

If you have read my previous articles on *conviction of sin*, *contrition for sin* and *confession of sin*, you could be forgiven for thinking that all God is interested in is making sinners miserable! It all seems so negative! Actually, that ought not to surprise us too much, because a vital part of the message of the Bible is to impress upon us *why* we need to be converted.

It may also seem like that because of the way I have been presenting this great subject of conversion. I have been giving thoughts on each aspect separately, but in real experience the various elements of Conviction, Contrition, Confession, Consolation and Commitment, do not work in 'water-tight' compartments! They are all interwoven and work together to bring us to saving faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

This time I want to draw attention to another vital matter in the process of conversion, which I am calling 'Consolation'. The fact is that our experience of conversion does not take place in a vacuum. Romans 10:17 says, "*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*" The text is telling us that our conversion is based on the word of God and, in fact, against the whole background of the good news of the gospel presented to us throughout Scripture. A most striking example of this is seen in the experience of those who became Christians on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2. Peter drew the crowd's attention to a number of Old Testament prophecies and applied them to their situation, we read, and "*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?"*" (Acts 2:37) The crowd's reaction was very clearly founded on hearing God's word.

One of the clearest messages that comes throughout the Bible, from cover to cover, is that we need to turn to God. The human race has, by nature, "*no hope ... without God*" (Eph 2:12). It could therefore be argued that the whole message of the Bible, as Paul was inspired to put it, is that "*through the encouragement [or consolation] of the Scriptures we might have hope.*" (Rom 15:4). All the time we experience conviction and contrition, because of our sinfulness, we have also the comfort and consolation of God's word assuring us that there is the hope of a glorious and everlasting salvation.

On the evening of the Lord's resurrection, He assured those gathered behind locked doors that "*everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled... Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations*" (Luke 24:44–47). The saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ is inextricably tied to the Word of God.

However, in order for people to find that salvation, by responding positively to the gospel, the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit is needed. Lydia's conversion is a particular case in point. We read that "*The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.*" (Acts 16:14) Another example is the Thessalonians. "*Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures*" (Acts 17:1,2), and those Scriptures were applied by the Holy Spirit for, as Paul noted later, "*our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction*" and, as a result, the Thessalonians "*received the word ... with the joy of the Holy Spirit*" (1 Thess 1:5,6).

In the process of genuine conversion, the Holy Spirit takes the word of God and impresses it on the mind and heart of the sinner. Sometimes He does that by helping us to understand the message of the gospel in a general way, and sometimes by focussing our attention on a particular part of Scripture, even a specific verse. In so doing, He consoles our troubled minds and encourages us along the road to faith in Christ as Saviour.

Let's look at a few more examples:

Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra where they healed a lame man, resulting in crowds wanting to worship them, but Paul and Barnabas dissuaded them by giving a general explanation of who the true and "*living God*" really was (Acts 14:15). They were speaking to people who would have known little, if anything, of the Old Testament – which is probably why they did not quote Scripture verses to them. However, the general gospel message resulted in some being converted – we read of "*disciples*" (verse 20), and know that Timothy, who was one of "*the brothers at Lystra*" (Acts 16:1,2), had "*from childhood been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to make wise for salvation*" (2 Tim 3:15).

Later, in Athens, Paul saw that the Greeks worshipped an "*unknown god*" (see Acts 17:22–31). Paul then presented to them what could be called an overview of what the Bible says about the true God! Paul did that without pointing to any particular Scripture, probably for the same reason as in Lystra. Even so, the Holy Spirit impressed the truth of Paul's message on the hearts of some of his hearers and they believed (Acts 17:34).

In other situations, particular Bible verses or passages were used in peoples' conversion experiences. A very obvious example is the case of the Ethiopian eunuch recorded in Acts 8:26–39. The evangelist Philip met the man, who was on his way home from Jerusalem, and found him reading Isaiah 53. The eunuch invited Philip to join him and explain the verses he was reading. So Philip, "*beginning with this Scripture ... told him the good news about Jesus.*" (Acts 8:35) The result was the eunuch's conversion and baptism.

In Berea, Paul and Silas found Jews who were eager to examine the Scriptures daily to see if what they were being told was true, the result being that "*Many of them therefore believed*" (Acts 17:12). All these examples show the vital role the word of God has in the process of conversion. It is as Paul was inspired to write concerning the "*hope of eternal life, which God, promised before the ages began and at the proper time, manifested in his word*" (Titus 1:2,3).

Another wonderful way in which God's word consoles and encourages us in the process of conversion is the thrilling assurance that He loves to save sinners. There is not a single trace of reluctance in the heart of the Saviour to accept us, no matter what we have done or who we are! In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father is pictured as seeing his wayward son "*yet a great way off ... and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.*" (Luke 15:20, AV). It is with that kind of passionate welcome that the Lord receives sinners. In the two parables recorded earlier in the same chapter, the Father's great joy is shared by all in heaven when the lost are found and saved.

This is true as much in the Old Testament as in the New. It was to the backslidden, rebellious, idol-worshipping Jews exiled in Babylon that Ezekiel's message came: "*As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?*" (Ezek 33:11) Even our wickedness is no barrier to God enthusiastically welcoming us into His family!

Paul was inspired to assure Timothy that "*God our Saviour... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*" (1 Tim 2:3,4) Incidentally, it is important to notice again that being saved is inextricably linked to gaining at least some knowledge of gospel truth.

It has to be admitted however, that all the above examples and verses date back at least 2,000 years! So what about today? The wonderful thing is that God is still as powerful and eager to save souls as ever He was.

One of our church members, who had good Bible teaching in Sunday school, told me that conversion came through the realisation of the love of Jesus and a strong sense of being called to come to Him. The result was an overwhelming sense of joy and so immediately they knelt down and accepted Him as Saviour. Another member was drawn to the Saviour by being impressed with a great sense of the lover of God. Another was saved as a young man through coming to understand that faith was taking the step of relying entirely in the total trustworthiness of the Lord Jesus. Almost at the end of my ministry as pastor of our church, a gentleman who had been attending our services for some time came to see me and told me that he had simply come to see that the message of the gospel made complete sense, and so he believed and later was baptised.

None of the people in these examples pointed to a specific verse or passage of Scripture, but were drawn to the Lord by understanding vital aspects of the gospel in a general way, all of which comes from the Word of God. My own conversion resulted from a growing realisation of the day of judgement and danger of an eternal hell, a realisation based on the truth of Scripture in a general way.

On the other hand, when I was in my early twenties in Birmingham, I met a man who told me he was driving a coach party of fishermen back from an angling event and saw a poster outside a church with the text, "*the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Rom 6:23) The Holy Spirit took that text, convicted the driver and brought him to salvation.

A lady I know very well, who had been brought up in a Christian home and gone to an evangelical church from her earliest days, was on holiday and felt a very strong urge to go to a service on the Sunday morning. She was surprised to find that the preacher was a friend of mine and, if I remember rightly, he preached on the text: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*" (John 14:27). The Holy Spirit worked through that text and message that morning, and she was converted.

I heard only yesterday of a lady who was struggling in very difficult circumstances and woke up in the night with a Bible reference in her mind from one of the letters of Peter. She didn't even know there were any such letter in the Bible, but got up, found a Bible and the text and the Holy Spirit spoke to her so powerfully that she was converted!

I find such great encouragement in all of this not to lose confidence in the gospel to save sinners still today, especially though it appears that few are being converted. I imagine we all have friends, or members of our families, who seem to show absolutely no interest in the gospel. And we are seriously tempted to think that they will never or even could ever be saved! Yet the Lord asks the question, "*Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver?*" (Is 50:2) The answer is "*Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear.*" (Is 59:1) We can confidently continue to live in the assurance that, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, "*the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*" (Heb 4:12). He can strike anyone with that sword, anywhere, at any time, and bring conviction, contrition and conversion. Let's hold strongly to the fact that it is still absolutely true that "*the gospel ... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*" (Rom 1:16).

Therefore, let us keep on seeking the Lord in prayer for the conversion of those near and dear to us. Paul testified that his "*heart's desire and prayer to God*" for his fellow Jews was "*that they may be saved.*" (Rom 10:1) So surely we can go on praying the same for those we know and love.

Finally, let's have such a confidence in the power of God to save sinners through the gospel that we are eager to share it with whoever we can and whenever we have opportunity.

If you are a Christian and would like to send me a brief e-mail, or give me a call, I would love to know how the Holy Spirit used the word of God in your conversion. Do get in touch!

If you have not yet been converted, now is the time to turn to the Lord Jesus and trust him as your Saviour, in the assurance of the promise of God's Word: "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" (Rom 10:13).

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