

LESSON 4 Humanity Turns to God: Conversion

A boy ran away from home because he hated the responsibility his parents gave him. It was his duty to cut firewood and bring it from the woodpile into his house when needed. Gathering his clothes and few belongings together, he left home. But soon his money was gone, his clothes were dirty, and he was cold and aching from sleeping out in the open.

Finally he was so miserable that he decided to call home. He listened anxiously as his father answered the phone for some idea of his father's feeling. Very hesitantly he asked, "Father, will you forgive me? May I come home?" His father answered, "Son, we love you dearly and we have missed you so very much. Of course we want you to come home, but when you do, come by way of the woodpile."

A few days later the father returned to his home in the evening and found his son at the woodpile, dutifully cutting wood. But his attitude was different, for the boy was smiling as he applied himself to his job. It was easy to see that a great change had taken place.

In this lesson we will consider the part that we have in our own conversion, which begins the experience of salvation. It is a dynamic experience that changes us into the image of Christ and causes us to respond with joy to His desires.

lesson outline

Nature of Conversion

Conversion in the Bible

Experience of Conversion

lesson objectives

When you finish this lesson you should be able to:

1. Identify the biblical meaning of conversion and list three basic steps to conversion.
2. Distinguish between examples of conversion which involve spiritual change and those that do not.
3. Compare and contrast notable biblical examples of conversion.
4. Describe the means of conversion.
5. State the purpose of God in conversion.

learning activities

1. Read Acts 9:1–31; 16:1–40; 22:1–21; 26:4–18. These Scripture portions will give you a good overview of conversion examples.
2. Follow the lesson procedures as indicated in Lesson 1.
3. Take the self-test at the end of the lesson and check your answers.
4. Review Lessons 1–4, then answer the questions in Unit Student Report 1.

key words

apostasy	irresistably	negative conversion
confrontation	objective standard	
conversion	persecutor	
decisive	philosophy	
enlightened	transformation	

lesson development

NATURE OF CONVERSION

In our discussion of salvation, we have spoken of *conversion*. Perhaps you have wondered how *conversion* differs from *salvation*. Let us consider the following example. We observe that a well-known drunkard no longer gambles or gets drunk. He hates the things he once loved and loves the things he once hated. Those who know him say, “He’s converted; he’s a different man.” They are simply describing what they see from the manward (outward) viewpoint. But from the Godward viewpoint we would say that God has pardoned him and made him a new creature. *Conversion* emphasizes the positive activity of *man* in the experience of salvation.

Definition of Conversion

Objective 1. *Identify the biblical meaning of conversion and list three basic steps to conversion.*

Conversion may be defined as the act by which we turn from sin to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness of sins. And, in addition, we are saved *from* our sins and delivered *from* the penalty of sin.

The word translated *conversion* means “to turn,” to “make a complete turnabout.” This turnabout involves more than a simple change of mind, attitude, or morals. It involves every part of a person’s being: desires, lifestyle, will, spirit, and outlook on life. Conversion is a complete spiritual change. In the act of conversion a person has, according to John 5:24, “crossed over from death to life.”

The spiritual change brought about by conversion through Christ is not the same as other kinds of conversion. For example, I might be converted to a different view of politics, or religion, or morals without ever involving myself in the total commitment that is required of one who is dead to sin but alive to God (Romans 6:1–14). Paul explains this basic change of Christian conversion by noting that when “anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Application

- 1 Identify the statement below that gives the basic biblical meaning of *conversion*. Conversion is
- a) the act by which one changes his or her mind, or morals, or point of view.
 - b) essentially a change of feelings toward one's way of life.
 - c) the act by which one experiences a total change in his or her life by turning from sin to God.
-

Consider the illustration given in the lesson introduction as you note three steps in conversion. *First*, one must carefully consider the error of his or her ways. This is a necessary step of preparation, for until one recognizes the need to change he or she will feel no need for conversion. *Second*, there must be a decisive turning to God. This is the action step. *Third*, there must be obedience, for *conversion* means a *changed life*.

In our introductory illustration, we saw the preparation step, the careful consideration of his ways; the action step, the decisive turn homeward, and finally, we witnessed the complete change that was evident in the boy's life as he obediently took up his chores.

Application

- 2 In your notebook, list three steps to conversion.
-

Relation to Repentance and Faith

Conversion is closely related to repentance and faith. In fact, on occasion conversion is used to represent either or both, and thus represents all of the activities by which we turn from sin to God. You will recall that repentance turns us *from* sin and produces sorrow for it by pointing us to the Cross. Repentance does not seek to excuse sin; rather it freely admits the sins committed and the attitudes held that are contrary to God's law.

Faith is the positive activity by which we turn *to* God. We look to God who has provided the Cross as a cure for the sin that infects us. And we trust our life and future destiny to Him. When we *repent* and *believe*, we are converted.

Application

- 3** Circle the letter of the completion that shows the relationship of faith and repentance to conversion. Repentance and faith are
- a)** steps in the chain of conversion but are unrelated to conversion.
 - b)** the same as conversion, for in these acts one turns from sin to God in total trust.
 - c)** separated by a considerable time element from conversion.
-

Elements of Conversion

As we have noted previously, a person is a whole being. Generally speaking, then, what he or she does is a result of what he or she is wholly: intellect, emotions, and will. Each of these elements involved in repentance and faith is also involved in conversion. A person cannot be converted unless that person *knows* what he or she is doing. Neither can the person be converted if that person does not have *feelings* about what he or she is doing. An individual must be *inclined* toward conversion. And quite obviously, the person cannot be converted unless he or she *wills* it to occur.

Application

- 4** Circle the letters of the TRUE statements.
- a)** Repentance involves the “turning to God” aspect of conversion.
 - b)** Faith is the act by which a person turns to God and commits his or her life and destiny to Him.
 - c)** The act of conversion is basically an intellectual change.
 - d)** Conversion affects a person’s whole being: intellect, emotions, and will.

5 Identify the elements of conversion by matching the proper element (right) with its description (left).

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>... a Involves feelings and is the assent of the heart to the rightness of what we know</p> | <p>1) Intellect
2) Emotions
3) Will</p> |
| <p>... b Is the knowledge factor, lets us know what to repent of and what we should believe</p> | |
| <p>... c involves the decision-making process, by which we commit ourselves to what we know and feel</p> | |



CONVERSION IN THE BIBLE

Conversion is a marvelous experience which we undergo as we begin our Christian life. Based upon our own individual experiences we might tell others *what* happened to us and *how* it happened. But the only measure for true conversion is the Word of God. It alone is the objective standard by which we judge whether conversion is genuine or not.

Use of the Word *Conversion*

Objective 2. *Distinguish between examples of conversion which involve spiritual change and those that do not.*

We have seen that the word *conversion* speaks of a complete turnabout or change in one's life. The most common words used in the Bible that refer to such a change have the same ideas in the original biblical languages. Sometimes the change referred to is purely physical (Acts 9:40). At other times, it indicates a change of emphasis (Acts 13:46). However, among the various uses of the word is a common use that speaks about spiritual change. In 1 Samuel 10:6 we see that when Saul was changed into a different person the conversion involved a definite spiritual change. (See also Mark 4:12; Psalm 51:13; and Luke 22:32.) In Acts 3:19, when Peter challenged the people to "repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out," we again have the idea of spiritual change.

Consider the idea of *turning away* from God. This is called *negative conversion* or *apostasy* (Jeremiah 2:27). Another example of a change from the good life to the bad life and its effects is seen in 2 Peter 2:22 where Peter compares apostasy to dogs who return to their vomit.

While we have used a number of examples of the way the word *conversion* is used in the Bible, it speaks primarily of a person turning to God and of God forgiving him or her.

Application

6 Select examples of conversion that refer to spiritual change by writing 1 in front of those that involve spiritual change and 2 in front of those that do not involve spiritual change.

- | | | |
|----------------|---|------------------------|
| . . . a | Paul and Barnabas decide to turn in ministry from Jews to Gentiles in Antioch. | 1) Spiritual change |
| . . . b | Jesus says to Peter, “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32). | 2) Nonspiritual change |
| . . . c | Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). | |
| . . . d | Isaiah says, “The abundance of the sea shall be converted unto you” (Isaiah 60:5). | |



Examples of Conversion

Objective 3. *Compare and contrast notable biblical examples of conversion.*

Our conversion experience does not concern a religion. It does involve a *person*. We are not asked to acknowledge the Ten Commandments, a certain church creed, or the Sermon on the

Mount in order to become Christians. But we are challenged to believe in the *Person* of Jesus and accept Him as Lord of our lives, believing that He is risen and alive (Romans 10:9–10).

At a certain young people's meeting a young lady asked the Christian speaker about the need for a personal experience with Christ. She said, "It is hard for me to accept this. If a person believes in Fascism, is he not a Fascist? If he believes in Communism, is he not a Communist? Well, I believe in Christianity, doesn't this make me a Christian?" The speaker replied, "Not necessarily." Then he added, "I notice you are wearing an engagement ring. Do you believe in marriage?" "Of course," she answered, "I'm planning to be married very soon." He answered, "What are your reasons for believing in marriage and wanting to be married?" She replied, "Marriage provides security for a woman, also a home and a family." The speaker turned to other young ladies and asked, "How many of you believe in marriage?" And with little exception all agreed that they did believe in marriage. The speaker continued, "Well, this *is* interesting. All of you ladies believe in the institution of marriage. And since I'm a licensed minister, I can perform marriages according to the laws of our government. This young lady here says that if one believes in Fascism, he is a Fascist. If he believes in Communism, he is a Communist. And if one believes in Christianity, he is a Christian. Since a number of you ladies have told me that you believe in marriage, permit me to pronounce you married."

The audience laughed. The speaker then asked, "What is wrong with this reasoning?" Another young lady said, "Sir, you know marriage is not a philosophy like Communism or Fascism; it is a personal relationship." The speaker said, "This is precisely my point. Christianity is not just a philosophy, for to be a Christian one must have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus who is a living person." Christian conversion, then, is uniquely different from all other conversions.

One very beautiful example of conversion in all its aspects is recorded in Acts 16:13–15. On this occasion, Lydia, a Gentile God-fearer, that is, one who worshipped the God of Israel without accepting all the ceremonial laws of the Jews, was attending a time of prayer. As Paul shared the good news of Jesus, she heard his message as the Lord opened her heart, and she *responded* gladly. She then gave evidence of her change by being baptized and by extending hospitality to Paul’s group.

In this example we see some of the wonders of God’s provision in bringing people to himself. Though Lydia was an earnest seeker, she needed further knowledge of salvation, and God met this need. As she prayed, God brought her to a place of confrontation with the gospel. Thus, prayer is an effectual means of bringing about spiritual change. Her experience shows us that even though a person is sincere and apparently religious, he or she must have a decisive spiritual change if the person is to be a truly converted Christian. Notice how the Word and the Holy Spirit work together in bringing about conversion also. Observe that both the Holy Spirit and human responsibility are involved in conversion.

Application

7 Circle the letters of the TRUE statements.

- a)** Conversion follows the same course with each person: he or she must go to church, hear a gospel message preached, and then join the church.
- b)** Lydia’s experience gives us proof that God loves the world, and that He is not willing that any should perish.
- c)** Even though a person is sincere and seems to live a good life, he or she still needs to be converted.
- d)** Conversion requires more than knowledge of one’s sins and the desire to change; the knowledge and the assent must be followed by a personal experience of conversion.

The Philippian jailer is another example of Christian conversion (Acts 16:16–34). In this second case we learn that God uses various means to get a sinner’s attention: sometimes

by natural disasters such as an earthquake, a windstorm, or a personal crisis or serious problem in the home. These experiences that shock sinners so much help them to see their spiritual need and help them seek for a solution. Notice that the gospel is God’s solution to the sinner’s sense of need (v. 32). It is the instrument of conversion. Observe also, that conviction of sin ends in conversion only when the sinner’s sense of guilt and sin is linked with belief in the Lord Jesus (v. 31). And, once again, we see that true Christian conversion produces good deeds.

Application

8 Read Acts 16:16–34. In this example all the elements of conversion are present. Following each element, list the verse (or verses) and the proof that this element was in fact exercised.

a) Intellect

.....

b) Emotions

.....

c) Will

.....



A third example of conversion, that of Paul, gives still other principles of Christian conversion. Acts 9:1–31 reveals facts about Paul’s conversion, some of which are quite different from our other examples. One key consideration arises out of the miraculous events involved in Paul’s conversion: sometimes, unusual circumstances accompany a conversion experience, but usually they do not. It is wrong to assume that conversion requires an earthquake, a shining light from heaven, or some other attesting sign since the miracle involved in conversion is the greatest miracle in the entire world.

In Paul’s experience we see that even though a person may be highly trained, have great natural abilities, and be very sincere in his or her religion, that person may be totally without

true spiritual life and in need of conversion. Paul's case shows that a person may have great zeal for God that is not based on knowledge (Romans 10:2); he is sincere but wrong. Since such a person is ignorant of the gospel and deeply committed to his or her religion and tradition, he or she reacts fiercely against the gospel. However, when this person understands the truth that Jesus is Lord, this enlightened knowledge lays a solid foundation for conversion. Additionally, Paul's conversion shows that God is not willing that people at any social, intellectual, or economic level be lost. In the miracle of Paul we see that God's grace can change a persecutor into a preacher.

Application

9 Write answers to the following questions based on the comparisons and contrasts you have noted in the biblical examples of conversion in this section.

a) What elements are involved in each conversion experience?

.....

b) On what basis does God deal with us?

.....

c) How do the experiences differ?

.....

d) In what way are the experiences similar?

.....



EXPERIENCE OF CONVERSION

Means of Conversion

Objective 4. *Describe the means of conversion.*

We should understand what is involved in conversion. Some say that God does it all; others say the individual does it all. We should recognize the biblical balance. We will consider this issue

in greater depth in Lesson 5, “God’s Will in Salvation.” There we will see the importance of man’s free will in the experience of conversion; we will also see God moving humans toward Him. Balance is needed in our views; balance that does not deny a person’s free will or limit God’s sovereignty. Let us keep this in mind as we consider the means of conversion.

Application

10 Read each of the following Scriptures and place those which show God calling on people to turn to Him in the left column and those which show God turning people to himself in the right column. Proverbs 1:23; Psalm 85:4; Isaiah 31:6; 59:20; Jeremiah 31:18; Ezekiel 18:32; Hosea 12:6; Joel 2:12–13; Lamentations 5:21; Acts 26:20.

God calls people to turn to Him	God turns people to himself



The Scriptures thus show the human and divine aspects of conversion. God always respects the will of humans. When He created man and gave him personality, God made a creature that could either respond to His offer of salvation and turn wholly to Him, or reject and turn from Him. God begins the process that brings conversion through the Word and the Holy Spirit. But we must respond to the call of the Spirit through the Word and experience conversion. Remember: our willing response to God’s call through the gospel does not involve merit. God respects our will and thus calls us to turn to Him.

When we turn to God, we simply allow Him to step across the threshold and take control of our lives (Revelation 3:20). In this way we see that people turn to God, and God turns people in the way of truth and righteousness. It is completely correct to pray as the psalmist did, “Turn us, O God...” (Psalm 85:4 KJV), and it is just as appropriate for God to appeal to us to turn. Notice that while the Lord stands at the door and knocks, we must open the door. God never forces His way into our lives.

The instrument God uses to bring about conversion is the preaching of the gospel. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to convict us of sin and to produce faith (Romans 10:17). We thus repent, believe in the Lord Jesus, and are converted. In this process God is glorified and we are redeemed. We have neither limited God’s sovereignty nor our own free will.

The apostle Paul declared that his message was of Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). He preached about the significance of Christ’s death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3–4), and his message included many references to the work of the Holy Spirit (see Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 12 and 14). But the emphasis of Paul’s gospel message was the atoning death of Jesus Christ. He proclaimed it not with a demonstration of his own speaking ability but in the power of the Holy Spirit. The results of this message reflected the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1–5, 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:13).

Application

11 Select the statement below which properly describes the *means of conversion*.

- a)** Conversion is the product of God’s grace alone. It is brought about as the Holy Spirit draws a person to Christ; therefore, a person need not believe nor respond to any message of the gospel, since the person is irresistibly drawn to God.
- b)** Conversion is the result of our assessment of our own situation. We realize we need to change, and the change comes about by our will alone.
- c)** God and humans are both involved in the process of conversion. God brings people knowledge of their lost condition and convicts them of sin, but individuals must respond by repenting, believing, and turning wholly to God.



Purpose of Conversion

Objective 5. *State the purpose of God in conversion.*

The purpose of conversion may be viewed as two-fold: to turn away from our evil ways, sin, and eternal death (Ezekiel 33:11; Matthew 7:13), and to turn us to the narrow way that leads to eternal life (Matthew 7:14). God’s highest purpose is to bring us out of sin to fellowship with Him. In conversion we take the first step on the road to eternal life. We thus begin a new way of life.

Conversion enables us to live according to new principles based upon God’s Word. Our goal at this point is to make our outward life conform to the inward transformation that has taken place. Our *standing* in Christ as people of God becomes a powerful testimony to others because our *state* (our behavior in daily living) conforms to this. Notice the way Paul describes the ongoing process of growth in Christlikeness that begins at conversion: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Yes, in conversion we

make a complete turnabout. Before we were earth-bound; now that we have turned to God and are heaven-bound, we face upward so that we reflect His image to others. We thus become living letters bearing God's message to all people (2 Corinthians 3:2).

Results of Conversion

Having received the Son of God as Lord and Savior, we learn something of the extent of this transaction: "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life" (1 John 5:11–12). One of the immediate results of conversion, then, is salvation from spiritual death (James 5:20). However, we are more than just *saved sinners*, as we shall see later. At the time of conversion we are considered part of God's family: "Dear friends, now we are children of God . . ." (1 John 3:2). Also, our sins are wiped out (Acts 3:19), not just covered over to be revealed later. In fact, the psalmist says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he [God] removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). Isaiah reinforces this truth: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions . . . and remembers your sins no more" (Isaiah 43:25).

As a part of God's family, we have new relationships. We join multitudes of others at the cross of Christ, and together as converted people we form a great fellowship. This is what we have been called unto (1 Corinthians 1:9). John says that the fellowship we have is "with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). The fellowship that Adam and Eve lost when they fell has been restored through the death of Christ. Moreover, as we walk in daily fellowship with Him, there are added benefits: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin" (1 John 1:7). What a transaction! We exchange our place in the sinful world for an eternal palace in glory; we leave the poverty of the world for the riches of divine grace; we leave the broad road of destruction for the straight and narrow way, where the arms of our Heavenly Father await us.

Application

12 List at least five results of conversion.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....



self-test

MULTIPLE CHOICE. Circle the letter of the best answer.

- 1** Repentance and faith are related to conversion
- a)** in a very close way, for they are steps that prepare the sinner for conversion.
 - b)** only in a very narrow sense, because they are completely different activities of people in things of the Spirit.
 - c)** in that repentance deals with the intellect, faith with the emotions, and conversion with the will.
- 2** Repentance, faith, and conversion are
- a)** exclusively the work of God. Humankind is passive in these acts.
 - b)** acts that touch people at every point of their being: intellect, emotions, and will.
 - c)** generally words that mean the same thing.
- 3** Conversion is brought about as a result of
- a)** an individual's response to the ministry of the Word and the activity of the Holy Spirit.
 - b)** people's self-knowledge, which shows them that they do not measure up to a moral standard.
 - c)** an individual's deep-seated seeking after a Savior whom he or she does not know.
- 4** Conversion speaks of turning to God for forgiveness of sins. This turning is the
- a)** responsibility of people, since this is commanded by God.
 - b)** activity which God brings about in people; therefore, turning is a divine action which God works in people.
 - c)** responsibility of mankind, *primarily*, for God commands it; nevertheless, people have prayed that God would turn them to Him, and God has done so.

5 The primary instrument God uses to bring about conversion is the

- a)** ministry of the Holy Spirit, which deals with each person on a different basis.
- b)** preaching of the gospel.
- c)** ministry of the body of Christ, the church.

6 **MATCHING.** Place 1 in front of the following items that are results of conversion and 2 in front of those that are not.

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| ... a We receive eternal life. | 1) Result of conversion |
| ... b We are saved from eternal death. | 2) Not a result of conversion |
| ... c We are made instantly righteous and perfect. | |
| ... d Our sins are blotted out completely, never to be remembered again. | |
| ... e We become involved in new relationships. | |
| ... f Fellowship with other converted ones helps us grow and become strong. | |
| ... g Our knowledge of spiritual things becomes full and complete. | |
| ... h We have fellowship with the Sovereign of the universe and His Son, Jesus Christ. | |

Before you continue your study with Lesson 5, be sure to complete your unit student report for Unit 1 and return the answer sheet to your GU instructor.

answers to study questions

- 7 a)** False
- b)** True
- c)** True
- d)** True
- 1 c)** the act by which one experiences total change . . .
- 8 a)** Verse 32. This verse indicates that the jailer and his household heard and understood the message.
- b)** Verses 25–30. The miracle made a powerful impression on the jailer; hence his question, “Men, what must I do to be saved?” (Obviously he believed, for this led him from conviction all the way to making a decisive change.)
- c)** Verse 33. We see here a deliberate act of the will in the jailer’s ministry to them and in his submission to baptism.
- 2** Consideration of one’s ways, a decisive turning to God, and obedience to Him.
- 9 a)** The total person—intellect, emotions, and will.
- b)** These experiences show us that God deals with us on the basis of His Word.
- c)** The experiences differ because God deals with us as individuals. Experiences differ slightly from person to person based on this fact.
- d)** In every case the person must acknowledge his or her sins and turn from them, believe in Him, and confess Him as Lord. When an individual does this, he or she is converted.
- 3 b)** the same as conversion, for in these acts one turns . . .
- 10** God calls people to turn to Him: Proverbs 1:23; Isaiah 31:6; 59:20; Ezekiel 18:32; Hosea 12:6; Joel 2:12,13; Acts 26:20. God turns people to himself: Psalm 85:4; Jeremiah 31:18; Lamentations 5:21.

4 a) False

b) True

c) False

d) True

11 c)

5 a 2) Emotions

b 1) Intellect

c 3) Will

6 a 2) Nonspiritual change

b 1) Spiritual change

c 1) Spiritual change

d 2) Nonspiritual change

12 Your answer should include in any order five of the following: we receive eternal life, become part of God's family, have our sins wiped out, are saved from death, have fellowship with God and other Christians, purification from sin, and the joy of heaven.



What God Provides

Lessons

- 5 God's Will in Salvation**
- 6 Regeneration**
- 7 Justification**
- 8 A New Family: Adoption**