

Conversion

Psalm 51:1–13; Acts 26:1–23

The Bible is a book about contrasts: God and man, heaven and earth, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death, blessing and curse.

Our Old Testament text, Psalm 51, is a prayer, the prayer of the celebrated King David. It is David's prayer to God. David has sinned. He has disobeyed God. He has broken God's holy law. He is conscious that he is a sinner, conscious that his relationship with God has been broken. He begins to pray. His prayer begins with the words, "Have mercy upon me, O God." Here is the God who revealed himself in the first words of the Bible, "In the beginning God." Here is the God who is the Creator of all things, the Lord and giver of life, the one with whom we have to do. To be in a right relationship with God is life and peace. To be separated from God is death.

David is a broken man. He knows that he cannot justify his great crime. He has committed adultery with another man's wife, and he is guilty. He doesn't come to God from a position of power. He cannot say, "I've got a deal for you." Rather, he says, "Have mercy upon me, O God." David's prayer is our prayer. Here is the prayer that we must all pray.

David asks God to blot out his transgressions, to wash him thoroughly from his iniquity, to cleanse him from his sin. He doesn't try to hide what he has done. He acknowledges that he has transgressed God's holy law. God is a just God. His commandments are right, and his law is just.

David is aware that his sins have defiled him, left him tainted and filthy in the sight of God's perfect holiness. He says, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean." "Hyssop" is a reference to the Exodus, when God delivered his people from enslavement in Egypt. Each family and household was to take a lamb. The lamb was to be killed, and its blood drained into a container. The head of the household was to take a stem of the leafy hyssop plant, dip it into the blood, and smear the blood on the doorposts and top of the door frame. When the death angel went throughout the land of Egypt, killing the firstborn, he would spare every house that had the blood of an innocent lamb upon the door frame.

David realized that for God to forgive his sin would require the death of an innocent substitute—the Passover lamb—ultimately fulfilled in Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His sins—and ours—could be washed away only through the blood of an innocent lamb.

Not only does David need cleansing from sin, he also needs a renewed heart—a heart made new by God's Holy Spirit. He pleads with God to send his Holy Spirit and renew his human spirit. Once again he will have the joy of salvation. Upheld by the Spirit, he will teach transgressors the ways of God, and sinners shall be "converted" to God.

Here is the need of every fallen sinner: to be converted.

The word “converted” is the translation of the Hebrew word שׁוּב, which means *to turn*. The English Standard Version has “and sinners will *return* to you.” The marginal reading of the New American Standard Version has “and sinners will *turn back* to You.”

But the traditional English translation is “converted.” This word goes back to Jerome’s Latin vulgate, which uses the word *convertō*. Here is man’s basic need: to be converted. Easton defines *conversion* as “the turning of a sinner to God In a general sense the heathen are said to be “converted” when they abandon heathenism and embrace the Christian faith; and in a more special sense men are converted when, by the influence of divine grace in their souls, their whole life is changed, old things pass away, and all things become new.”¹ Easton cites Paul’s statement in our New Testament text this morning: “to open their eyes, in order to *turn* them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.”

Here, then, is man’s basic need: to be *turned* by the Spirit of God, so that he *turns* or *turns back* to God. Fallen man will never do this on his own. He is spiritually dead and spiritually clueless. He might know that his life is not perfect, he might know that he has made mistakes and is suffering the consequences of those mistakes. But he doesn’t know the depths of his fallenness. Unless he hears the gospel, he doesn’t know that our forefather Adam sinned by eating the forbidden fruit. He doesn’t know that when Adam sinned, he brought guilt and condemnation upon the whole human race. He doesn’t know that his root problem is that he is alienated from God, spiritually dead, and cannot save himself. He doesn’t know that there is one Savior, the second Adam, who succeeded and won our salvation, where the first Adam failed. He doesn’t know that by nature we are spiritually blind, and stand in need of the Spirit’s opening our eyes and turning us from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, that we might receive forgiveness of sins and a spiritual inheritance—heaven itself.

Yes, the Bible is a book about contrasts. Did you notice two: “from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God”? If you are lost, and have not come to Christ in faith, here is your spiritual condition: you live in darkness, and are under the power of Satan. These are not very flattering facts, but they are true.

Have you ever tried to find something in the dark? Maybe it is an item on a table or in a drawer. You feel for the item with your hands. You move your hand around, feeling for the special shape and feel of what it is you’re looking for, but you cannot find it. Then you turn on a light, and you see it immediately. You might

¹ Easton’s Bible Dictionary: “Conversion” (Logos Bible Software)

have been just a few inches away, but you could not find it. Groping about in the darkness, it is difficult to find what you need.

It is the same in the spiritual realm. Blinded by sin, we grope around in darkness. We know that something is wrong with our lives, but we don't know exactly what that is. We keep making the wrong choices, and those wrong choices in turn make our lives worse. What we need is the light of God's truth. We are told, "you were once *darkness*, but now you are *light* in the Lord. Walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8).

Not only is the sinner groping around in the darkness, he is also under the power of Satan. The word here is Σατανᾶ. It is a transliteration of the Aramaic ܣܬܪܐܢܐ, meaning "one lying in ambush for." As a proper name it means *the adversary*, *the accuser*.² Again, this is not a very flattering description of the sinner. But the Bible doesn't try to make people Christians by flattering them; the Bible tells the truth. If you haven't come to Christ, the Bible says you are under the power of Satan, the adversary, the enemy of your soul. Perhaps you've heard the expression, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Well, let me tell you, Satan has a plan for your life, and it isn't wonderful! He wants to enslave you, he wants to destroy you, he wants to take you to hell. He lies in ambush for you, wanting to take you out.

There is a tragic story in the current issue of *World*, the Christian newsmagazine. Walker Montgomery, 16, of Starkville, Mississippi, was scrolling Instagram at midnight in his bedroom last December when a message popped up: "Hey, what's up?" The sender's profile displayed an attractive teen girl who claimed to live locally and share mutual friends.

The messaging lasted hours and turned flirtatious, then sexual. By 3 a.m., Walker agreed to a video chat on the photo-sharing platform and engaged in a sexual act. Minutes later, the person on the other end said the act had been recorded. The perpetrator threatened to share the video with Walker's friends and family and demanded \$1,000, which the teen didn't have.

That same morning, Walker took his own life.

"I can't even imagine the tremendous fear and panic he was under," his father, Brian Montgomery, said in a phone conversation. "Walker stepped right into a trap."³

A couple family photos that accompanied the article showed a smiling boy that appeared to have a good relationship with his father, and with his family. There was a photo of the boy and his dad on a hunting trip to New Mexico. They sit on the ground behind a buck which they had killed with a bow. Both are wearing camouflage. The dad has his arm around his boy. Both are smiling. They are

² Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*: Σατανᾶς (Logos Bible Software)

³ *World*, 5-6-2023, p. 65

sharing the sweet savor of success. The other photo is a selfie of the family with their four children, posing in a parking lot before a professional football game. All of them are smiling, obviously enjoying the moment. By all appearances they are a happy Christian family, yet in the middle of the night, their 16-year-old son was scrolling Instagram and walked into a trap. The Bible gives the explanation of what happened. Satan, the adversary, set an ambush for a young man. The trap sprung, and took him out. Just imagine the grief of a Christian father and his family. Sinner, Satan has a plan for your life, and it isn't wonderful.

Jesus said that at the final day “the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.” He will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” The devil is Satan, the adversary. His destiny is everlasting fire—the flames of hell. That's where he is going, and that's where he wants *you* to go. He wants you to go there with him.

On the other hand, Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life.” He died that we might live. He went to the cross to take the punishment for our sins, and he promises to take his people with him to heaven. He loves his people, and he knows them each by name. He is the Good Shepherd, and as a loving shepherd he knows each of his sheep—their characteristics, their nature, their habits. As a loving shepherd he cares for each one of his sheep. He says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.”

So there you have it. Satan wants to take you with him to hell. Christ wants to take his people to heaven. But this life is full of booby traps, and Satan wants to entrap you. Now a skilled trapper knows how to hide his traps. Perhaps he scatters brush around a trap, so his quarry will not see it. Satan is a skilled trapper. He doesn't put up a big sign and say, “Here is a trap; just want you to know it's there.” He doesn't call out, “Whoa there, watch out for the trap!” No! He hides his traps, he makes them alluring, so people will be attracted to them.

But Jesus sends preachers to us, as he sent out Paul of old, to open people's eyes, “in order to *turn* them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.” Here is the *turning*—what the Bible calls *conversion*—that every one of us needs in order to be right with God and go to heaven. Paul

himself is Exhibit A of this process. In our Acts text we hear him describe the process of his own conversion.

As we saw last week, it was a festive occasion. Governor Festus had brought in King Agrippa and his sister Bernice, along with the Roman commanders—literally *heads over thousands*—and the prominent men of Caesarea. Agrippa, who was Jewish, had expressed an interest in hearing Paul speak. Festus assembles a sizable audience of dignitaries to hear Paul’s address.

At the beginning of our chapter, as the noise of the crowd dies down, Agrippa says to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself,” and Paul begins his message: “I think myself *happy*, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews.” The word translated “happy” is rendered in some versions as “fortunate.” “Happy” is a more faithful and literal translation. This is the same word that is used over and over in the Beatitudes: “*Blessed* are the poor in spirit ... *Blessed* are those who mourn ... *Blessed* are the meek ... *Blessed* are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” and so forth.⁴ Paul’s expression could also be translated “I consider myself *blessed*.” *Blessed* is a uniquely Christian way of expression. Fortuna was the goddess of fortune and the personification of luck in Roman religion.⁵ Luck is a force that brings good fortune or adversity.⁶ The Christian does not believe in luck, but in the power of God. Paul did not begin his testimony by giving praise to an impersonal force, such as “May the force be with you,” but to the power of God who blesses his people with peace.⁷ Here is Paul the prisoner, publicly declaring himself to be blessed. He knew very well that he was standing at this moment before a large and distinguished audience because it had been planned by God in eternity past, for God’s own glory and Paul’s good. The prisoner Paul is speaking to a Roman governor, a petty king, rulers of thousands, and the principal men of the city. Here were important people—people who generally don’t have time for religion. They are too busy making money and making their way in the world to bow before the God of heaven. They have no time for worship. They consider religion to be the opium of the people—something that keeps the unwashed masses in thrall. They plainly say, “I’m not a Christian,” as if being a Christian were the kiss of death. But Christianity is not the kiss of death. Jesus is the life! He says, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of *life*.” He is “the way, the truth

⁴ μακάριος; Lat. beātus

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortuna> accessed 4-29-23

⁶ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “luck,” accessed April 30, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/luck>

⁷ Ps. 29:11

and the *life*.” He says, “I am come that they might have *life*, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

Paul, unlike Bernice, did not have servants attending him that morning, dressing him and fussing over him and fixing his hair and face, so that he could make an imposing public appearance. Likely his persona was a bit mussed and ruffled as he walked out of his cell to make his way to the auditorium. Perhaps his hearers dismissed his message as unimportant or beneath them. But he had truth on his side. Paul had been *converted*. Raised a Jew, according to the strictest sect of Judaism, he lived a Pharisee. He was a bitter opponent of Jesus of Nazareth. He captured many of his followers and put them in prison, and when they were put to death, he had cast his vote against them. He punished them in all the synagogues, and being exceedingly enraged against them, he pursued them even to foreign cities. He took his posse to Damascus, where he hoped to round up more Christians, when the Lord encountered him, speaking in a vision of blinding light: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

So here is Saul, a murderer of Christians, now converted by the power of the Holy Spirit. Here is Saul, himself turning from darkness to light, preaching the Christ whom he formerly persecuted. What a dramatic change! What caused the change? The converting power of the Holy Spirit.

In its chapter on “Free Will” the Westminster Confession of Faith, summarizing the teaching of the Bible, states that “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to *convert* himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”⁸ Here is the bad news: the natural man, dead in sin, cannot, by his own strength, convert himself. A lot of people think, “I’m not ready to become a Christian yet. I’ll enjoy the pleasures of sin. I’ll live for self. I’ll have a good time. And when I get old and frail, and have nothing better to do, I’ll become a Christian then.” A lot of people think that they have the power to regenerate themselves simply by making a decision: “I make the decision to believe in Christ, and then I’ll be born again; I’ll pray the sinner’s prayer, and then I’ll be born again.” Maybe you think like that.

But the truth is that the person who is dead in sin is not able, by his own strength, to *convert* himself. As Jesus put it, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”⁹ Not only can he not *enter* the kingdom of God, he cannot even *see* it. The kingdom of God—Christ’s reign and power and authority—is spiritual. The natural man is completely oblivious to it.

⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith 9.3

⁹ John 3:3

But the good news is that “when God *converts* a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by his grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good.”¹⁰

The Westminster Standards go on to speak of preachers of the gospel “zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their *conversion*, edification, and salvation.”¹¹ They speak of the Scriptures’ “power to convince and *convert* sinners,”¹² and of the Spirit’s power to make the preaching of the word, “an effectual means of convincing and *converting* sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.”¹³

Conversion is a wholesale change of life. It is the power of God enabling a sinner to turn *away* from his sin and turn in obedience to Christ, voluntarily submitting to him as Lord. Paul’s message before Agrippa is a testimony of his own conversion. Paul has preached to both Jews and Gentiles “that they should repent, *turn* to God, and do works befitting repentance.”

Yes, the Bible is a book of contrasts. Dear people of God, once we were darkness, now, we are light in the Lord; once we were spiritually dead, now we are alive in Christ: once we were enemies, now, we are his friends; once we were idolaters, now we are Christ’s worshipers. We, like Saul of Tarsus, need to be totally transformed. We should pray, “Lord, I love you, remake me in your image. May people see Christ in me.” Amen.

¹⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith 9.4

¹¹ LC 159

¹² LC 4

¹³ SC 89