

## CONVERSION, A WORK OF GOD by Ron Harvey

Text: Acts 9:1-17

### INTRODUCTION

Salvation is first and foremost a work of God. If you are saved, it is because God saved you. If you have ears to hear, it is because God has opened them. If you have eyes to see, then God has given you sight.

If you have any sense of the **blackness and the awfulness of sin**, then God has made you aware.

If you have any concern for the **laws and commandments of God**, it is because God has made you concerned.

If you have any affection for your **Christian neighbor** then God has given it.

If you have **come to Jesus**, it's only because God has drawn you to him.

*No man cometh to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.*

John 6:44

If you have any **love for God**, it is because God first loved you.

If we learn anything in our studies of God's Word, I hope we learn that salvation is a mighty, and a massive and a marvelous and a miraculous work of God.

And I hope we learn that salvation is a comprehensive work of God. He leaves nothing undone from beginning to end. He had a plan of salvation and there are no holes in his plan. It is a perfect plan and he has the power to bring it to pass.

There are no circumstances that can interfere with his work of salvation. In fact, the Bible says that God is in control of all circumstances of the entire universe.

There can be no contingencies to his plan that would frustrate his plan to save. He doesn't say, "this plan will work if . . ."

Now I want us to understand that salvation is a grand and glorious concept in the Scriptures. And the plan of salvation stretches from eternity past into eternity future. There never was a time when God was not saving his people, and there never will be a time when God is not saving his people, for our salvation has always depended on him in the past and will always depend upon him in the future.

Either God shall save us, or we shall be lost. It's as simple as that.

Much of the confusion about salvation occurs because in general people don't understand that salvation is an eternal concept, encompassing many parts.

Salvation is more than merely the eternal covenant of redemption entered into by The Father, Son and Holy Spirit before the world began.

**Example: What if an architect finished his drawings and came to you and said, "OK, here's your house, enjoy." All you would have is a set of plans. You can't move into a blueprint.**

So, salvation is more than just the plan to save.

Salvation is more than the incarnate work of Christ whereby he suffered and died for sins.

Salvation is more than propitiation and more than substitutionary atonement. It is more than the intercessory advocacy of Christ.

Salvation is more than justification whereby God simply declares me forgiven because God could do all of that, and yet, if he went no further, I would still be unchanged and unfit for heaven.

There must be more. God must do something in me to change me. And so,

The great work of salvation includes the manifold works of the Holy Spirit in applying salvation to our souls.

And so, salvation includes the work of conversion whereby we are changed by an act of God. And it includes the work of sanctification whereby God improves us by the application of his word to our hearts.

You see, there are many, many parts to the whole plan of salvation.

Salvation is more than just escaping hell. It involves God actually changing us and moving us away from sin and self and into the likeness of Jesus. And that requires a miraculous work of God.

Salvation is more than all of that. It is the sum total of all of that and much more.

If you are saved, it is the result of a massive and marvelous, mysterious and miraculous work of God.

It is too great to comprehend.

And the only thing we can do is study it in all its parts and try to rightly understand it as best we can.

Now I think it is helpful to understand that some of the work of salvation occurs outside of ourselves and some of the work of salvation occurs inside us.

You see, God's plan to save us occurred outside of us and completely independent of us.

**Example: Now no one builds a house without a plan. In fact, house plans are generally very elaborate, detailing every board and every tile and every product that goes into the house.**

And God doesn't build **his** house without a plan. And the Bible says that God's people are his house. He is building a tabernacle for himself. And God drew up the plans before the foundation of the world. And he chose his materials. The Bible says,

*He has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world.*

Eph. 1:4

And that obviously occurred outside of us. His plan occurred before the world ever existed and before we were ever born.

And there were other parts of salvation that occurred outside of us.

Jesus, who was God himself, became a man and lived a righteous life on our behalf. And he bore our sins in his body when he suffered and died. And he rose again on the third day and this served as a promise that he would one day raise us up.

And all of that work was done outside of us and in our case, before we ever came into the world.

It is interesting that the Bible says, "We were justified by the blood of Christ."

*Much more, being justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.*

Romans 5:9

And we were justified by his blood before we were ever born. And this occurred outside of us.

And in many ways, salvation is a legal work that has nothing to do with any work inside of us, but everything to do with what happened outside of us and independently of us.

So, you could ask someone the question, “When were you saved?” And someone might say, I was saved in 1988 when I believed in Jesus and I was converted and he changed my heart. And that is a fine answer because your conversion was a part of your salvation and maybe that’s when you first became sensible to the things of God.

But, someone else might just as rightly say, “I was saved when Jesus shed his blood for me, for the Bible says I am “justified by his blood.”

Someone else might have an even broader perspective on salvation and might say, “I was saved when God chose me and placed me in Christ before the foundation of the world.”

And, there is nothing wrong with that answer.

Someone else might say, “I’m not saved yet, because God’s work of salvation is an ongoing process that has a ways to go. I shall be sanctified more and more and then I shall be glorified.

So you see, some may view salvation in its narrower scope in terms of changes that God makes in them, while others may see salvation in terms of what God did for them and what he did outside of them.

And both are true, for salvation is a master plan with many parts.

Now in previous messages, we have heard of some of the things that God did outside of us. He chose us, he placed us in Christ. Jesus died for us and rose again for us.

But, the thing is, when God chooses to do all of that outside of you, he also determines to change you on the inside as well. God doesn’t do all those wonderful objective things for you and then leave you unchanged.

Now one of the first acts of God that is performed in you is the act of regeneration. And we have talked much about regeneration. This is the work of God whereby the dead soul is made alive. The Bible says,

*And you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins.*  
Eph. 2:1

And this is the first act of salvation upon the soul itself. This is salvation being worked within you. And it is an act of God’s sheer, unmitigated grace, creating life where there was no life, creating a disposition toward God where there was no such disposition. It is an awakening of the spirit. Jesus called it a new birth, because it is a new life. It is a mysterious and miraculous work of the Holy Spirit within you. And God makes you alive.

And this happened all before you ever had faith or repentance. You were not inclined toward Jesus at all, until he made you alive. But once he made you alive, the work of salvation was begun in you and there was a great change being worked in you.

Now, once God begins a work in you, he never quits.

*Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

Philippians 1:6

Now this morning, I want to talk about a part of salvation that is closely akin to regeneration in that it is something worked in you but it is logically subsequent to regeneration. It is the work of God that actually turns you from a life of sin and rebellion to a life of holiness and submission.

For you see, salvation is never purely objective. God doesn't do all this work outside of us and which is largely unknown to us, and then leave us unchanged.

Salvation results in a great change in us. And this change occurs within us and it occurs in the course of time. What was planned by God before the foundation of the world comes to pass in our hearts in the course of time.

Theologians sometimes call this work conversion. It is a change worked inside of you after you have been made alive by the Holy Spirit. And it appears to be one of the first conscious changes inside of you.

Conversion is a change. It is a change from the former condition where you had no sorrow for sin to a new condition where there is great sorrow for sin. And it is a change from a condition where you had no faith in Jesus, to where you place all your faith and trust in him.

Now conversion is often thought of as an immediate change. And we often can pinpoint the day and the hour of our conversion. It is the moment when we turned our back on our former life and laid our trust in Jesus. In that sense conversion is a crisis experience.

**Example: I think of the conversion of the Apostle Paul.**

See Acts 9:1-18

Now the first mention of Paul in the Bible is in Acts 7:58 where we find that the witnesses who stoned Stephen laid down their robes at the feet of Saul (that is his former name). This would imply that Saul had some authority over this stoning. And the witnesses gathered around Saul and laid down their robes and they threw stones at Stephen until he died.

And then we see in Acts 8:1 that Saul was consenting to the death of Stephen. Now Saul was not just a reluctant consenter, but Saul was an active consenter. Saul wanted Stephen dead.

And in Acts 8:3 we see that Saul made havoc of the church. That word havoc is a word used to describe how a wild beast slaughters its prey. And that's the kind of ferocity with which Saul attacked the church.

And look, Saul didn't just persecute Christians that were bold enough to come to the temple or to the synagogue, but he entered every house. (v.3) He went house to house. This shows the persistent and unrelenting pursuit by Saul of anyone who professed the name of Jesus.

And when he found them he haled them to prison, not only the men, but the men and women and I suppose he left the children behind crying and destitute and without parents.

And look at chapter 9:1. Saul yet was breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord. That is, he didn't stop since we last mentioned him in 8:3. Oh no. Saul was relentless and determined and he would use any means to exterminate Christians.

And Saul got papers from the high priest to allow him to legally arrest Christians in Damascus and to bind them and bring them to Jerusalem for trial and punishment. And so, Saul set out on the road to Damascus with hate and vengeance in his heart to kill and to maim and to hurt anyone who professed the name of Christ.

Now what Saul didn't know was that he himself was a chosen vessel of the Lord. He had no knowledge of the plan of salvation which Jesus made for him in eternity past. He had no clue that Jesus died for him. And he had no understanding of all that was previously done for him by the God of grace. But this is the same man who would later write,

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world."*

This is the same man who would later write,

*"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."*

This is the same man who would later boast that he was chosen and called of God.

Now the fact is that God had to change Saul from the vilest of sinners to the sweetest of saints. And this would require the very power of God. For Saul would not be moved from his love and devotion to Judaism and his hatred of Christ. No man could deter Saul from his mission to destroy the church.

But look. Jesus came knocking. Jesus knocked him to the ground (v.4) and gave him a command. Go into the city and wait (v.6).

And Saul obeyed. And the next time we see Saul in Acts 9:11, he is praying. And not just praying, but he is now a friend to the disciples. (v.19)

And so you see the power of God in the conversion of Saul. In one powerful swoop of the hand of God, Saul was converted from Christ-rejecting Judaism to Christ-loving Christianity. He was converted from the haughtiness of self-righteousness to the self-deprecating humility which

results from the awareness of sin. Whereas every inclination of his heart was bent on slaughter of Christians, now the inclination of his heart was to love them. Saul was converted from being at war with Christ, to being at peace with him, and all this in a moment.

One moment Saul is intent on persecuting Christ and the next, he is asking, “Lord, what would you have me to do?”

Now this kind of change is not worked naturally. One doesn’t travel down the road to Damascus as a zealous Pharisee determined to kill Christians and then just stop and say, ‘You know what, I think I’ve been wrong all this time, I think I will become a servant of Jesus.’”

No, true conversion is a work of God and he can turn your hatred for him into love for him in an instant. This is not just some intellectual light going on, this is a work of God upon the heart bringing a complete conversion from darkness to light, a conversion from reveling in sin to reviling it, a conversion from abhorring Christ to adoring Christ.

Conversion is only one part of salvation, but what a sweet part it is! We may have no awareness at all of the work of God that led to our conversion, but we have a sweet sense of the conversion itself.

First of all, there is a conscious change of mind about Jesus. This is a part of repentance. When Jesus changes us, we change our minds about Him. See how much Saul hated Christ before, but how much he loved him afterward. And nothing can account for this except the power of God to change hearts.

And many have found this to be true. Where once they despised Christ, they now find that they love him; where once they ridiculed Christians, now they admire them.

And there is a change of mind about sin. Before his conversion, Saul thought himself to be chief of the Pharisees. Afterward, he thought himself to be chief of sinners.

Such is the power of God in conversion.

Oftentimes, when we are converted, there is a change in our demeanor. Saul was bold like a warrior in his persecution of the saints, breathing out threatening and slaughters, but after his conversion the Bible says he trembled and was astonished. (v.6) Could this be the same Saul? Yes. But God has converted him from a lion to a lamb.

And God changes angry sinners into loving saints by his work of conversion.

God changed Saul from a demanding master to a dependent servant. For Saul came down the road in charge of an army of soldiers, but after Jesus changed him, the soldiers led him by the hand blind into the city. (v.8)

And so it is with us when we are converted. We thought ourselves to be the master of our own fate, and we served and fed our selfish desires daily. But now, we find that we serve another master. And he leads us whithersoever he will.

### **SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON CONVERSION**

1. Conversion is not merely an external change. It is not a reformation of your life. It is not the reading and application of a self-help book. Jesus warned the Pharisees about a mere outward washing and he called them whited sepulchers. (Mt. 23:27)

2. Conversion is not merely making a change to a true church or to true doctrine. The Bible calls this a form of godliness without the power thereof. (2 Tim. 3:5; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof)

But,

3. Conversion is an internal work of God upon the souls of men. Conversion is not a judicial act of God as is justification. Conversion is a creative act of God that changes the condition of man. And it will result in the turning of a man's heart to God. It will make a man sick of sin but joyous of the grace of God. It will turn a man's heart from worldly things to spiritual things.

4. Conversion takes place in the conscious life of the sinner. There will often be tears of sadness and tears of joy upon this work of conversion. There may be great remorse for sins committed. But then there will be great elation over the forgiveness of sins. There will be a conscious sense of faith in Jesus. There will be a release of the burdens of sin into the arms of Jesus. There will also be a commitment to obey him. And he that has been converted will say with Saul, "Lord, what will you have me to do?"