with them (verse 28). But the very next day he also has a vision in which he is commanded to kill and eat unclean animals, which is interpreted, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” At the very time Peter is considering the implications of this the men from Cornelius arrive. The Spirit tells Peter to go with them without hesitation. Peter later explains to Cornelius that the vision applies to persons, with the words, “God has shown me that I should not call any *person* common or unclean” (verse 28). So he says he came without objection (verse 29). All is now ready as Cornelius and others with him are gathered to hear from Peter “all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (verse 33).

It is obvious that God is in control of every event, and every person, with or without angelic visitations or visions. These were not means of conversion, but only the immediate

preparations for hearing the good news. Consider God's providences to you. You can read and you have a book about the gospel in a language you can understand. This is not true of everyone or of every language. But there are so many who can read who have never seen any book (including the Bible) about the gospel in their language. Consider how you got this book. In God's providence you were given a copy by a friend, or you saw it on a book-table or in a bookshop. These are not providences that everyone experiences. May the reading of this book, and understanding its message, lead you to true conversion and assurance that you are so converted.

(2) God brought **the preaching of the gospel** (verses 34-43).

This was the immediate means of his conversion, and for all who heard this word (verse 44). What was Peter's message? He starts with what he has learned through his recent experiences, that God shows no partiality (verse 35), so that what he is to say is equally applicable to Gentile as well as Jew. Peter tells them all about Jesus, His earthly ministry, His death and resurrection, His coming as Judge, and the good news of forgiveness through Him. The emphasis is that it was God who was doing all these things. God sent the word to Israel (verse 36), God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit, God was with Him (verse 38), God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear to His chosen witnesses (verse 40), God appointed Him to be Judge (verse 42).

We must emphasize the central place of the proclamation of the gospel in the conversion of sinners. It is the proclamation of a specific message about the Person and work of Jesus Christ. On coming to Corinth Paul made a definite decision "to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). He reminds the Galatians that when he came among them, "it was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified" (3:1).

3. CONVERSION IS THE SPIRIT WORKING FAITH AND REPENTANCE

(1) Cornelius experienced **the powerful work of the Holy Spirit** (verses 44-46).

This is described in a number of ways, which all amount to the same thing.

- The Spirit "fell" (verse 44) on all who heard the word, implying both suddenness and that it came from above (heaven).
- The gift of the Spirit was "poured out" (verse 45), implying its abundance.
- They were "baptized with the Holy Spirit" (11:16), fulfilling the promise of the Lord.
- God bore witness to these Gentiles, by "giving them the Holy Spirit" (15:8) just as He did to us at Pentecost. The gift of the Holy Spirit clearly showed that God accepted these Gentiles as His people without circumcision and submitting to the Law of Moses (this was the controversy, see 15:1,5).

It needs to be emphasized that every truly converted person receives the Spirit in full measure at conversion, and not at a later stage in their Christian life. This was the promise on the Day of Pentecost to those who repented (2:38). It is precisely the baptism with the Holy Spirit that united all Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul states it bluntly that "anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him" (Romans 8:9).

This giving of the Spirit is the great gift of the new covenant. Think about what John the Baptist said Jesus was coming to do: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). Ezekiel promised it (36:26-27, 37:14, 39:29). Paul specifically describes the present time as "the ministry of the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:7-8). Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law on the cross so that "we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14). Later he writes that Christ redeemed us so that we might receive adoption as sons, and as such "God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts" (4:5-6).

Cornelius, the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues.

It is quite clear that the gift of the Spirit was recognized by their "speaking in tongues and extolling God" (Acts 10:46). There is constant reference back to the Day of Pentecost, that the experience of these Gentiles was the same as the Jews at Pentecost (see 10:47, 11:15,17, 15:8). For Cornelius there is no doubt that this was a conversion experience. It is wrong for anyone to use this as a two-stage experience, first conversion, then later receiving the Spirit. The conclusion of all in Jerusalem who heard this report from Peter was, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life" (11:18).

We must ask then, what is the significance of the speaking in tongues? Does it mean that the evidence that anyone has received the Spirit is such tongues? Does it mean that if a person has never spoken in tongues that he is not converted? There are only 3 direct references to speaking in tongues in Acts, on the Day of Pentecost (2:4), with Cornelius, and some disciples in Ephesus (19:6). It is also possible there was such a manifestation in Samaria as Simon "saw" the Spirit was given (8:18). There are many other records of conversion but no mention of tongues, for example with Saul (9:17). Remember that Cornelius is the first gentile convert. Given the very dismissive relationship between Jews and Gentiles it was so important that these first Gentiles have exactly the same experience as at Pentecost to mark them out as 'full' Christians. When Peter is called to Jerusalem to account for what he has done he tells his inquisitors it is the way they received the Spirit that convinced him, so "who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17).

(2) Cornelius **repented and believed the gospel** (11:18).

When those in Jerusalem heard Peter narrate what happened as he began to speak (verse 15), the conclusion that everyone came to was that Cornelius and those with him had repented unto spiritual life (verse 18). The gift of the Spirit was God's own witness to this reality (15:8). Peter had just finished telling them that if they believed in Christ they would have forgiveness of sins (10:43). In subsequent explanations he declares that they did believe (11:17, 15:7,9). This is always the simple man-ward response to the preaching of the gospel that results in conversion. It is what Peter preached in Ephesus: "testifying both to Jews and to Greek of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). And such is the fruit of the Spirit's powerful work – note that repentance is granted by God (11:18).

Maybe you wonder where in the record of Cornelius' conversion is his repentance and faith? We read that it was "while Peter was still saying these things" that "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word" (10:44). The response to the word begins in the heart, and before God our hearts are open. Inwardly, where it really matters, Cornelius is confessing his sins to God and putting his trust in the Christ of whom he is hearing. We know this is true because it is why the Holy Spirit is given. The response is not physical, walking to the front of a meeting. There is a physical response after it is clear these people have been converted for they have

the signs that they have received the Holy Spirit. Peter commands that they be baptized. All the evidences of conversion are there. Therefore no one has any grounds to forbid their baptism. Note how baptism is assumed to be the natural consequence of conversion.

4. SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT TRUE CONVERSION

1. *Conversion is the same for each and every person.*

There are Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven, gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. There are a great many priests (6:7). There are Samaritans, both men and women. There is Saul the Pharisee and persecutor. There is an Ethiopian eunuch. Now there is the Gentile Cornelius and his household. The background does not matter, for God is no respecter of persons. Jew or Gentile, or even Samaritan; man or woman; somebody or nobody; these are neither qualifications for conversion, not disqualifications. But all who are aware of their sin before God, who humble themselves, who confess their sin and turn their back on it, and who look to Christ crucified as their only hope, will know true conversion.

2. *A person can be so near to being converted without a true experience.*

How near Cornelius appeared to be! He is described as devout, a God-fearer, a man of prayer and good works, and had even experienced a visiting angel. All such things, and many more, are good, but they are not good enough. One very important thing is lacking. As with the Pharisee in the parable, if there is no humbling because of sin, no calling out for mercy in the name of Christ, then there is no conversion. With all his religiousness Paul once thought he was alive before God. But when the Law of God convinced him of his sin then he 'died' – all his hopes of glory disappeared. Ask yourself if you have this key experience, that of repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, because of conviction of your sin.

3. *Conversion is a powerful work of God.*

This is where there is so much confusion today. Many see conversion as man's work, the fruit of a person exercising his so-called 'free will'. God was working out His purpose before either Cornelius or Peter were aware of each other. It is He who set the wheels of conversion moving. Without the vision Peter would never have gone to Cornelius' house. Even then he needed special prompting to go when the time arrived. Without the angelic visitation Cornelius would never have known about Peter. Then as Peter was speaking the Holy Spirit fell on them with power. In conversion there is the need to be filled with the Spirit, immersed or baptized with the Spirit, in order to live the Christian life (see Ezekiel 36:27).

Summary. **Conversion** is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit bringing a sinner to faith and repentance made public in baptism.

14. LYDIA: A BUSINESS WOMAN ACTS 16:11-15

¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. ¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:11-15)

TRUE CONVERSION: OPENING THE HEART

This very simple account of the conversion of Lydia brings to the forefront what God does in conversion. We must learn to see in conversion not only what the sinner does, but the absolutely essential work that God does in the sinner.

1. CONVERSION IS GOD'S WORK IN THE HEART

If you listen to many preachers there is much talk about what God has already done in Christ as a preparation for conversion, but when it comes to conversion itself it seems to be all the work of man. The account of Lydia shows that conversion is totally impossible without the work of God. In Lydia it is all the more remarkable as she is most probably a Gentile, called "a worshipper of God" (verse 14).

(1) God's **preparatory work** of providence bring Paul and Lydia together in Philippi.

- The *messenger*. Paul began his second missionary journey by revisiting churches already established in order to strengthen them in the faith (15:36-16:5). As he journeyed he found the Holy Spirit forbidding him to go into Asia, and not allowing them to go into Bithynia. In this way they were 'forced' to go to Troas where there was the vision that made Paul conclude that he was to go to Macedonia (16:6-10). So he and his team ended up in Philippi.
- The *hearer*. Lydia was a business woman, "a seller of purple goods". She is about two hundred miles away from home in Thyatira on the other side of the Aegean Sea. Although a Gentile, she has embraced the Jewish religion and is presumably familiar with the word of God as we have it in the Old Testament.

What is the explanation as to why these two are found in Philippi at the same time? Is it just coincidence? No, God has purposed it and it has come to pass. It is the same with Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It was not a 'chance' meeting at the well, but one arranged by the plan of God. Going from Judea to Galilee through Samaria, although more direct, was not the usual route, for strict Jews would prefer to avoid Samaria and go the east side of the Jordan River. So it is very noticeable when it is written, "He **had** to pass through Samaria" (John 4:4). This was not a geographical, but a divine necessity. So it is God who caused the hearer to come within earshot of the messenger that particular Sabbath day. If you are converted just look back on all the events leading up to your conversion and learn to see God's hand in them all.

(2) God's **powerful work** in the heart of Lydia as Paul preaches. Very simply we read, "The Lord opened her heart." What does this mean?

➤ By nature the heart is closed. How can Lydia's heart be closed, yet she is a very religious woman, one who has deliberately left the idolatrous religion of her culture, and we assume sincerely and not under any pressure? "Heart" does not refer to emotions as opposed to the mind (as in Western thought), but to the inner person as opposed to the outer person. So while man looks upon the outward appearance, the Lord looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Jesus quotes Isaiah who contrasts the lips with the heart (Matthew 15:8). Lydia's whole inner life, her thoughts, her desires, her conscience, her will, are all impenetrable to the truth that Paul was preaching. Think of a house shut up and in darkness with no godly inhabitant and a determination not to let in anyone godly. That is the state of us sinners by nature. The Scriptures declare that the mind is blinded (2 Corinthians 4:4), the understanding is darkened and the heart is hard (Ephesians 4:18), so that there is a refusal to come to Christ because of love for this world (John 5:40). Many of us can say the words of the man whose eyes Jesus opened, "though I was blind, now I see." But the obstacles must first be overcome, and only God can do that.

➤ God must open the heart. It is obviously figurative language. To be closed means to refuse anything to enter. To be opened means to be receptive, and here to be receptive to the message that Paul was preaching. The Bible has other equally figurative language to describe the same work of God within.

And I will give you a new heart, and a new Spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

God ... has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds (Hebrews 10:16).

As regards receiving the truth, such as Paul was preaching, this opening of the heart is what is elsewhere called teaching, or enlightenment. Jesus states that when someone believes in Him, it is because he has “heard and learned from the Father” (John 6:45). God does this as the only way anyone can receive the message preached.

➤ The error of believing man can open his own heart. Can a man pull himself up by his own boot-strings? How many an evangelist has told his audience to open their hearts to the Lord. It is like telling the leopard, ‘Change your spots!’, or the Ethiopian, ‘Change your skin!’ (Jeremiah 13:23). Evangelistic practice is based upon what we believe, especially what we believe about the nature of the sinner. Despite what the Bible so clearly says here, there is the belief that a person is able to open their own heart, because everyone has ‘free-will’. So it is supposed that at any time, any sinner has the ability to respond to the gospel that is being preached. There were other women that day by the riverside but it is only said of Lydia that her heart was opened. The others heard the message but there was no saving response from them. The false idea of ‘free-will’ lies behind the practice of the ‘altar call’ or ‘decisionism’. Why is the teaching of the closed heart rejected? Because the thought that we are totally dependent on the Lord for conversion is not liked by proud, self-dependent man.

➤ How does God open the heart? As here, it is in connection with the truth of the gospel. It is as Paul was preaching that Lydia gave attention as her heart was opened. Although it is God’s sovereign work (why Lydia and not the others?), He chooses to use means to accomplish His purpose. Remember James 1:18 and 1 Peter 1:23,25. It was as Paul preached the gospel to the Thessalonians that they were converted (see 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, 2:12, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Therefore we do not sit back and just hope God will some day open someone’s heart. It is our privilege to pray expectantly, and to preach and witness vigorously in dependence upon Him. Although “God gave the growth” it is Paul who “planted” and Apollos who “watered” (1 Corinthians 3:6). There would have been no growth without planting or watering.

2. THE EVIDENCE THAT GOD HAS WORKED IN THE HEART

These are three things that show God has been at work in the heart.

(1) Lydia ***gave heed to the gospel.***

This is the result of the Lord opening her heart. It was opened to receive the message of the gospel Paul was preaching. Using different concepts, when the Lord gives the new birth the result is faith (see John 1:12-13, 1 John 5:1). I want to be guarded here lest any of you think, ‘I am helpless, I can’t do anything, so I will just sit back and hope that God might one day open my heart.’ Paying attention to the gospel message by repentance and faith is your responsibility. To fail to do it only increases your guilt. You cannot plead your inability as you

are responsible for this. Imagine you take out a big loan for your business of, say, ten thousand dollars. Of course, you intend to pay back the loan, but instead of using the profits from the business to do that you squander the money. When you are finally called to account can you be excused because you are unable to pay? When you see your inability the normal reaction is to turn somewhere for help. Turn to the Lord in your helplessness.

(2) Lydia showed her genuine submission to the Lord by **baptism**.

This is the consistent pattern in the apostolic church. Conversion, i.e. repentance and faith, and then baptism. So far we have looked at the Pentecost worshippers, the Samaritans, the Ethiopian, Saul, and Cornelius, and in each case they all submitted to baptism. Baptism is not conversion. But baptism is the command of Christ to all who enrol as His disciples. The same Lord who commanded repentance, commanded baptism. Don't pick and choose His commands, obeying some now, but leaving others. Could not the genuineness of your conversion be called into question if you refuse or even ignore baptism? Look again through all the examples of baptism in Acts and see that in every case those baptized were believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

(3) Lydia **identified with the Lord's servants**.

These are total strangers she unexpectedly met at the riverside that day but she now wants them to stay with her. They had brought her the good news of Jesus Christ. She hopes they have seen in her a genuine reception of the message. We may say she now regards Paul and his companions as part of her family. This is not just a polite request for she "urged" them. She was not willing to take 'No' for an answer. One thing she surely wanted from them was more of that word of God to which she had just been introduced. So here is a great mark of one who has been truly converted. She 'devoted herself to the apostle's teaching' as they did in the first church in Jerusalem (2:42). The word of God had found her and she could not get enough of it. God's messenger is here, I must hear as much as I can from him. Those who find that once a week for the word is as much as they desire need to ask if they are really converted.

Household Baptisms.

Not only was Lydia baptized, but it also says, “and her household as well”. Many have tried to use this fact to justify the baptism of babies who have at least one parent who is a believer. There are the following passages to which appeal is made, but they do not stand up to examination.

Acts 2:38-39 – “The promise is for you and your children.” Children here are not considered as babies, but as the next generation. So the promise is for generations to come. It is also for those “far off”, i.e. the Gentiles. And all those who have the promise are described as those “the Lord our God calls to Himself”. Those called are those who are saved. So all these people are saved, and thus to be baptized.

Acts 16:15 – “And her household as well.” She is a business woman, far from home. There is no evidence or likelihood that she had small children with her. This is to read into the passage what is not there.

Acts 16:33 – “He and all his family.” There was the promise to all his household that if anyone believed they would be saved (verse 31). Then Paul spoke the word to ALL who were in the house (verse 32). This assumes that all could hear and understand. The implication is that all believed and so were baptized.

Acts 18:8 – “Together with his entire household.” It is specifically said that the entire household believed in the Lord. This clear statement should be used as a pattern for the rest.

1 Corinthians 1:16 – “The household of Stephanus.” See 16:15 where it says that his household were the first converts in Achaia. The implication is that all the members of the house were converted. Why should it be assumed that any household has very young children? Look around you and see if this is so everywhere.

Summary. **Conversion** is when the Lord opens the heart to believe the word that is being preached.

15. THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER: A RAW PAGAN

ACTS 16:16-40

¹⁶ As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. ¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. ³⁵ But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." ³⁶ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace." ³⁷ But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." ³⁸ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. ³⁹ So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. (Acts 16:16-40)

TRUE CONVERSION: FAITH

God had purposed to build a church for Himself in Philippi, which is why He directed Paul there. But look whom He chose! There was a prosperous business woman away from her home, but devoted to religion. Then there was a slave girl possessed by an evil spirit. Finally there is the Jailer who we assume had no concern for genuine religion. Such are the living stones with which the church is built into glorious unity. Look how God's gracious providence reaches to each. Lydia has travelled far on business to Philippi for a season. The spirit in the slave girl "greatly annoyed" Paul because she kept following him. Paul and Silas were thrown into the inner prison having been falsely accused. So we are introduced to the Jailer.

1. UNCONVERTED AND CARELESS (verses 23-27)

The prisoners, Paul and Silas, are roughly delivered to this Jailer to be kept safely. He obliges by putting them in the inner prison, fastening their feet in the stocks to make sure escape was impossible. Duty done, he could retire to his bed and be confident everything was in order until the morning. How quickly things can change! It was only some hours later, about midnight, that an earthquake occurs so that "all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened". For a Jailer it was his life for the life of a prisoner. If a prisoner escaped from under his charge he, the Jailer, would lose his life (so in Acts 12:18-19). He thinks it far better to take his own life than to be humiliated by execution. Suicide was thought to be the best solution to problems in this life by being ushered into the next and hopefully better world. A worldly and godless man is driven to despair of this life by an unexpected misfortune of events, something he could never have anticipated. This attitude shows his total ignorance and carelessness in regard to God and his eternal destiny. He feared those who can kill the body, but not Him who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28). He had not considered that it was a greater danger to rush into God's presence through death and so into eternity, and yet be unprepared.

This attitude is true of all of us by nature. We are spiritually dead, so insensitive to spiritual dangers. It is seen every day in those comforting epitaphs for the deceased, 'May God rest his soul in eternal peace'. This can be said even though the dead is known to be a wicked person. It shows no sense of sin, of the wrath of God, of judgement. There is a vague belief that God is a God of love who will simply welcome all no matter how they have lived. It is like a person fast asleep on his bed at night, totally oblivious that fire is raging all around him and it is only a matter of time before it will consume him. Do you have any sense of your great danger before God because of your sin? Don't you think of God's destruction of the world of Noah's day with only 8 survivors? Don't you look in horror at the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sin? Then consider that a whole people, the Canaanites, was to be destroyed in judgement by the people of Israel. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

2. AWAKENED TO THE NEED FOR CONVERSION (verses 28-30)

What happens to make him aware of his sin and his spiritual danger? Just before plunging the sword into his body Paul shouts at him that he and all the prisoners are still present. Amazingly, none have tried to escape. Apart from the earthquake itself, he is overwhelmed that all the prisoners have been restrained from what would have been entirely natural to do. And he is "trembling with fear". It cannot be a fear of having to kill himself because no prisoner has escaped. Suddenly he has a spiritual fear of God, he knows he needs "to be saved". This is not an intellectual enquiry. It is the middle of the night, there is urgency as he rushes in, and there is humiliation as he falls down before his prisoners. What contributed towards this?

- ✓ He must at least have heard a report of the activities of Paul and Silas in Philippi. The healing of the slave girl had the city in uproar (verse 22). From the accusation of "advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept" he would have learned something of their message.

- ✓ He was a close witness of their conduct under great provocation. There had been no proper trial. "The magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods." He did not hear them cursing and reviling, but rather praying and singing hymns to God (verse 25). We are specifically told that the other prisoners were listening. How important is our testimony under such circumstances. People of the world cannot understand such conduct in the face of such unjust and brutal suffering (for more on the suffering read 2 Corinthians 11:25 and 1 Thessalonians 2:2).
- ✓ Immediately, there was the power of God in the earthquake and the restraining hand of God on the prisoners so that none of them escaped, as would have been natural.

All this combines to bring into sharp focus that these two prisoners are actually "servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation" (verse 17).

God has an endless number of ways to awaken us sinners to our great danger and need of salvation. It can be great circumstances on the scale of an unexpected earthquake, and things such as sickness, accident, bereavement, failure. Or it can be the privilege of having heard the word from the earliest age so that you are well aware of the reality of sin and its consequences. The actual means God uses are unimportant. What is important is that you come to humbly and urgently ask this question, "What must I do to be saved?" Have you ever come to the conviction that you are not ready to enter the world to come?

- Are you conscious of your *guilt* because you have sinned against God? It is not the earthquake or even death of which you would be afraid.
- Are you conscious of your *danger*? If Rome surely punishes one who lets a prisoner escape, how much more does God mean what He says when He states, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23)? Once you know the fire is raging out of control everything is done to put it out.
- Are you conscious of your *helplessness* knowing that you cannot rescue yourself but need a Saviour? Like the Jailer you must go to God's messengers. What do they say?

Note that to be conscious of such things is not conversion. It is a necessary first step for there is no true conversion without such conviction. This is why Jesus promised to send the Spirit, to "convict the world concerning sin" (John 16:8). So the Pentecost worshippers were "cut to the heart" when they realized that it was their Messiah they had crucified. So the Prodigal Son came to himself and realized he had sinned against heaven and his father. So the Tax Collector was so conscious of his sins that all he could do was to cry for mercy. This was the problem with the Pharisee who did not see himself as having any sin. The Rich Young Ruler did not understand his sin of covetousness in his love for his riches. Simon's problem was the same, not viewing his attempt to buy the power of the Spirit as being sinful.

3. CONVERTED AND REJOICING (verses 31-32)

The Jailer was not converted when he experienced the earthquake or when he was assured that none of the prisoners had escaped. He was converted when he responded to the word of the Lord through Paul. He asks an amazing question, what he has to do to be saved. The use of the word "saved" shows it is his sin that is now of most concern in his heart. How would you answer this all important question, 'What must you do to be saved?' Pray this prayer after me? Believe Christ died for your sins? Even wait for God to do something? None of these are what Paul responded, and we must very carefully examine the statement.

Paul's answer was short and clear: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." There are two things:

(1) "Believe". This is the only thing commanded to be done to be saved. Why faith and faith alone? To believe (or to have faith) is different from every other activity. It is to look away from yourself and to trust someone else, to totally depend upon another. When the Israelites were dying of snake bites in the wilderness they were simply told to look at a bronze serpent that Moses lifted up on a pole and they would live (Numbers 21:6-9). A person might well have reasoned, 'How can seeing a lifeless model of a snake cure me from a deadly snakebite?' But Moses was the servant of God and if they trusted God according to what He said then indeed they lived. Jesus used this incident to teach about faith (John 3:14-15).

(2) "In the Lord Jesus". Faith has one object, the Person of the Lord Jesus.

- He is Jesus = Saviour (Matthew 1:21). Believing in Him is the heart-felt confession that He is the one and only Saviour, and that He lived, died and rose for our salvation.
- He is Lord = exalted ruler over all (Philippians 2:9-11). Believing in Him is glad and full submission to Him as the One who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

This is more than knowledge. Believing is total commitment to this Lord Jesus. In practice to believe means to call on His name, telling Him of your guilt, your danger, and your helplessness, asking Him to rescue you because He is the Saviour of sinners, and purposing to turn from your sins and to follow Him. Like the Tax Collector, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Like blind Bartimaeus, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

This promise to the Jailer and his household if they only believed is amazing. Only a matter of minutes before he had been unconcerned. This teaches that there is no need for a long period of preparation before a person can be converted. As the hymn writer says: 'All the fitness he requireth is to feel your need of Him.'²¹ But until you do believe you remain in danger. There are a number of inadequate responses.

→ 'I am not sure if I have this faith.' This is a most healthy question, as there is a false faith, as with Simon the Magician. Faith must always be tested to see if it is genuine. But you must not stay in this position of doubt. You must either conclude that by God's grace you have this faith, or you do not have it. Do you humbly acknowledge your guilt, danger and helplessness? Are you rejecting the very best efforts you have made and trusting only in Christ and Him crucified? If not, that is what you are commanded to do.

→ 'I have always believed.' It is possible that from your youngest years you have believed and that you have never been through a specific experience from which you can date your conversion. Take heart as there are very many like this. What matters is not yesterday, but today. Whatever experiences we have had need interpretation, and many falsely conclude they are converted when they are not. So the question is, 'Do you have the same faith as the Jailer had *now*? Is the Lord Jesus everything to you in your life *today*? Have you been saved from sin so that your life is a continual fighting with sin?' But if these things are not true of you, then that faith you have always had is not a true faith.

→ 'I am waiting to be saved.' You hope you will be saved one day, but you are doing nothing about it. You are commanded to believe! If you are drowning and thrown a rope, will you hope that the current brings it near you and wraps itself around you? No, you will grab hold of it with all your might that you might be pulled out. To wait doing nothing means that you really do not believe in this way of salvation as revealed in the Bible. And if you cannot rely on God as He speaks, what hope of salvation can there be?

²¹ Hymn of Joseph Hart, *Come, ye sinners, poor and needy*, verse 3.

This Philippian Jailer, in the space of a very short time, was convicted of sins, heard the message of the gospel, and believed in the Lord Jesus, and was saved. And in that he rejoiced (verse 34).

4. A NEW CONVERTED LIFESTYLE (verses 33-40)

We have a few details about the Jailer after he was converted. As with Lydia some of these details are quite ordinary. True conversion does more than add some religious dimension to one's life, like attending worship services. It transforms the whole of life so that it is now all lived to the Lord for His glory. Note the following five things:

(1) The Jailer had **new priorities** in his life (verse 32).

We first meet him as he is charged to keep the prisoners safely. He has no concern for them, but only to do his job. It is now past midnight, and he forgets his own sleep and conveniences, in order to hear the word of God, and to care for God's servants and his own family. When a person truly believes he is awakened to the world of spiritual reality (2 Corinthians 4:18, 5:7). The early morning hours of darkness are an unusual time for preaching and Paul and Silas are physically needy, but the word of the Lord has priority (verse 32). False faith is content with just enough knowledge to be safe (as it thinks). Saving faith is never satisfied (Acts 2:42). Many blame the poor state of professed converts on the lack of follow-up. But do you have to convince a new born baby to be hungry? If it does not cry to be fed then it is probably dead. The word of the Lord is so important to this man that he wakes up his entire household to hear the saving message of the gospel.

What concern do you have for the unconverted family members with whom you live? Is knowing and following the word of the Lord now the great priority of your life as one who has professed faith? If we could record your life for a week, what would it reveal? What personal reading of the Scripture, devotion to the apostles' teaching, prayer for the word of God to change you, and speaking to others, would there be? Many professing Christians are not interested in a second service in the late afternoon or evening. Then what about one after midnight? Would we have to conclude that you are not truly converted?

(2) The Jailer showed **love** to fellow believers (verses 33-34,40).

Now that he is a Christian he cannot do enough for the sake of these prisoners he regards as brethren in Christ. He washes the wounds that the magistrates had ordered to be inflicted. He sets food before them in his own home. These were the specific and immediate needs that needed to be dealt with (see 1 John 3:14ff.). How quickly he changes from pagan cruelty to Christian tenderness, sharing all that was his. Salvation in Christ delivers all believers from a hard-hearted indifference to the needs of others. Love for the Lord who saves always translates into love for those He loves (1 John 5:1). Note that before they leave Philippi, Paul and Silas must visit Lydia and the brothers (verse 40). Perhaps they were physically unable to leave immediately. But these brethren needed encouragement in the face of persecution. How dear the relationship between Paul and the brethren in Philippi continued to be (Philippians 1:7-8). Is this how you consider other Christians?

(3) The Jailer professed his faith in **baptism** (verse 33).

Once again it is reported that baptism followed the profession of faith. There is no doubt that baptism is the God-appointed way of openly professing one's faith in Christ. Paul's answer to the question about being saved was not baptism but faith. Cleansing from sin and salvation are through faith. Yet baptism must have been part of his teaching, as it was Peter's on the Day of Pentecost (2:38). Note that instruction preceded this baptism. All his family were baptized because all his family had heard the word and believed. There was household baptism because there was household conversion.

If you profess to be a believer in the Lord Jesus then you are to submit to baptism. This is the consistent apostolic commandment and practice. To refuse apostolic instruction is to refuse Christ who authorized them (see 1 Corinthians 14:37). If you have not been baptized as a believer put all excuses behind you and submit in joyful obedience. Could it be that you would be ashamed to publicly profess your faith because you know there are real spiritual problems in your life? Then maybe you are not truly converted.

(4) The Jailer **rejoiced in believing** (verse 34).

He had been filled with terror on account of his sins before God. He had nowhere to turn, he was hopeless. Now he is sure that both he and his family have been rescued from God's just and eternal judgement. Who would not rejoice? Have you never seen the scenes of joy at a Court when the previous conviction is overturned? True joy is not some emotional experience because of singing, such as the stony-ground hearer had (Luke 8:13). This joy is not dependent upon external circumstances and is the mark of the true believer (Romans 14:17). Do you know anything of the joy of just believing in God?

There is much preaching today about Christ and believing in Him for salvation. We thank God for wherever the gospel is preached (Philippians 1:15-18). The problem is that mere profession of faith tends to be so easily accepted. The problem is in the area of the fruit to be looked for as evidence of true faith. Many are assured they are believers and so saved just because of a prayer they prayed. Many are accepted by churches because they were baptized as an infant, have gone through a catechism class, and faithfully give tithes. They say 80% of Kenyans are 'Christians' and yet it is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Jesus says many will be surprised on the day of judgement to be told, "Depart from Me" (Matthew 7:23). This will not be because of false teaching or lack of religious fervour, but because they are "workers of lawlessness", that is, they do not live Christian lives. Do you have the fruit that God demands to show you are a tree that is alive in Christ, as with the Jailer?

Summary. **Conversion** is to believe in the Lord Jesus and to manifest that faith in a totally changed life.

PART III: CONVERSIONS IN THE LETTERS

16. THE ROMANS: SLAVES ROMANS 6:17-18

¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:17-18)

TRUE CONVERSION: A CHANGE OF MASTERS

More than 30% of the world's population is labelled as Christian. Even in secular U.K. 40% of people would say they are Christians rather than something else. With such large percentages one would expect general Biblical standards to prevail, yet it is wickedness that abounds. There is something very wrong. At the very least there is almost total ignorance of what it means to be a Christian. But even among practising, sincere Christians the idea that the Christian way of life is totally different from the world's is not in evidence.

So far in this book we have shown that conversion is first of all God's work and thus of His grace alone, without our works. Many respond with the objection that such teaching is dangerous as it will encourage people to be careless about sin. In this letter to the Church in Rome Paul is asking this very question, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1). In other words, can a true Christian continue to live in sin? The question arises because Paul has emphasized that salvation is all of grace (in 5:21 and the whole discussion from 3:21). Paul imagines a perverse person asking, 'If salvation is of grace and not of works, then it does not matter how I live, does it?' He repeats the question in a slightly different way, "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" (6:15). Or, 'If we are no longer under the authority of the law to condemn us, then it does not matter if we sin, does it?' Paul's first response to both forms of the question is a very strong, "By no means!" It is more literally, 'May it never be!' We might say, 'Impossible!' or 'God forbid!' The idea that a Christian can be careless with sin is not something that may be but should not be; it **cannot** be. Any person who is careless with what the word of God calls sin is simply not a Christian, is not truly converted.

How does Paul go on to answer the question? One of his answers is to remind the Roman Christians what happened to them when they were converted (6:17-18). In relation to sin, what does happen to us when we become Christians? The answer is bound up in the word "slave", and the corresponding idea of 'master'. The truth is that every person is a slave to one master or another. The question then is: Whose slave are you? Which master are you serving? How can you know?

1. BEFORE CONVERSION: SIN IS MASTER

One of the great reasons why there is so much misunderstanding about conversion, is that there is no clear thinking of what we need to be converted *from*. Yes, we may know it is sin generally, but how serious a condition is that? It really matters if your headache is a result of tiredness the simple cure of which is sleep, OR whether it is a sign of high blood pressure which if not dealt with will kill you!

So how serious a matter is sin? The Bible so clearly states that you are a slave to sin, so that sin is your master. To be a slave of sin “leads to death” (verse 16). Many find this language of slavery insulting, even abusive. ‘You mean to tell me that I am not a free person?’ it is objected. This is how the Jews were antagonized (John 8:33). But if a doctor tells you that your condition is so bad that you need an emergency operation you will not think he has insulted you. You will be thankful for his honesty and the hope of a remedy. So consider the following:

(1) The evidence of the Bible.

- “You who were once *slaves* of sin ... You were *slaves* of sin, ...” (Romans 6:17,20). In verses 16-22 the verb or noun ‘slave’ occurs 8 times. The contrast is between slavery and freedom, so that tells us what is implied in the word ‘slave’. Don’t respond with the thought that might have been true long ago of the Romans but not with the enlightened people of today, for we all want to claim the free gift of verse 23!
- “For we ourselves were once ... *slaves* to various passions and pleasures” (Titus 3:3). Paul includes himself in this description, and not just the Cretans where Titus was. Thank God that the salvation of verses 4-7 also include us all.
- “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a *slave* to sin” (John 8:34). The Jews who had professed faith objected to the statement about being set ‘free’, because they considered themselves never to have been enslaved (verses 32-33). Jesus made it clear that those who sin show themselves to be slaves of sin, these people because they did not receive His words and were seeking to kill Him (verse 37).

(2) The evidence of experience.

We have been told that various social ills are because of such things as illiteracy, and poverty. If only there is universal education, good health care, and growing prosperity, people will live good fruitful lives, it is claimed. One only has to put it in black and white to know it is just not true. The most developed societies economically speaking may not have some of the social ills they used to have, but is alcoholism, drug abuse, and the break-up of the family, any advance? However, social ills go far deeper than such obvious things – there is selfishness, hedonism, materialism, pride, corruption, etc. Perhaps you say, ‘I am not a slave to any of those things, I believe the Bible, that Jesus is the Son of God.’ But are you ashamed to confess Him, to follow **all** that He commands? Why are you unwilling to confess sin, why do you get angry, why do you put your own interests first, why do you not totally identify with God’s people? If He is the Son of God then follow Him without any reservation. If you are not willing to do so you show that you are still a slave of sin; sin is holding you back. Many people grapple with habits that they are unable to shake off, as much as they would like to do so. It is not just activities you do and words you speak but also desires that occupy you within. At the root of all these is sin, and the gospel is the only way to deal with that problem. The implication of slavery is that the slave has a master who is not willing to let the slave go free. There is no hope unless God frees us, so Paul continues, as he describes the conversion of the

Romans, “But thanks be to God” (verse 17). God has done what we cannot do for ourselves even if we wanted to.

2. AT CONVERSION: GOD USES THE TRUTH TO MAKE THE CHANGE

Slaves of sin need to be set free from their wicked master. How does God do it?

(1) The means God uses: “the standard of teaching”.

Once again, the truth is at the centre of any conversion experience. The word translated “standard” is more literally ‘type’. In the old days when we used typewriters, a button, say for the letter ‘A’, was pressed and an impression was made on a piece of paper through an inked ribbon. Every time that button was struck the same image appeared on the paper. Or it is like a biscuit mould, a predetermined shape, say a star, that when pressed on the pastry will always make that star shape. Elsewhere it is translated as “a pattern of sound words” (2 Timothy 1:13). There is a standard, a type, a mould, a pattern of recognizable truth, such as this letter to the Romans. It is not a simple message with little content such as, ‘Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved.’ Evangelism is not telling stories, playing on emotions, or giving testimonies. As in this letter, the message begins with God’s wrath because of sin (1:18), our inability to deliver ourselves because we are “under sin” (3:9), what God has graciously done in Christ to save us (3:24-25), and our response of faith in God and what He has said. This is the authoritative standard that *shapes* the thought and conduct of one being converted. So if you would be converted you must seek to know, understand and believe this teaching.

(2) What God does: “you were committed” by God. It is not we who commit ourselves, but God who does the ‘committing’! This is why Paul is thanking God. This is what Paul is describing here about the conversion of the Romans. By means of the proclamation of this teaching, God takes the slave of sin, and moulds him according to the shape of the truth, so that he takes the very shape of that truth. We are like the unformed pastry, and God cuts us out as it were, into that shape that He wants that is according to the teaching. This is put in other words elsewhere. It is the ‘law written on the heart’ (Hebrews 8:10, see 2 Corinthians 3:3), so that the heart takes the shape of the law. It is being given ‘a heart of flesh’ (Ezekiel 36:26) so that we will walk in the way of God’s commandments (verse 27). People often talk about conversion as if God did His part in Christ on the cross, then it is up to the sinner to do the rest. But how can a slave of sin just walk out of that slavery and commit himself to another master? That is not the way slavery works! God not only pays the price to ransom us from our sins, but He also changes the heart that we may love another master.

(3) How we respond: you “have become obedient from the heart.” This is a bit surprising as we might expect ‘believe’ instead of ‘become obedient’. But the two are not contrary, for true faith is a faith that surrenders, that trusts, that follows. When the teaching says, ‘You are a slave of sin, you cannot free yourself’ the response is, ‘So true’. When the teaching continues, ‘Salvation is only possible in Christ who died for sinners’ again the response is, ‘Amen’. Then when the sinner is commanded to repent and believe the gospel he obeys that command by believing and repenting and starting to follow Christ joyfully and unreservedly. It is like the man who found the one pearl of great value and went and sold all that he had to buy it (Matthew 13:45-46).

3. AFTER CONVERSION: RIGHTEOUSNESS IS MASTER

Conversion is not the end of the process. It is a means to an end. The purpose of conversion is to deliver us from being slaves to sin that we might belong to another. We could think of a slave market where slaves are bought and sold. In His amazing grace God looks with pity on the one totally enslaved to sin, pays the price for his freedom from sin (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 7:23, 1 Peter 1:18-19), and then enlists him in His own glorious service. This is described as being “slaves of righteousness” (verse 18), or “slaves of God” (verse 22). Don’t object to the word ‘slave’, as Paul himself is telling us that he is speaking “in human terms” (verse 19). Slavery among men is objectionable; it is wrong for one man to own another like a piece of property. But to be a slave of the God who created me, and who gave His Son for me, is surely the greatest privilege. It is exactly how Paul introduced himself in the letter (1:1), where the same word is translated “servant”, with a note ‘or slave’ (at the bottom of the page). To serve One who loved me enough to die for me, One who withholds no good thing from me, One who never treats me cruelly but always in love, is no hardship. Rather, I long for that time when I can serve Him for ever and ever without sin.

So what is the evidence that you have been converted? Ask yourself, ‘Am I a slave of righteousness?’ Remember that the problem Paul is dealing with is whether salvation by grace means it does not matter whether I sin or not. Paul is saying that if you think in this way then you have no understanding of what conversion is. Conversion is not only a freedom from sin’s power (thank God it is that), but it is necessarily a freedom to serve God. No man can serve two masters. In order to serve God we must be delivered from sin. So ask yourself some more questions. Are you devoted to God more than even your closest companions on earth? Are you as totally committed to God as a slave is to his master? As you think of answering the real test is not in such things as church attendance, or reading your Bible and praying at home. The great test is when serving God is against the flow of society. It is the refusal to lie or deceive although you know you will suffer for it. It is deliberately bridling your tongue so that you do not join others in gossip, blasphemies and unprofitable talk, but determine only to speak that which will build up (Ephesians 4:29, 5:4). It is remembering the Sabbath Day to keep it holy when others are doing their own thing (Isaiah 58:13). It is using your time and possessions for the Lord instead of just thinking about yourself. A slave of God wants to do *all* that the Master commands. His aim in life is to please the Master. When you were a slave to sin you gave yourself to it unreservedly. Yet those professing to be Christians too often have other excuses like, ‘I have other things to do, I am tired, I will do it tomorrow, I don’t feel like it.’ Are such words the language of a real slave? When you are converted righteousness becomes what you are devoted to day in and day out. When you leave the church gathering on Sunday you are still a slave of righteousness at home. When you leave home on Monday morning for work or school you continue to be a slave of righteousness. Slaves constantly present themselves before their master asking, ‘Show me your will’, and ‘What do you want me to do?’ Let it never be said of you, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46) and so prove to be a false convert.

Being a slave of righteousness is not a second step after conversion. Anyone who is not such a slave is not converted. There is no such person as a ‘carnal Christian’ for it is a contradiction in terms. It is so important to emphasize that to be converted involves a fundamental change of life, as many think they are converted yet there is no such change.

Summary. **Conversion** is becoming a slave of righteousness by obeying the truth to which God commits the sinner.

17. TIMOTHY: A CHRISTIAN UPBRINGING

2 TIMOTHY 1:5, 3:14-15

⁵ *I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. (2 Timothy 1:5)*

¹⁴ *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14-15)*

TRUE CONVERSION: CHRISTIAN UPBRINGING

The subject of conversion is a many-sided one. So far we have looked at a rich tax collector, a blind beggar, a rebellious son, a dying criminal, the mass conversions on the Day of Pentecost, an Ethiopian Government official, a fanatical persecutor, a Gentile military officer together with all who heard, a business woman and her household, a jailer, and inhabitants of the great city of Rome. The precise experiences were different because the people and their backgrounds were so different. There was always some preparation whether long or short, leading to conviction of sin, and through the truth of the gospel coming to repentance and faith, and finally to baptism. The example of Timothy is very interesting as we do not have a specific account of his conversion, yet he became Paul's right hand man!

1. WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT TIMOTHY

- He was born of mixed parentage, a Jewish mother, and a Greek father (Acts 16:1).
- His grandmother Lois, and his mother Eunice were the greatest influences in his life (2 Timothy 1:5), having taught him the Scriptures from childhood (2 Timothy 3:15). The description of his mother as "a believer" (Acts 16:1), and that she had faith before her son, suggests that they were a great influence in Timothy's conversion. Thus Timothy knew the Old Testament which is "able to make ... wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." It appears that his father, as a non-Jew, was not a believer, and so was of no positive spiritual influence.
- It is probable that Timothy was converted during Paul's first missionary journey at Lystra (recorded in Acts 14:8ff.). This is why Paul can call him "my beloved child" (2 Timothy 1:2, see also Philippians 2:22). This seems reasonable because when Paul came to Lystra again on his second missionary journey he found Timothy there as a "disciple" (Acts 16:1).
- On finding him "being well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium" (Acts 16:2) Paul included him in the mission team and we find them together in Berea (Acts 17:14-15), and in Corinth (Acts 18:5).
- Timothy further accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey, so he is explicitly mentioned as being with him in Ephesus (Acts 19:22) and from there being sent into Macedonia. Perhaps Paul picked him up from there as he travelled through Macedonia on his way to Jerusalem with the gifts for poor believers in Jerusalem and Judea (Acts 20:3-4).

- He remained as Paul's representative in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3). He sent him to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:2), to Philippi (2:19-20), and to Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10).
- Timothy was of very great usefulness to Paul. He is included in the introductions to 6 of Paul's letters. He is called a "fellow worker" (Romans 16:21). Paul extols his virtues to the Philippians (2:19-24).

2. WHY PAUL WAS SURE TIMOTHY WAS CONVERTED

We know much about Timothy (see above) but we do not have a 'testimony' of his conversion. That does not imply that there is no testimony for the Biblical record cannot tell everything we might want to know. The New Testament does not think it is necessary to have the credentials of every gospel worker by going back to the 'conversion testimony'. This fact needs to be pointed out for some people think a person is not a Christian unless he can tell exactly what happened at such a time in such a place. The testimony becomes like a shibboleth for acceptance. The reality is that many, many Christians do not have such a testimony. I, for one, know the approximate month in 1964 when I was converted, but I cannot tie it down to a specific experience. In fact having such an experience to relate may even be dangerous as it can come to be trusted in!! The rocky ground hearer had a wonderful testimony of immediately receiving the word with joy (Matthew 13:20). It is the subsequent life of the professed convert that is far more important than even the most amazing experience. As Jesus said, 'A tree is known by its fruits.' A person may claim to have been healed after a specific prayer, to have had Jesus appear in a vision by his bedside, etc., but we should want to see the changed life that results, if indeed it does. So far more important than knowing the time and circumstances of Timothy's conversion is to know that he lived a faithful life as a Christian. The most wonderful testimony devoid of godliness is an empty noise. There are at least three things that Paul says about Timothy that show the genuineness of his profession of conversion to Christ.

(1) Timothy had a "*sincere faith*" (2 Timothy 1:5). Of this Paul was sure, just as with his grandmother and mother before him. What made Paul so sure that Timothy's faith was sincere, without hypocrisy? To show its genuineness, faith must be tested in the fires of trial (1 Peter 1:7-8). When he first met Paul in Lystra Timothy was well aware of the persecutions Paul had gone through (2 Timothy 3:10-11) and was soon to be a partaker in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea on the second missionary journey. But Timothy was not moved by these things, and remained steadfast in his faith.

(2) Timothy had "*firmly believed*" (2 Timothy 3:14). Paul was given ample opportunity to know if Timothy really believed what he professed. They had journeyed much together in ministry. Timothy had represented him in a number of churches. The way Timothy preached and talked with people showed clearly his faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. While words may be 'parroted' ²² for the occasion, over a lengthy period all that a person says will indicate what is believed in the heart.

(3) Timothy had been of "*proven worth*" (Philippians 2:22). Timothy was very special to Paul. He says, "I have no one like him ..." (verse 20). Paul is saying that Timothy has been put to

²² Parroted – like a parrot that is able to repeat words without understanding what those words mean.

the test, and he has passed with flying colours. He has already shown that first and foremost he is interested in the welfare of others and not in his own. He has served in the gospel with Paul like a son with a father. How often had Paul heard Timothy pray earnestly for these Philippian Christians?

Does this in any way describe you? Is your life now devoted to Jesus Christ just because He gave Himself for you? Are you showing it in your concern for your brethren? You may or may not have had some specific experience to show the precise time of your conversion. Perhaps you may never be able to think back to a time when you did not believe in Christ. One thing is sure, if you are devoted to Christ and His people because of what He did, then the Lord has savingly worked in you, whereas to be able to testify to a particular experience is no guarantee. It is to be noted that when John wants to assure his readers that they “have eternal life” (1 John 5:13) he does not ask them to remember some conversion experience. He tells them, “If you know that He is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of Him” (2:29) or, we might say, has been truly converted. Again, “We know that we have passed from death into life, because we love the brothers” (3:14). And again, “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world... Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (5:4-5).

Observation: The blessing of a home where the Scriptures are learned.

Paul notes that saving faith first dwelt in Timothy’s grandmother and mother (2 Timothy 1:5), and that “from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings” (3:15). This is surely the means the Lord used to prepare Timothy for conversion to Christ. So let us draw two important applications.

(1) What a privilege to be in a Christian home! The example of Timothy is the only clear one that we have in the Scriptures of one from a home where genuine faith was present because the New Testament is the infancy of the church. Yet so many people today are converted from this kind of background. Many can never remember a time when they did not believe. Many never lived a life of open rebellion against the gospel. If this is your background as you read this, then thank God for it. It is a blessing that countless millions have not had, like me. It is possible that this home training has preserved you from being so openly wicked, although there are those who have been so. But the question is, have you made use of this great blessing? Have you fully and willingly embraced the truth of your need for a thorough conversion from sin to God through Christ?

(2) What an encouragement to Christian parents! It was Timothy’s mother, with the help of his grandmother, but without the help of his father, who raised him spiritually. What a tremendous task mothers have (1 Timothy 5:10), especially as in today’s world raising children is not considered to be fulfilling enough for a woman. The emphasis for the upbringing is on the Scriptures. Let parents and teachers of children remember that in the Bible there is all the truth needed “for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). What an opportunity to gather the family together day by day to teach the Scriptures. If this is sometimes difficult for certain good reasons then the children can be talked with one-by-one and this is what ought to be done. If parents fail to do this will not their blood be on their own heads? Let parents, then, have a sincere faith, so that their daily life backs up what they teach, and in God’s mercy may such children themselves come to a sincere faith.

Summary. **Conversion** may not be a specific experience, especially by those brought up in Christian homes, but will be evidenced by faithful Christian living through trials.

18. THE THESSALONIANS: IDOLATERS

1 THESSALONIANS 1

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ² We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1)

TRUE CONVERSION: GOD'S WORK AND MAN'S RESPONSE

This account of the conversion of the Thessalonians has been chosen because there is a fullness of description which explains both parts of the conversion process, what God does, and what man does. Paul visited the city of Thessalonica on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-9). There was great success but that success aroused the jealousy of the Jews and it was not long before Paul was forced to leave. He sent Timothy back to see how they were progressing in their faith in the midst of their afflictions (1 Thessalonians 3:1-3). Having received a good report upon Timothy's return (verse 6) he writes this letter to them with thanks to God. In that thanksgiving he refers to his first coming to Thessalonica to preach the gospel and of their response to the message.

1. THE BEGINNING OF CONVERSION: GOD'S CHOICE (verse 4)

"We know ... that He has chosen you."

Before the Thessalonians had ever heard the gospel, even before the foundation of the world in eternity (Ephesians 1:4), God had chosen them and predestined them to be saved. So it was with those who believed in Antioch, they had been "appointed to eternal life" (Acts 13:48). Likewise Saul was "a chosen instrument" of God's (Acts 9:15). It is not that Paul preached about this to them. But Paul remembers how they received his preaching and how their lives changed. Why these and not other Thessalonians? It can only be that in His grace God had chosen them. Why these? We can only say, 'For so it seemed good in your sight, Lord.'

Do not shy away or be embarrassed by this clear teaching of the word of God. There is much that remains a mystery, hidden in God's unsearchable and eternal counsels. Rather it is something to rejoice in. If God had not chosen you, you would never have chosen Him. God has done for you what you could never have done for yourself. More probable that the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots. Note that Paul writes that they are

“brothers loved by God”. God’s choice of them to be converted is the evidence of His great love (see also 2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Why is Paul so sure they had been chosen by God? It is because of the way the preaching of Paul was received by them.

2. THE PROCESS OF CONVERSION (1): PREACHING (verse 5)

“Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”

- ★ Preaching in word. Paul came preaching with words in a language they could understand. He addressed the mind with truth from God. But if this was all, as it was with many, then the message would be rejected. The words of the preacher only make the ear drum vibrate, but bring no lasting impression on the conscience and the heart. People hear the same sermon, some respond in repentance and faith but many/most do not. Why did Lydia pay attention to Paul’s preaching in Philippi when others did not? The Lord opened her heart (Acts 16:14). There must be preaching, but for it to be received God must work on the hard heart.
- ★ Preaching in power and in the Holy Spirit. This is a figure of speech that probably means ‘the power of the Spirit’, as power and the Spirit are not two separate things. When the words of the preacher come joined with the Spirit’s power at work in the hearts of hearers then it is received. God calls sinners through the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14), and that calling includes the giving of a new heart. The power of the message is not in the hands of the preacher, but in the work of the Spirit. It is the Spirit who ‘cut the heart’ of the Pentecost worshippers (Acts 2:37). Paul knows this happened for there were such great changes in the lives of these Thessalonians, something that only God the Holy Spirit could accomplish.
- ★ Preaching with full conviction. This most probably refers to the preacher who is given by God a certainty about the truth he is speaking and a confidence in its ultimate triumph in his hearers. He is sure of his message, that it is from God, and it is what He uses to save those He has chosen. The preacher knows that although his hearers have many and varied needs, they all have the one great need to be saved from their sin. He preaches as one who knows that the sinner has no ability in himself to save himself, so that the only hope is in Christ who died on the cross for sinners and who rose victorious from the dead on the third day. That conviction is communicated in the very way he preaches.

It is God who equips and sends such a messenger of the gospel and who powerfully works through him by the Spirit.

3. THE PROCESS OF CONVERSION (2): RECEIVING THE PREACHING (verses 6-8)

“You received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit ...” (verse 6).

“Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, ...” (verse 8).

Those who were converted, to whom Paul is now writing, are described as having “received the word”. There are three descriptions of this:

(1) There was **much affliction** as they received the word of the gospel (verse 6). Conversion was not an easy thing for them. The message they heard was of Jesus of Nazareth, that He is the Christ, who suffered and rose again (see Acts 17:2-3). To Jews this was a stumbling block – how could One dying a death cursed by God possibly be God’s Messiah? To Gentiles this was foolishness – the resurrection of the body was not a benefit. To them blessing was the opposite, getting rid of the body (see 1 Corinthians 1:22-23). The ones to whom Paul preached already had a religion, idol gods in whom they trusted, and a corresponding culture. To leave this behind was to invite opposition from family and neighbours, which is exactly what happened (see Acts 17:5, 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4). “Affliction” is a word that implies great and sore difficulties, like a fruit being pressed until its skin bursts. How many early Christians were put to death because, having received Jesus as Lord, they would no longer confess Caesar as lord?

How was this possible? When you come to know that sin is your great number one problem and that it is a matter of everlasting life or punishment whether or not you deal with it; when you realize that there is only one way sin can be dealt with, through Christ and Him crucified; then you are willing even to suffer affliction, rejection, and death in order to receive this salvation. Think of the athlete who desires the gold medal. She will be totally focussed on that aim, denying herself anything in order to win the medal. This is why Jesus warns the great crowds who are following Him, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). Christ and salvation from sin are more important than anything else.

(2) They had **joy of the Holy Spirit** (verse 6). This is an amazing statement! They received the gospel message and they were immediately persecuted, but they did not complain or get discouraged. They rejoiced! How was this possible? It was the work of the Holy Spirit. Joy in the midst of afflictions is great evidence of true conversion. False religion will never give true joy in afflictions. There may be joy at the beginning, but it will quickly vanish in the time of testing (Luke 8:13).

There are at least two reasons why there can be such joy:

- Christ my Saviour was Himself afflicted unto death. I am following One who has gone before me, who was “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, ...” (Isaiah 53:3). It is to be counted a privilege to suffer like Him and to so be identified with Him (see the apostles in Acts 5:41, 13:52, 16:25, and also Matthew 5:10-12).
- Afflictions are not a surprise and so will not cancel the promise. Paul repeatedly told this to the Thessalonians, that “we are destined for this” (3:3-4). When we are afflicted it does not mean that God has forgotten us, that we are no longer His children, or that somehow the devil is in control. It is precisely “through many tribulations (that) we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). It is part of God’s loving discipline of His children (see Hebrews 12:3-11).

When the Holy Spirit convinces you of these things, nothing can take away your joy. How much is this your experience?

(3) They had **faith in God** (verse 8). Their faith was so notable that the report of what happened in Thessalonica went far and wide. Macedonia and Achaia were two Roman provinces. These Thessalonians receive the message of Paul about the Christ as “the word of

the Lord". No amount of affliction makes them turn back to their old ways. Indeed they press on with joy. They turn their backs upon the idolatrous religion of their society and ancestors. They trust what God says through His messengers and are prepared to follow that word wherever it leads them. The faith that saves is not something temporary, not present only when life is easy and successful. True faith rejoices even in the darkness and perplexity of life. It is this that made the faith of the Thessalonians so noteworthy. It is a living faith.

If no one notices your faith, what sort of faith is it? It is certainly not 'Thessalonian-faith'. True faith is something strange to the world, making it sit up and notice, although it very well may not be favourable towards it. They may call you a fool, a mad person, to give up worldly prospects to follow Christ and even to preach. They will scratch their heads when you refuse to be corrupt and get problems in your place of work. They will shake their heads in disbelief when you give up a relationship because you can now only marry a Christian.

4. THE FRUIT OF CONVERSION: A NEW LIFE-STYLE (verses 9-10)

"You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (verses 9-10).

The report that went far and wide was about the new life-style of some in Thessalonica that was the result of faith in the message they heard from a travelling preacher. This report said three things which we may call the fruit of conversion. In other words, anyone who professes faith in God through Jesus Christ must manifest this fruit in their lives to show the genuineness of that profession. The fruit is described by three verbs – turn, serve and wait.

(1) They **turned to God from idols**. The Greek-Roman world had many idols. There was the great goddess Artemis in Ephesus (Acts 19). The Corinthian Christians had many problems centred in attending idol feasts and eating food that had been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8 – 10). Idols were part of everyday life, birth and death, puberty, marriage, sickness, work. They had such a hold on their devotees that they dreaded causing the least offence to their idol gods. So they were constantly seeking to placate their anger and court their favour. To abandon any of the ceremonies would make vengeance a certainty both from the gods and from society. Paul's preaching, such as is recorded when he was at Athens (Acts 17:16-31), convinced them of the delusion of idol worship. Their gods are non-entities with whom there is no personal communion nor hope of salvation from sin (see also Paul in Lystra in Acts 14:15-17).

So when many Thessalonians forsake their idols it is not surprising that the report spreads. It had never happened before on such a scale. It was not just substituting a weekly visit to the idol temple with a Sunday morning service. It was destroying idol objects (as Acts 19:18-19), never visiting the temple again, no more prayers or offerings to those false gods, and no participation in the guilds (such as the silversmiths in Ephesus, Acts 19:24ff.). This is what it means to be converted. You turn away from whatever you used to trust in – false religion, worldly possessions, political ideology, religious observances, family, and even oneself. In the town of Liverpool where I live football can be such an idol.

But conversion is not only turning away from idols, it is also a turning to God. He occupies the place that idols used to have in life. 'Turning to God' is a common description of conversion (Acts 9:35, 11:21, 15:19, 26:18,20). Of course, this God is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who sent His Son to be the Saviour of sinners. So turning to God is for

forgiveness of sins, for new life, and for all spiritual resources. Life is now centred in God to whom the converted person turns in all situations as a source of strength, joy, peace and comfort. If the word of God has convinced you to turn because wrath is coming and because Christ is an able and willing Saviour, then that is good evidence that the Spirit has been at work in you and that you are converted.

(2) They are now **serving the living and true God**. They used to serve idols. 'Serve' is not like employment for a certain number of hours each day. It is 24/7 service like that of a willing slave to his master (remember the Romans in 6:17-18). Christians gladly confess themselves to be slaves of Christ, bought with His precious blood. How foolish that people serve a dumb, lifeless idol (Psalm 115). What a privilege to serve "the living and true God". He is "living" and not like the helpless idol that has to be carried from place to place. He is the "true" God as opposed to all others called 'god'. He is the only being worthy of the name God. What a privilege it is to serve Him. It is this service that makes conversion to Christ such an identifiable thing. This God is now the centre of life and everything is done in order to please Him. It is like a young man who meets one he wants as his future wife. As they begin to get to know each other observe that young man. He becomes so taken up with the young lady on the phone at lunch time and after work because that is the one he wants to be with. He never says no to a suggestion of meeting up. He never refuses her request.

Now apply this to one who has been converted. God is the One he wants to serve with all his heart. The worship of God, prayer to God as Father, reading the word of God, fellowshiping with the people of God, witnessing to the gospel of God, all become such important parts of life. Unprofitable activities are rejected and the only things done are those commanded and which are of profit to the kingdom of God. Talking also comes under the searchlight of service to God. No more filthy talk but only that which builds up (Ephesians 4:29). People will take notice of the change. Some will despise you as a fanatic, while others will ask you what has happened. If not, has there been a true conversion? Have your family members noticed anything different about you? Honestly ask yourself if your whole life is not devoted to serve God as He has instructed in the Bible. Are you really serious about your Master's will, searching the word and seeking to put it into practice? In a Roman slave market how can you know to whom the slave belongs? Whose voice does he obey? Whose word are you obeying in life?

(3) They are **waiting for God's Son from heaven**. This is a dimension of conversion that is so often overlooked. The decisive change in turning to God to serve Him has taken place. But there is something great yet to come, the second coming, the glorious return of our Saviour. We are "waiting" for this in the sense that we are eagerly longing for it. Sometimes we say that 'I can't wait' for we wish it had come yesterday! There is another word which, in relation to the second coming, is translated 'wait' (1 Corinthians 1:7, Philippians 3:20), and even with the adverb 'eagerly' (Romans 8:23, Galatians 5:5, Hebrews 9:28). There is no doubt that this is the present attitude of the true convert. Why are we so waiting?

✓ We want to see Him face to face. We love Him because He first loved us. When we are away from our family pictures are good, but we long for the time when we will be together again. So with our Lord who we have never yet seen. We know He is alive in glory for He was "raised from the dead". We are not afraid of His coming for there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. When He comes we shall not enter into judgement but He will deliver "us from the wrath to come".

- ✓ We want to be like Him. We do serve Him now, but we are so aware we do it imperfectly. We long for that time when we shall have new bodies and shall be able to serve Him without sin for ever in His presence (1 John 3:2). Our greatest problem now is that sin which still dwells with us, which follows us at every turn. We cry out with Paul, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" And we respond with him, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25).

Waiting is not idling about doing nothing. It is expectation. Think of a couple who have fixed the day for their wedding. They plan for it, talk about it, and long for it. It is like the waiting in the airport arrivals section. You make sure you are there early by seeing the actual arrival time on your phone. You check the arrivals screen to know if the plane has touched down. Then you try to look through the doors to see if your loved one is in the arrivals hall, if necessary over the shoulders of others. When your eyes finally meet then it is all joy.

How can you know if you really are waiting for the Lord? The Apostle John says, "And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). We do not want to be ashamed when He comes for we do not know exactly when He is coming. We want to be as like Him as possible now. When students remember their exams are around the corner it helps them to study more seriously in preparation. Such a certain expectation of His return helps us to use this intervening time in proper preparation. Think about who are your friends, where you choose to live, what you do in your spare time, how you spend your retirement, even when you are in sickness and infirmity. Would you still be happy with the choices you have made if Jesus were to return right now?

Here, then, is the third great mark of a truly converted person. What does the return of Christ mean to you? Do you ever think about His return? Or is it something only for doctrinal arguments?

Summary. **Conversion** is God's work of choosing the sinner, bringing the gospel to him, and working in his heart; and man's response of receiving that word in faith unto a life of service to God in view of the return of Christ.

19. PAUL: THE APOSTLE

ROMANS 7:4-13 & PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

As Paul writes to various churches he finds it appropriate to refer back to his own experience. In the places we will consider it is not in the form of a 'personal testimony', where it would be told as historical narrative. That we considered in chapter 12 from Acts 9. We are going to examine two passages where Paul reflects on the theological significance of his conversion. This gives us a much deeper insight as to what is going on in all true conversions. While the historical narrative of your conversion might be quite different from Paul's, what actually happened to you is the same! You were probably not persecuting Christians to their death as Saul was. The Lord Jesus did not personally appear to you. But you were convicted of your sin. You have believed in Christ unto justification.

TRUE CONVERSION: (1) KNOWING YOUR SIN

⁴ Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. ⁵ For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. ⁷ What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." ⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. ⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. ¹⁰ The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. ¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. ¹³ Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (Romans 7:4-13)

Romans 7:7 and the following verses are about 'the law', by which Paul refers particularly to the Ten Commandments (so the reference to the tenth, "You shall not covet"). It begins with the question, 'Is the law sin?' The question naturally arises from what he has been writing about the way sinners are justified by God. The law is useless to justify a person, and in fact only leads to condemnation (Romans 3:20). It was actually given by God "to increase the trespass" (Romans 5:20). In order to bear fruit for God it is necessary 'to die to the law' (Romans 7:4). The law, far from eliciting obedience, arouses our sinful passions (verse 5). It seems as if the law is a terrible thing, on the side of sin, and so to be rejected. Paul refuses this conclusion in the strongest possible way by writing, "By no means!" We must never begin to think this way. His conclusion is: "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (verse 12). The verses in between give the evidence of this conclusion (verses 7-11). What is the good thing that the law does? It shows us our sin! Without the law of God we would never know our sin, what we need to be saved from.

1. BEFORE CONVERSION YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT SIN IS

Read the following statements in the passage:

(Yet) if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. (verse 7)

(For) apart from the law, sin lies dead. (verse 8)

I was once alive apart from the law,... (verse 9)

Sin was present before you became a Christian but you did not recognize it as sin. It is like a floating 'log' in the water. You throw a stone at it only to find it is a crocodile! Before conversion you felt "alive", that you were doing well morally and spiritually, with no painful consciousness of sin, and no fear of punishment. Then think how your feelings change when you find that the log drifting by your small boat is a crocodile. The rich, young Ruler knew nothing about sin, because in relation to the commandments of God, he proclaimed, "All these I have kept from my youth" (Luke 18:21). Likewise Paul, before he was converted sincerely claimed, "as to righteousness, under the law blameless" (Philippians 3:6). Neither were remotely aware of the seriousness of their sin before God and the awful consequences of continuing in their sin. It is significant that Paul points to the tenth commandment that forbids coveting, the one commandment that specifically deals with inward desires and not merely outward actions. Who understands that "desire" is at the root of all sin? That is what James teaches us:

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.
(James 1:14-15)

On the contrary we think that life is so fulfilling when our desires are satisfied, and we are so unhappy when those desires are frustrated. Think of sullen King Ahab when he was refused the vineyard he so desired (1 Kings 21).

Perhaps you are reading this and, although you would not claim to be converted, you feel "alive" as you read. Let me suggest what you could be saying to yourself.

- 'I have always been a Christian, because my parents brought me up to be a Christian.' This is like the Jews who claimed, "We have Abraham as our father" (Matthew 3:8).
- 'I know God specially loves me because he answered my prayer and healed me, gave me the job, got me good grades in my exams,...'. Remember it is God's nature to do good to all His creatures, but that does not mean that you are converted (read Matthew 5:45).
- 'I went to a Christian meeting and had such an emotional spiritual experience, I am OK.' But so did the type of hearer represented by the seed that fell on rocky ground, who has joy just for a while (Matthew 13:20-21).
- 'I am not a sinner like others, and I try to do all the good I can.' This is reminiscent of the Pharisee who Jesus clearly taught was rejected by God (Luke 18:10-12).

Will you dare to consider that sin has actually deceived you, as Paul had to admit it had deceived him (Romans 7:11)? Do you not pity King Belshazzar having a great feast with a thousand of his lords, yet totally unaware that at that very moment the enemy was at the city gates and he was about to be slain (Daniel 5)? What if this is YOU? What if your sin cries for judgement from God and you know it not?

2. ONLY THE LAW OF GOD CAN SHOW YOU WHAT SIN IS

Have you looked down a microscope to view that microbe, invisible to the naked human eye, that is the cause of your trouble? Thank God He has given us His law to show us what an awful disease and powerful enemy sin is. It is like a mirror into the soul. How does the law do that?

(1) The Law makes you *aware* of sin's presence (verse 7). Paul was always guilty of coveting, yet he had not realized that was what he was doing in his thoughts. It is when he came face to face with this commandment and realized that his thinking is what God calls coveting, that he began to understand that he is a sinner before God. Think about your desires in the light of the commandment of God. Have you ever realized that an adulterous desire in the heart is itself adultery? Jesus taught: "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Yet you enjoy watching those videos, reading those magazines, hearing those stories. Do you understand that even before Eve, Achan, Absalom, Amnon, Ahab, Ananias and Sapphira openly sinned, they were all guilty of coveting (see Joshua 7:21, for example)? How much evil desire we are all guilty of! Thank God, we are never able to put it all into action. Otherwise we would have murdered many times over. Thank God that His law tells us our true situation.

(2) The Law *encourages* sin's activity (verses 8-9). This is shocking! But it is what the passage so clearly states. Our sinful passions are aroused by the law (verse 5). The law produced in Paul all kinds of covetousness (verse 8). When the commandment was understood by Paul, sin came alive (verse 9). Like a peaceful river, when suddenly thrown against the rocks of rapids, so the law makes the sinner to be in turmoil. Mangoes are delicious, especially to children. The neighbour has a tree laden with ripe mangoes. You warn your children not to creep into his garden and steal any of them. In many children that simply strengthens the desire to get their teeth into that fruit and to enjoy themselves. Why? Is it a problem with the law? No, the problem is "sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment" (verses 8,11). Sin is not just an action; it indwells us. And the basic character of sin is that 'I am in charge of my life'. Sin is rebellion against God, resenting His commands. It says with the Jews about Jesus, "We do not want this man to rule over us" (Luke 19:14). Sin is not just a mistake, a lapse or occasional slip, a misunderstanding or ignorance. The Law shows sin to be something powerful and deceptive within us. In our sober moments we all know that the Ten Commandments are both good for the individual and for society. So why don't you always gladly submit to these commands? It is the perversity of sin. Sin uses the law as its base of operations to produce the very sin to which the law is opposed. But there is one more thing you need to learn about sin.

(3) The Law shows you that sin is *immeasurably evil* (verse 13). Sin is "sinful beyond measure". This was the purpose of God in giving the law – note the words "in order that sin might be shown...". This is actually a great blessing. When you are ill you want to know the true nature of your problem, no matter how serious, how life-threatening. You do not want to be told that everything is OK, that you will soon be discharged, when you are actually on your death-bed. One of our greatest needs is to understand sin as it really is in the sight of God Himself. Today sin is taken so lightly, it is excused, and the responsibility is put somewhere else, on the one who you perceive has wronged you, for example. The doctrine of Evolution has taken away any absolute standards, for if true there is no Creator, no Law-giver. What is right becomes what you think. So there is open rebellion against God's created order in the areas of sex and marriage. The fact that sin actually uses God's good law to accomplish this shows its evil character. For example, God's law clearly states: "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife" (Exodus 20:17), yet so many are doing exactly that. If such a one is challenged by the commandment, what is often the response? I will continue, I desire it, we love each other. It may well be done secretly and covered over with lies. But God's authority is cast aside, the future influence on the families involved is ignored, for only personal desire matters.

3. WHEN YOU COME TO KNOW WHAT SIN IS YOU DIE

This was Paul's experience. "When the commandment came ... I *died*" (verse 9). "The very commandment ... proved to be *death* to me" (verse 10). "Sin ... deceived me and through it (the law) *killed* me" (verse 11). When you come to know the true and terrible nature of sin, you cease to have any confidence in the presence of God. You die to your own self-confidence, you have no peace in your heart, you feel condemned, you know you are just one step from hell. You had been deceived into thinking that you were doing well spiritually, that God was pleased, that you had kept the commandments and whatever failures you had were excusable. You had no idea of the demands of the law, where even the innermost desires and neglected duties are sin. Here is a man who is so proud of himself for striking such a good deal, until he realized he has been deceived. How many of you have been deceived into thinking that it is by the law that you get life, both now and eternally? How can you think like this when the Bible so often makes it clear that the law can only bring death because we have all broken the law and so are liable to its curse? Isn't the parable about the Pharisee that we looked at in chapter 1 clear enough (Luke 18:9-14)?

True Christian conversion mirrors Paul's experience in Romans 7. It begins with coming face to face with the law of God, and being convicted in your heart that you are guilty before God and deserving of eternal punishment.

- King David's desires get the better of him, and he commits adultery and then seeks to cover it up with murder. When months later Nathan confronts him with the fact that he has despised the word of the Lord (2 Samuel 12:9), David 'died' in the sense that he is now convicted, "I have sinned against the Lord" (verse 13).
- It was the Tax Collector who was justified, and not the Pharisee, because he confessed himself to be "the sinner", and so had 'died' (Luke 18:13).
- The Pentecost multitude, not many days previously, clamoured to have Jesus crucified. But when Peter shows them from their Scriptures that they have crucified their Christ, they 'died' for they see the enormity of their sin (Acts 2:37). They ask if anything can possibly be done to save them from this sin.

Has the law done this good work in you? Have you seen all kinds of wrong desire of which you are guilty? Have you turned away from self-confidence? One of the reasons why there are so many spurious conversions is the lack of the preaching of God's law. This is why Jesus confronted the rich, young Ruler with the commandments (see chapter 6). The work of the law is to show you your sin before God that you might know Christ as your sure hope. Therefore, we must use the law in our evangelism, in our preaching, in our teaching the children.

TRUE CONVERSION: (2) KNOWING CHRIST JESUS

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. ² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh--- ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I

had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith---¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:1-11)

The letter to the Philippian church has much about joy, and chapter 3 begins with the exhortation, “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1). It is specifically the “Lord” who is to be the object of our rejoicing. There are false teachers who make such rejoicing impossible as the Lord does not occupy the proper place in their teaching. So Paul turns to warn the church against them and does so with very strong and emotional language. Our view of Christ is not a small matter, but one of life and death. Using his own experience, Paul clearly shows what it means to be converted, because it all depends upon our attitude to Christ Himself. Here is Paul’s great statement in verse 8: “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” For Paul, to “know” Christ is incomparable gain so that nothing else matters. To this all Christians say a hearty, ‘Amen!’

1. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “KNOW CHRIST”?

To “know” God or Christ is a common description in the Bible of being in a genuine relationship with Him in both Old and New Testaments:

*Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and **knows** me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth." (Jeremiah 9:23-24)*

*And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, '**Know** the LORD,' for they shall all **know** me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:34)*

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the **knowledge** of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)*

*And this is eternal life, that they **know** you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)*

*But now that you have come to **know** God, or rather to be **known** by God,... (Galatians 4:9)
... so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the **knowledge** of God. (Colossians 1:10)*

We can get an understanding of what it means to know Christ, from the fact that God Himself is said to know His people. In Galatians 4:9 (above) this relationship is reciprocal. When we are converted it is not only we who come to know God, but we are also “known by Him”. Obviously, this is not referring simply to God’s knowledge, because He knows all things, and nothing is hidden from Him. Amos records God as stating of Israel, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth” (3:2). It was only with Israel that God had entered into a special covenant relationship in which He promised to be their God, and they to be His people. In the same way God ‘foreknows’ His people, that is, He determined beforehand to enter into this special relationship with them (see Romans 8:29, 11:2, 1 Peter 1:2).

So to know Christ is to have a personal relationship with Him. It is possible to know about a person such as Paul, the writer of this letter, without ever having met him face to face. Paul knew some things about Jesus before he was converted. As he enters Damascus the Lord Jesus meets with him personally. Paul knows He is alive, and he talks with Him, asking Him what he should do. Jesus is no longer just a distant name to him. He now trusts Him, loves Him, prays to Him, submits to Him, follows Him. This is the relationship that a converted person has with Christ. Elsewhere Paul put it this way: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

2. HOW CAN YOU COME TO "KNOW CHRIST"?

This is just another way of asking, 'How can I be converted? How can I become a Christian?' There are two parts to the answer, a negative and a positive, a losing and a gaining.

(1) First negatively, **you must lose all things** (verses 7-8).

Paul's privileges:

1. Circumcised on the eighth day – exactly as God commanded Abraham (Genesis 17:10-14, see Leviticus 12:3); proselytes would have been circumcised in adult life when they accepted the Jewish religion.
2. Of the people of Israel – not a child of proselytes, as perhaps many of the false teachers, but having pure blood lines going back to Jacob himself.
3. Of the tribe of Benjamin (see also Romans 11:1) – for whatever reason, and many have been suggested, it was an honour to belong to this tribe, and Paul could trace his ancestry back here.
4. A Hebrew of Hebrews – although born outside the land in Tarsus in Cilicia, his parents had kept the pure Jewish language and culture and had not become Hellenized (see Acts 6:1).

Paul's achievements:

5. As to the law, a Pharisee – the party that had the strictest commitment to keeping the law of Moses (see chapter 1).
6. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church – there was no doubting his devotion to his religion as he knew it, and people like Phinehas were greatly lauded for their zeal (Numbers 25:7-13, Psalm 106:30-31).
7. As to righteousness, under the law blameless – he led such an exemplary life that he could not be charged with transgressing the law, and the Pharisees had plenty of laws they added to Moses (so the rich, young Ruler in chapter 6).

This was Paul's experience. He could count up so many privileges and achievements that the false teachers claimed would gain the favour of God. Paul has far more than anyone else (verses 4-6). In every respect, whether privileges he was born with, or achievements he gained, he was a model Jew. If anyone had a claim on God it would seem to have been Saul of Tarsus. Let us be in no doubt that to be an Israelite was a very great privilege (see Romans 3:1-2, 9:4-5). But Paul was determined not to put any confidence in the 'flesh' – what can be accomplished by human effort. Note exactly what Paul writes:

- ★ "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss" (verse 7). All these privileges and achievements were counted as gain, on the credit column of the spiritual ledger, by the false teachers. For Paul now, far from seeing them as credit, they are actually a loss, a debt, a disadvantage, harmful.
- ★ "I count everything as loss" (verse 8). That decision he made to count everything as loss when he was converted, he continues to uphold as a way of life (note the present tense). He now includes everything and anything of human privilege and achievement that might be relied on to bring him to God as loss.

- ★ “I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish” (verse 8). He goes further and suggests he has experienced the sort of things the Hebrews suffered, the confiscation of property, public shame (Hebrews 10:32-34), perhaps even disinheritance. But he calls such things “rubbish” – the word certainly has the idea of worthless, but probably something also abhorrent, so filthy and disgusting. Paul could hardly write more strongly of his rejection of the things of the “flesh”.

What does this mean in practice? All of us by nature think we have something to commend us to God, reasons why God should deal with us favourably. And these are either privileges that I have – being raised in a Christian home, or things that I have achieved – I am a faithful church goer, I try to do good to people, I give to charity, I am not like some other wicked people, etc. This was exactly the attitude of the Pharisee before God in Jesus’ parable (chapter 1). All these, and many more may be true of you, but if you are going to be converted, you must come to count them as irrelevant as far as acceptance with God is concerned. Paul wrote to the Galatians: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (6:15). But you must go even further. If you have been actually trusting in these things then you must deliberately count them as loss, throwing them out as filthy rubbish. Your whole attitude towards your past life must change. Your greatest privileges and best deeds, when you have confidence in them, are disgusting in God’s sight. If there is something that God hates, it is a created being boasting in who he or she is, forgetting that all comes from God (remember Jeremiah 9:23-24). For example, so many are confident that God is pleased with them because they think they are doing their best. If this is true of you, then you must totally reverse your thinking about your “best”. What God thinks is what matters. “All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” is what God thinks (Isaiah 64:6). You know that murder and adultery and theft God hates. But God equally hates pride, self-confidence, covetousness, hatred, etc. This all boils down to the fact that there is nothing good in you, nothing good at all, as far as God is concerned, nothing that you can have confidence in to bring you to God. This is the Bible’s conclusion, as in Romans 3:9-12.

(2) Second positively, **you must gain Christ** (verse 9).

Counting all things as loss is necessary, “in order that” you might gain Christ. If you want to put tea in a cup that is filled with water, you must first empty out the water. If you want to gain Christ, you must first count everything else as loss, as rubbish. You can’t add Christ to rubbish. What does it mean to “gain” Christ? It means to “be found in Him”. And how do you get to be “in Him”? By having “faith in Christ”. And why must you have this faith? It is the only way to be declared righteous by God = to be justified. This is one of the great blessings of conversion, God not counting your sins against you (Romans 4:6-8). Let us work out from this great verse how this happens.

- You do not have a righteousness of your own that comes from the law. Once Paul claimed to be righteous before God (see above, verse 6). But when he came to truly understand the demands of God’s law he found himself to be a guilty sinner (Romans 7:7-11). If you wish to be righteous by keeping the law, then you must keep it perfectly. Just one failure will prove you to be a law-breaker.

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20)

... yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and

not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:16)

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." (Galatians 3:10)

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. (James 2:10)

Jesus summarizes the requirements of the law as loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself (Mark 12:29-31). Have you done this fully and consistently throughout your life? If not, then you have no righteousness to offer to God that He should receive you. Will you be accepted as a law-keeper in court if, when you are found guilty of bribing, you plead that you have not murdered or committed adultery? Whatever else you have done or have not done your bribery makes you to be a law-breaker. The word of God is so clear that, "None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). You must sadly confess that this is so true of you, that you cast away from you any pretence to having a righteousness of your own. How then is it possible to be righteous before God who is holy, holy, holy?

- You may have a righteousness through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. There are three things about this righteousness that makes it acceptable with God.

- (1) It is a righteousness "from God". It is not what you have made for yourself, such as Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness. It is a righteousness that God Himself provides. This the theme of Paul's letter to the Romans (see 1:17, 3:21-22, 10:3). Being declared righteous by God (= to be justified) is "by His grace as a gift" (Romans 3:24).

- (2) It is a righteousness "in Christ". But how can God justly acquit a sinner from His court? It all has to do with Christ. In His death Christ takes the sinner's place. The Prophet calls him, "The Lord our righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:6).

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned---every one---to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us---for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"--- (Galatians 3:13)

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, ... (1 Peter 2:24)

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, ... (1 Peter 3:18)

Jesus lived a life of perfect law keeping. His death was therefore not for His sin (He had none), but for us sinners. When the Rendille Wazee (= Elders) of Lekuchula found a man guilty of disrespecting one of them his fine was to forfeit a camel. The man had no camel. When a friend of his brought a camel to the Wazee declaring that this is the payment for the fine, was it not accepted on behalf of the guilty person? Christ has the righteousness we sinners so desperately need. This is what we call 'imputation' – our sins are imputed

²³ Imputation – counted or reckoned as belonging to another.

to Christ's account, so He is dealt with as we deserve – condemned; His righteousness is imputed to our account, so we are dealt with as He deserves – acquitted.

- (3) It is a righteousness “that depends on faith”. How does Christ's righteousness (obedience) become mine? It is not by anything I do, but through faith. I cannot add to it as it is perfect. I simply receive it as a gift. We have sought to explain what is involved in having faith in Christ in the accounts of Bartimaeus, the Blind Beggar (chapter 4), and the Philippian Jailer (chapter 15). You must have faith in Christ. To have faith means that you trust Him. You trust what He says, what He promises. And so you come to Him just as you are and ask Him to do for you what He has promised, to forgive your sins, to make you clean, to renew you, to be with you, to keep you, to bring you to glory. Christ is like a doctor. He has diagnosed your problem (sin), and has assured you that He can fully deal with it. But to do that you must come to Him and put yourself in His hands on His ‘operating table’ so to speak, so that He can do all that He needs to do. That is true faith – looking to Him alone for help.

3. WHY IS IT OF “SURPASSING WORTH” TO KNOW CHRIST?

It is much easier to lose something if what replaces it is far better. You may think that your privileges and achievements in this life are things to be held on to. But what if you find out that they are actually harmful to you and trusting in them will exclude you from God's eternal blessings? I once went to Bole Airport in Addis Ababa to catch my flight that was leaving just after midnight. I failed to think that the day changes from midnight, so I arrived a day late! It was a big loss and I was foolish to be confident that I would be leaving for home just because I had the ticket. How disappointed and in anguish you will be on the Judgement Day when you present the audit of your life if you think it is fully in your credit. ‘Lord, I have done so much for you.’ Listen very carefully to the warning the Lord gives: “Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'” (Matthew 7:21-23). No, when we see the glory of God's presence we will look to our Lord standing there and declare, “Worthy is the Lamb”, and we shall cast our crowns at His feet, because “by your blood you ransomed people for God” (Revelation 5:9). He is our one and only hope now and forever.

Compared to knowing Christ whatever you have lost is worthless. Those things which you think are so important now will fail you on the day you leave this world. You brought nothing into the world and you will take nothing out of it. But if you know Christ then you have everything now and for eternity. That is why it is of “surpassing worth”. This is why we are in love with Him, why we glory in Him. This is why Paul calls Him, “Christ Jesus my Lord”. Just examine what you have by knowing Christ.

✓ Justification (verse 9). Through faith in Christ you have a genuine righteousness so that God may justly declare you righteous in His sight.

✓ Sanctification (verse 10). You “know Him and the power of His resurrection”. The very power of God that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in you (Ephesians 1:19-20), transforming you into His likeness. We are united with Him in a resurrection like His so that we might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4-5). Lest it be thought this means worldly

success and prosperity, Paul adds, that we “may share His sufferings”. There is no union with Christ unless we suffer with Him (Romans 8:17), and we have the power to finally triumph over and through it. Is it worth undergoing such suffering? The hymn, *The sands of time are sinking*, has, ‘It were a well-spent journey, Though seven deaths lay between’ ²⁴, because of the glory to come (see Hebrews 12:2 for this in Jesus). So this leads to the third blessing.

✓ Glorification (verse 11). The final result of knowing Christ is “the resurrection from the dead”. It may seem as if Paul is in doubt of this, as he writes, “by any means possible”. Elsewhere he expresses certainty of the future (see 1:23, 3:9,20-21), The doubt is by what means he will reach the resurrection. Will it be through martyrdom or some other kind of death? Or will he be alive at the coming of Christ? What is sure is that all who know Christ will “be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:17)

Can you now clearly see “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus”? In Him you have been blessed with “every spiritual blessing” (Ephesians 1:3, and the blessings are enumerated in verses 4-13). In Him “you have been filled” (Colossians 2:10). There is nothing you need that you do not have in Christ. Is Christ everything to you? Is he the glorious bridegroom of the Song of Solomon to you? Do you love Him with all your heart? Are you ready to take up your cross daily to follow Him? Do you love Him enough to keep His commandments? Is it your great hope that you will one day see Him and be like Him? **THIS is conversion, what it means to become a Christian.** And so we rejoice in the Lord.

Summary: **Conversion** is knowing your sin so as to know Christ.

²⁴ Hymn of Anne Cousin.

CONCLUSION

Conversion is multi-faceted. It is like the proverbial diamond that reveals a different glory when looked at from different angles. There is first what God sovereignly does, and then there is what man responsibly does as a result. There is the internal change and the external change. One or more of these is emphasized in each account. We shall put them all together in this conclusion.

No two conversion experiences are exactly alike. People are converted from different backgrounds, as we have seen:

- Other religions or no religion at all.
- Sincere Christian upbringing, false Christian upbringing, or no Christian influence whatever.
- Moral or immoral lifestyle.
- Knowledge or ignorance of the Christian faith.

Yet there are common features. In the Bible record some things are emphasized while others are assumed. Because the observable experience is being described so often there is nothing about the invisible work of God which is so absolutely essential.

When we put everything together we come up with what is known as the *Ordo Salutis* (Latin for 'order of salvation'). So by way of conclusion we will see all that happens in the conversion of a sinner, with the numbers in brackets referring to the chapter where it can be found (the number in bold means it is explained at length)

ELECTION – God has chosen, before the foundation of the world and by His grace, those sinners He is pleased to save.

Saul of Tarsus is God's chosen instrument (**12**).

The Thessalonians were chosen by God (**18**).

PROVIDENCE – God providentially orders all events so that the message is brought to those He has chosen.

The disciples speak in the languages of the people present on the Day of Pentecost (**9**).

Both Peter and Cornelius have visions that bring them face to face (**13**).

God directs Paul to where Lydia is far from her home (**14**).

The Philippian Jailer sees that no prisoner escapes after the earthquake (**15**).

THE WORD – The gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified is heard.

[This is related in almost every account of conversion as it is absolutely central.]

Jesus personally speaks to Zacchaeus (**2**), Bartimaeus (**4**) and the Criminal (**7**).

The parable of the Sower is about different reactions to the word (seed) (**8**).

Peter preaches about Jesus on the Day of Pentecost (**9**), and to Cornelius (**13**).

Philip speaks about Jesus to the Ethiopian Eunuch (**11**).

Paul preaches to Lydia (14), the Philippian Jailer (15), and the Thessalonians (18).

EFFECTUAL CALLING – The elect are sought out and brought to salvation.

Jesus seeks Zacchaeus and brings him to salvation (2).

Philip is directed by the Spirit to join the Ethiopian Eunuch (11).

Peter is directed by the angel to go to Cornelius' home (13).

UNDERSTANDING – The Holy Spirit gives understanding (illumination) of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The seed that is sown on good soil is the person who hears and understands (8).

The Ethiopian Eunuch is given understanding through the teaching of Philip (11).

CONVICTION OF SIN – The Holy Spirit convicts them of their sin.

The Tax Collector calls himself "the sinner" (1).

The Prodigal Son confesses that he has sinned against God and his father (5).

The Criminal accepts that he deserves his execution (7).

The Pentecost worshippers realize they have sinned in putting Jesus to death (9).

The Roman Christians were slaves of sin (16).

The Thessalonian Christians had been idolaters (18).

Paul specifically details his conviction of sin (19).

REGENERATION – The Holy Spirit gives new life.

Jesus tells Nicodemus he cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born again (3).

Lydia's heart is opened as she heard Paul preach (14).

The Roman Christians were committed by God to the truth (16).

REPENTANCE – The first acts of new life are repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Zacchaeus repents of his wicked past as a tax collector (2).

The Prodigal Son confesses his sin to God and his father (5).

The Ruler refuses to forsake his sin of trusting in his riches (6).

The Pentecost Worshippers repent of their sin (9).

Simon Magus does not repent but only wants the judgement to be averted (10).

The Thessalonians turned from idols to serve God (18).

FAITH – Faith and repentance are the twin response to the hearing of the gospel.

The Tax Collector prayer to God in faith (1).

By faith blind Bartimaeus is converted (4).

The Criminal has remarkable faith (7).

Simon Magus professes faith but it is not genuine (10).

Lydia paid attention to the preaching of Paul (14).

The Philippian Jailer is told to believe in the Lord Jesus (15).

The faith of the Thessalonian Christians spread far and wide (18).

JUSTIFICATION – God justifies the one who believes in Jesus by forgiving sin and imputing the righteousness of Christ.

The Tax Collector was justified when he called to God for mercy (1).

Paul was justified by faith and not by works of the law (19).

THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT – The Holy Spirit is given to indwell the believer.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to give the new birth (3).

The Pentecost Worshippers are promised the Holy Spirit (9).

Saul of Tarsus receives the Holy Spirit after his eyes are opened (12).

The Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius as Peter preaches the gospel (13).

UNION WITH CHRIST – Faith is in Jesus Christ, the closest personal relationship.

Paul gave up everything in order to know Christ (19).

BAPTISM – After repentance and faith comes baptism.

3000 who received the word are baptized on the Day of Pentecost (9).

The Ethiopian Eunuch is baptized after hearing the word (11).

Saul of Tarsus is baptized after receiving the Holy Spirit (12).

Cornelius, and all those on whom the Holy Spirit fell, are baptized (13).

Lydia and her household receive the word and are baptized (14).

The Philippian Jailer and his house believe and are baptized (15).

SANCTIFICATION – The new life given enables the convert to follow Christ in discipleship and to persevere to the end.

The Ruler is not prepared to follow Jesus at all costs (6).

In the Parable of the Sower neither the seed sown on rocky ground nor the seed sown among thorns produces fruit (8).

The Pentecost Worshippers become devoted to the local church (9).

Lydia (16) and the Philippian Jailer (15) immediately show a change of life.

The Roman Christians become slaves of righteousness (16).

Timothy is the example of one whose conversion experience is not recorded but we see him a Christian because of his faithful living even in the midst of trials (17).

The Thessalonian Christians show a new life-style (18).

APPENDIX

A TRUE TESTIMONY OF CONVERSION

What does a Biblical testimony of conversion look like? How can you know if your testimony is genuine? What should you listen for in a person who is giving a testimony in order for them to be brought into church membership?

A good basis is the testimony of Paul as written in 1 Timothy 1:12-17. Note the following emphases:

- His sinfulness (verse 13)
- God's mercy and grace (verses 13-14)
- Salvation in Christ Jesus (verse 15)
- Glory to God (verse 17)

From all that we have seen in the New Testament at least the following ought to be part of your testimony, if you are genuinely converted, together with appropriate personal details.

(1) *I was lost in sin.* It could have been the openly wicked life like that of the Prodigal Son (5), or the Criminal (7). Or it could have been an outwardly religious life like that of the Pharisee (1, 3). Whatever the details, conversion begins by coming to the point of acknowledging my life is not pleasing to God, I have broken His commandments, and that if I continue on this path I will be lost.

(2) *I cried out to God for mercy.* This is what the Tax Collector (1), and Bartimaeus did (4). I know that because of my sin there is no hope in me, in anything I have done, or can do. My hope is in God alone.

(3) *I put my trust in Jesus Christ.* I know that God gave His Son to die for my sins on the cross and He is the only One I am trusting for forgiveness. My one hope at the gate of heaven will be Christ alone, not Christ plus something I have done (19).

(4) *God saved me and changed me.* I recognize that it is God who has done the work by His grace and I have not deserved anything except judgement (12). He has helped me to turn my back on my old life (repentance) and begin to lead a new life. Specific details of your new life will be different from others but ought to include a love for the word of God and prayer (9).

If you are talking with someone about their conversion, ask probing questions, such as the two following:

Having lived your Christian life on earth and coming to the gate of heaven, how would you answer the question, 'Why should you as a sinner be allowed into heaven?' The answer must be because of Christ alone by His cross, and not anything done as a Christian (19).

What trials have you encountered since becoming a Christian? We would expect this to be true of each one in one way or another (8, 18). Another form of the question can be, 'What have been the greatest struggles so far?' The answer should centre on the battle with sin.