

Salvation "Conversion"

Isaiah 55:1-3; John 6:35-40; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

Introduction

- [Slide #1] When I was eight years old our family moved to a new part of Cincinnati. New place, new neighborhood, new families, my parents made some new friends. Those new friends invited our family to visit their church. Even though my parents weren't Christians they said yes. They loved going. I hated it. I remember my parents dragging me out of bed and forcing me to come with them and I remember riding in the car, whining and muttering under my breath, "this is stupid."
- For almost two years this went on. Sunday after Sunday. And if that wasn't bad enough my mom started listening to different speakers on the radio who talked about Jesus. We'd come downstairs to breakfast, my sister and I, and there'd be somebody on the radio and we'd have to listen while we ate our cereal and toast.
- When I was about ten years, one September day, autumn 1983, my mother was listening to one of those radio programs. And as she listened she felt as if God was speaking directly to her. God was calling to her, inviting her. And she responded. That day she gave her life to Christ. She turned from a godless way of life, living only for herself, to trusting in Christ for new life so that she might live for him. That day she became a follower of Jesus.

Transition

For the past couple of weeks now we've been taking an in-depth look at God's gift of salvation. What is it? How does it happen? How does God save?

- [Slide #2] If you were to break down salvation into its parts you'd get some fancy words like this. Election, regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification, preservation, glorification. Some of you are going to disagree with me on the order of things—you'll see conversion coming before regeneration. That's okay. A good case can be made from Scripture for that. If you're unfamiliar with these terms that's okay too. It's more important that you understand the concepts behind the words than the words themselves. So what is conversion?
- Conversion isn't going to church. Conversion isn't getting religion. Conversion isn't even the same thing as religious knowledge. **Romans 1:32** says that knowledge alone is not enough to save a person. This is

really important for those of you who have grown up in the church and know all the bible stories, you know who Jesus is. Having knowledge about Jesus or the Bible is not the same thing as conversion.

- Also, approval or agreement isn't the same thing as conversion. Remember from last week? That's where Nicodemus was at. He affirmed Jesus. He approved of Jesus. *Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God.* But approval isn't the same things as conversion; Nicodemus wasn't converted. Jesus said something Nicodemus, *you must be born again.* Conversion involves something more, something deeper. [Slide #3]

Big Idea

- **Conversion is our willing response to God's calling to us through Jesus, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation¹**
- You may not believe that I believe this, but God does not save us automatically without seeking a response from us.² We must decide to depend on Jesus to save us personally. Conversion is our willing response to God's saving work.
- Right now I don't know if there a dirtier word in the English language than the word conversion; it's like mothballs on the tongue. Why? Because many think conversion is ridiculously unnecessary. "Who am I to convert someone to my religion—as if mine is better" the reasoning goes.
- I think part of the problem stems from the way we use the word. We use the word conversion to describe a switch between two slightly different but basically equal things; like switching from Blackberry to Android or converting from Windows to Mac. We convert dollars into Euros or pesos or rupees—but they're all basically the same, they're all money.
- If that's how you understand conversion then no wonder that "conversion," switching from Islam or Hinduism to Christianity sounds ludicrous. They're all basically equal. But that idea, switching between two basically equal things, is totally foreign to the Biblical understanding of conversion.
- Do you know what the Apostle Paul said about his condition as a Jew before Jesus? *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from*

¹ Grudem, p. 709.

² Grudem, p. 695.

*this body of death?*³ Conversion is not a switch among basically equal things.

- The underlying assumption of the Bible is something is terribly wrong with us as people. And if God's assessment is correct; that human nature is corrupt,⁴ that we are spiritually sick and need to be made spiritually healthy,⁵ that we walk in spiritual darkness,⁶ that we are slaves to this thing called sin; we do to ourselves and to others what we loathe and we can't help it.⁷ And that because of our condition we are under a death sentence; we await condemnation.⁸ If He's right, then conversion in the way that the Bible understands it, isn't a dirty word. If conversion saves me from the wretched state I'm in, if conversion is rescue and freedom and light and deliverance then it's not an evil—it's mercy. It's grace. It's beauty. It's life. Conversion is not someone anyone can force another to do.

Organizational Sentence

- **There are three distinct actions that make up conversion**
- The **first** is a willing response to the call of God. The **second** is sincere repentance. The **third** is a placing of trust in Christ for salvation. All three together signal a shift from death to life. All three are necessary to receive God's gift of salvation. And in this sense, Christianity's use of the word is unique.

Transition

First action, God's call.

Main Points

- One of the most beautiful images in the Bible is of God, the King of the Universe, summoning his creation to life and to enjoy him. **Isaiah 55**. *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."*⁹ Or Jesus himself in **John 6**. *Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."*¹⁰

³ Romans 7:24

⁴ Erickson, p. 942.

⁵ Matt. 9:12

⁶ Mat. 4:16; John 3:19; Eph. 5:8a

⁷ John 8:34; Romans 6:6, 16-20; 2 Tim. 2:26

⁸ Romans 5:12

⁹ Isaiah 55:1-3

¹⁰ John 6:35

- This invitation to come, to fullness of life in Christ, this invitation to have your soul satisfied, is universal—it goes out to everyone. The call goes out through preaching. Sometimes God's calling to people sounds like a warning. But it's still an invitation. Come. Come to God. Come to Him for life. Come, enjoy him. Through Jesus He summons all creation to Himself. But in response to this universal call, all do not come. Many hear this external call and reject it.
- Jesus said the reason many hear this external call and don't come is because they don't have ears to hear. *If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*¹¹ To respond to God's call Jesus says it takes a special kind of hearing, which is why Jesus can say in **Mark 4:11**, some are ever *seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding.*
- For others, like my mother, the universal call is heard, not just with the ears, but with the spirit. On radio day, as I call it, the day God drew my mom to Christ, my mom felt like God was calling to her. Through that radio God was talking directly to her. She had an internal calling that she finally heard—after years of hearing.
- If you ask her she'll tell you that morning wasn't the first time she'd heard about Jesus' death and resurrection. She'd heard it countless times before. She had heard that all people have sinned, that the penalty for sin is death. She had heard that Christ died to pay the penalty of that sin. She had heard about forgiveness and eternal life. But on radio day something was different. She had ears to ear; God was calling, drawing her. And whatever objections she had to Christ, whatever obstacles she felt about giving her life to Christ, all those things were overcome, they melted away, and she willingly responded to God's offer of Christ. Jesus became water to her soul.
- See, there are two kinds of calling in the Bible. The universal invitation that God issues to everyone and is often rejected and an internal calling by God, who through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, gives a person ears to hear, and leads to life. Some have tried to illustrate these two calls of God through the analogy of the sun shining. Like God's invitation, the sun shines on everyone, God's call goes out to everyone—universally. But not all can see the sun; we've all been blinded, debilitated by sin. It's not until God calls us to life and opens our eyes that we can respond to the light of Christ. God's universal call has no effect on the blind; the message about Christ cannot penetrate darkened minds until the Spirit gives ears to hear.¹²

¹¹ Mark 4:23

¹² Demarest, p. 213-14 quoting Calvin.

- That there are two calls is seen by the New Testament use of the word “called” to refer to Christian believers. [1 Peter 2:9](#), [1 Thessalonians 2:12](#), [1 Corinthians 1:9](#), [Romans 1:7](#), [Galatians 5:13](#), [Ephesians 1:18](#) and on and on and on. If there is only one universal calling then why the special term?
- Peter’s invitation at Pentecost is a great example of this; two calls right in one verse. [Acts 2:39](#). *The promise, Peter says to the crowd, is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.* All are invited to share in the promise. But not all are called. The invitation is universal. Some reject it. None reject the inward call; God’s drawing of a person, his summons is so effective it always results in saving faith.¹³
- That’s why Paul can say in [Romans 8:30](#) those whom God calls *he also justifies; those he justifies, he also glorifies*. God’s internal calling to salvation through Christ always results in a person willingly responding with faith in Jesus—so that in the end those he calls are glorified.
- A wonderful example of this internal calling of God on the human heart is seen in Lydia’s conversion from the book of Acts. Paul’s in the city of Philippi, a Roman colony. He’s outside the city gate by the river. People gather to hear him talk about Jesus. [Acts 16:14](#). *One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.* “Like a radio receiver tuned to another frequency, sin-darkened minds cannot make adequate sense of spiritual signals. ‘The message of the Gospel is a noise, not a communication, until God tunes the set of man’s heart.’”¹⁴

Transition

What’s important in all this is that when you hear God calling you respond. Don’t put it off. Who knows how long you’ll hear his voice? And if the message about Christ seems like white noise to you, ask God for ears to hear. Let’s shift now and focus on our response. How should you respond when you hear God calling you?

- God’s call goes out through the Gospel. *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* The response God is looking for is twofold, repentance and trust. These are the [second](#) and [third actions](#) in conversion.

¹³ See also [Romans 8:30](#); [9:11](#); [1 Cor. 1:9](#), [26](#); [7:20](#); [Gal. 1:6](#), [15](#); [2 Thess. 2:14](#); [1 Tim. 6:12](#); [2 Tim. 1:9](#); [Heb. 3:1](#); [9:15](#); [1 Pet. 2:9](#); [2 Pet 1:3](#); [Jude 1](#); [Rev. 17:14](#); [19:9](#).

¹⁴ Demarest, p. 220.

- Repentance simply means turning. Repentance is the Bible's way of describing "a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."¹⁵
- Trust is another word for faith; it's the act of placing your confidence in another person. Trust, or faith, is more than simply believing facts. I can think something to be true, like Jesus' death and resurrection, without a personal commitment or dependence on Jesus to save me. Trust is being fully persuaded that God is able to do what he says he can do. Are you fully persuaded that God can and wants to save you? The Bible calls for trust in the sense of confidence that goes into and rests in a person. That's the faith that saves. And the two, repentance and trust, go hand in hand; like PB&J or opposite sides of the same coin.
- Let me see if I can explain. It is not that a person first turns from sin [repentance] and next trusts in Christ, or first trusts in Christ and then at some later point turns from sin. [Conversion means] both occurring at the same time. When we turn to Christ for salvation from our sins, we are simultaneously turning away from the sins that we are asking Christ to save us from.¹⁶ The two repentance and trust have to go together.
- Being sorry for your sin is not repentance. Repentance goes deeper than being sorry. **Hebrews 12:17** describes a very sorrowful man named Esau who, lost his right to lead his family because he was hungry for a bowl of stew. Afterwards he was terribly sorry for what he did. It says he sought his father's blessing with tears but failed to inherit his blessing because *he could bring about no change of mind*. In other words, he didn't repent. He didn't change his mind and become consciously opposed to the course of action he had pursued.¹⁷
- Sadly, there are a lot of Esaus in churches today. People are sorrowful for the things they have done but there's no repentance, no change of mind. No aversion to an old, former way of life in order to pursue a new way of life as Jesus lived. Lack of repentance is the reason people in churches look no different than the rest of the world. If that's you, it means you're not really converted; you're not a Christian. To be converted is not merely to switch from one path in life to another, but to change directions entirely and doing so with a clearly perceived aversion to the former path in life.¹⁸

¹⁵ Grudem, p. 713.

¹⁶ Grudem, p. 713

¹⁷ Berkhof, p. 480.

¹⁸ Berkhof, p. 481.

- You see a wonderful example of repentance by Zacchaeus. In **Luke 19:8** Zacchaeus says to Jesus, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." He was sorry for what he had done; robbing people, cheating people. And by his actions, paying back four times the amount he stole, he demonstrated that he had forsaken, repented of his former way of life. What does Jesus say in response? Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house."
- Conversion. Responding to God's call to Jesus with repentance and trust.

Transition

Briefly now, three applications of the doctrine of conversion. Application #1. [Slide #4]

1. **For a time, people can have the appearance of being converted without truly being converted.**
 - In **Luke 8** Jesus gave the illustration of four different kinds of soil to illustrate four different kinds of responses to God's word. One soil is so hardened against God's word that the seed of his Word bounces off a person's heart. Flat out rejection. There's obviously no conversion there.
 - The middle two soils though, the rocky soil and the soil with the weeds, produce some growth, some life. In other words, there is the appearance of spiritual life, of being converted. But in both cases both soils produce catastrophic crop failure. Testing and trials kill off the life in one and the worries and riches and pleasures of life kill off life in the other. In both cases, conversion wasn't real. Only the fourth soil, the soil that hears the word about God and clings to that truth produced a harvest. Which soil are you?

Transition

Application #2. [Slide #5]

1. **Prayer is a vitally important part of the conversion process.**
 - "Unless God works in a person's heart to make the proclamation of the gospel effective, there will be no genuine saving response."¹⁹ And God has deemed prayer the way the heavens are opened up. Prayer moves the hand of God. People come to faith in Christ when we pray. **James 4:2** says *you do not have because you do not ask*. We hold back God's work in conversion when we fail to pray for people to be drawn to Christ. So pray.

¹⁹ Grudem, p. 693.

Transition

Application #3. [Slide #6]

2. All of us are to faithfully call people to salvation in Christ

- It's a wonderfully encouraging thought that it's not up to me to save anyone. But on the other hand, God leaves the task of calling people to Christ to us. He uses our words. **Romans 10:14-15**. *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*
- You and I do not know those whom God has chosen in grace to be saved. We don't know who he will draw. Therefore, we, all of us, must faithfully, lovingly, gently preach Christ when we have the chance. And trust in the sovereign work of the Spirit of God to do the saving.²⁰

Conclusion

- Following radio day and over the course of the next month or so life in our family changed forever because my mom was radically changed. Jesus had transformed my mom's life. Before that radio day, she wasn't a terrible person or anything. I remember her losing her temper and yelling at us kids. But after, her personality and behavior changed so dramatically we all took notice. To my ten year old brain something weird had happened. She was being really nice—too nice. She wasn't yelling at us. She was happy. She had this peace, this calm about her.
- One evening later that fall, my dad being away on a trip, I went into my parent's bedroom to talk to my mom because I couldn't sleep. I was scared of dying. I don't remember why I felt that way. I was just scared. That conversation about what happens to a person after they die led me to ask my mom the question I had wanted to ask her for a while. "Mom, why are you so different? What's happened to you?"
- She explained to me, as best she could, that Jesus was the reason for the change in her life. He had given her peace and hope and a new life and a new purpose. She then explained that dying and our fear of death was a result of our sin. And that because of Christ she no longer had that fear. And then she told me how God loved me. And how because of his love God sent Christ to die on the cross as a payment for my sin. That his gift wasn't just for her. God wanted to give to me

²⁰ Demarest, p. 233.

all of what he had given to her. And He wanted to free me from my fear of death.

- And in my heart, as she was sharing, I knew that what she said about God and Jesus was true because I had seen, firsthand, what he had done in her life. I reasoned, “if God can change my mom, he can change me.” I wanted what she had. That night, some time in October 1983, God brought me to Christ and I prayed with my mom. I accepted His gift; Christ's death and resurrection as my death and resurrection. And I joined my mother as a follower of Jesus. And my life has never been the same. I am so thankful that the Bible is not just a collection of fables but that God is a living God who still speaks, and through Christ he is still in the business changing people's lives. Is he calling to you now? Here? Today? What are you waiting for?