

How Conversions Take Place

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Preacher: Stuart Olyott

[0:00] Acts 8.26 The Spirit told Philip, Go to that chariot and stay near it.

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. Do you understand what you are reading? Philip asked. How can I? He said, unless someone explains it to me.

So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before the shearer is silent.

So he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.

The eunuch asked Philip, Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about? Himself or someone else? Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

[1:31] As they traveled along the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized? And he gave orders to stop the chariot.

Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away. And the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Philip, however, appeared at Azostas and traveled about preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. Well, Don and I would like you to know that Bremen is one of our favorite places in the world.

And this is one of our favorite churches in the world. It's very good to be here again. I'm going to talk a little bit about ourselves for two minutes so that those of you who think I have an accent will get used to English as it should be spoken.

We've just come from the Reformed Baptist family conference where probably ten people told me they liked my accent and I had to remind them of the same thing.

[2:47] You have the accent. My wife and I live in Wales. Wales is a little country. It's next to England. It has three million people.

It has nine million sheep. It is lakes and greenery and mountains and has a Christian church which goes back to the second century.

The gospel first came there in the second century. The Roman church did not come to Wales in any serious way until 1284. So for a thousand years there was an evangelical Christian church before Rome came.

Rome only ruled for a little while because then there was the Reformation and then there was the 18th century revival so that 150 years ago 80% of people in Wales would have been in an evangelical church on the Lord's Day.

Today only 2% are in an evangelical church. So maybe somewhere along the line you'd like to pray for Wales. We have many gospel churches.

[3:56] They're mostly small. Many of them are discouraged. But they would value your prayers. And please therefore pray for Wales. Now what we're going to do this morning is we're going to look at the subject of conversion.

So have you lost the passage which was kindly read to us or are you still in Acts chapter 8? If you're not in Acts, the Acts of the Apostles chapter 8 please go back there now to chapter 8 verse 26 and we're going to talk about conversion.

What we're going to find out this morning is how conversions happen. How conversions take place. Now some of you need this sermon. Some of you are Christians and you've been converted and you need this sermon because you're quite discouraged in the way you talk to unconverted people.

And maybe this sermon will encourage you to continue talking to unconverted people. And some of you need this sermon because you're not yet converted people.

And one of the reasons that you may not be converted is because actually you don't understand very much about conversion. So this sermon should help you. And remember everybody in this building this morning is converted or unconverted.

[5:13] So from what I've said already this message actually should help everybody. Now if you look around the church building this morning you'll see different sorts of people.

If you're very courageous maybe you'd like to look around for a moment now. It's easy for me at the front. Look at their faces.

What did you notice? Just give you a moment to think about that. What really did you notice about their faces? Well they're all different.

Are they? Or are they not? They're all different and yet they're all the same. All the faces I can see at least have one mouth which is a good job.

Two eyes. Two ears. Two nostrils. This little bit that joins the face together down the middle. Very important bit this bit. Some of you I think have hidden it but it's mostly visible.

[6:24] Every face is similar. Every face is different. Every face is different. Every face is the same. It's just like that with conversion. If we were to stand up one after another those of us who are converted and we would talk about our conversions we would find every conversion is different.

And yet if we listened carefully we would discover that every conversion is the same. In this passage Acts chapter 8 verse 26 we have the conversion of a man from Ethiopia.

But before I go into it I want to remind you that conversions still happen. There are converted people in the church but conversions happen all over the world.

My friend Anatole from Africa was a Marxist. went to the Soviet Union to study. He's been converted. My friend Ajit from Sri Lanka if you don't know where it is I'm not telling you now he was a Buddhist.

He's been converted. But his friend and mine Jay Kant who was a Hindu also from Sri Lanka he's been converted. And my friend Sunok from Korea she followed the philosophy of Confucius.

[7:44] But she's been converted. But my friend Ho from Malaysia he worshipped his ancestors and he's been converted. John Mark who lives now in Switzerland was an atheist.

But he's been converted. Gerard was a Catholic. He lives in London. He's been converted. My wife was from the Christian Brethren.

She's been converted. Ladies and gentlemen I was a Baptist. I've been converted.

Conversions still happen. And in every country of the world today how many countries are there?

Over 200. In every country of the world today there are no exceptions.

there are converted people. And in every country of the world today there are converted people who gather together to form Christian churches. So I'm not actually talking just about history.

[8:51] I'm not just talking about a man who was converted all those years ago. I'm actually talking about something which still happens. The first thing I want you to notice about this man is that God prepared him.

Number one. God prepared him. Where did he live? It's there in verse 27. So tell me please because I'm not used to these congregations where nobody says anything.

Where did he live? Ethiopia. But aha where was Ethiopia then? Because the Ethiopia today is not the Ethiopia of then.

The Ethiopia of then in the first century was what we call southern Egypt. whereas the Ethiopia of today is just a little bit further south. He is from Ethiopia.

What sort of country is Ethiopia? Is it a democracy or a monarchy or what is it? Tell me. Verse 27.

It's a monarchy and the monarchy is you say Kandes but we educated people we say Kandes.

[10:01] the queen was Kandes and this man is a high dignitary an employee of Queen Kandes of the Ethiopians.

He's in charge of all her treasury because the more money you've got the more people you have to pay to look after it. So he's in charge of all the national treasure which is what we call in Britain Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Now tell me this did he have status? Did he have money? You wouldn't look after money if you didn't have money would you?

Because there might be a bit of temptation. Here's a man with status and here's a man with money and I'll tell you something else he had. Everybody in Ethiopia had it. He had religion. You could go into every Ethiopian home and you would find in the poorest home or in the richest home a shrine.

[11:19] There in the corner of a room usually the best room there would be a special area where there would be either made of wood or metal or stone an idol and they would worship it.

The whole country worshipped idols. This man certainly was brought up in a country which worshipped idols. So he has status he has money and he has religion but he does not have satisfaction.

I wonder why. I mean some people live for religion some people live for money and lots of people I know live for status but he has got like a sort of hunger inside which makes him different.

He's heard you see that the Jews who live in a land a little way away worship an invisible god and that this invisible god has a temple and the temple is in Jerusalem.

So he decides and this is a very extraordinary decision he decides that he will go to Jerusalem to the temple. Now let's go back and think which century are we in?

[12:46] You tell me. The first century. Any roads from Ethiopia to Jerusalem? Not what we call roads just flat bits of desert.

What happens to flat bits of desert when the wind blows? Sand. You can get lost. What happens if you get lost in the desert? You die.

He's willing to risk dying. He's going to be away months. Will his job be secure? Will he be able to come back to it?

It seems possible. Maybe it's even probable. Certainly not certain. He may have no job. He may have no life. How is he going to get to Jerusalem?

Any GPS? We call it sat-nav, but you call it GPS, but that's alright. Any road lights? Any automobiles? How is he going to get there?

[13:46] Well, he has a chariot. I mean, he does have status. And he sets off in what actually may be the end of his life where he risks losing his life and his religion and his status and his security, but he must get to this Jerusalem, to that temple of the Jews, this temple erected in honour of the invisible God.

Now, here's my question. What drives somebody to do that? Why risk everything?

Where's this hunger come from? This sort of itch which is inside? This sort of thirst which can't be satisfied, which is strong enough to make you do that.

Where does it come from? Especially when the Bible says that spiritually everybody is dead. dead? Have you ever seen a dead body? When you spoke to it, did you ever speak to it?

[15:03] First time I, well not the first time, but almost the first time I saw a dead body, I spoke to it because I'd been having supper with the man the night before. What response did I get?

None. Why? Well, dead people don't give any response, do they? How come a man who the Bible says is spiritually dead is nonetheless spiritually hungry, spiritually thirsty, and is willing to take an enormous risk because there's some sort of dissatisfaction in his heart which he believes only an invisible God can satisfy?

Where does that come from? And there is no explanation except this one. God prepared him.

God is at work in his life. He gets to Jerusalem. I wonder how long it took. He sees the temple. I wonder what he thought.

They've been building it for nearly 50 years. He didn't get into the temple. Why not? he's a Gentile, he's not a Jew, and he's a eunuch.

[16:21] As he walked towards the temple, he would have bumped into a little wall about that height. On it, about every 15 feet, would have been a little notice.

If you are not a Jew, don't go on the other side of this wall, or you will die. when you've traveled from southern Ethiopia, or southern Egypt, should I say, to Jerusalem, it's actually quite discouraging, isn't it?

But he's not been put off. Somewhere, he's got a copy of Isaiah, we say, Isaiah, and he's reading it.

How many chapters are there in Isaiah? 66. It's not an easy book to read. Have you ever read it?

First of all, it starts about judgment. The judgment of God against the Jews, the judgment of God against Assyria, the judgment of God against Egypt, the judgment of God against Ethiopia.

[17:34] But he keeps on reading. Judgment, judgment, sin, God isn't indifferent, God is not neutral, God will step in, God will punish. It's actually a very difficult and discouraging book.

And then he comes to chapter 40 and suddenly it says comfort, comfort, comfort. And it starts talking about God who's going to visit the earth and the servant of God.

But he's continuing to read. Most people would have stopped long ago. What keeps him reading?

And as he's reading, he's asking questions. Do you ask questions when you read?

And he's got to which chapter? Chapter 53. And in his mind, he's still asking questions.

And he's doing all this on the way home as he travels in a chariot. chapter 53. And he's We were driving down the road the other day and we were on the highway and we passed a car and there sitting at the steering wheel was a man steering and playing on his laptop.

[18:46] This man was not driving a chariot and reading Isaiah. There was somebody else driving the chariot. He's a dignitary, remember.

He's got status. He's sitting in the back reading Isaiah. Isn't this extraordinary? He hasn't lost interest. He's reading the Bible. It's a difficult book and he's asking it questions because God prepared him.

people. Why are you a Christian? Why did you first come under the sound of the gospel, either through being in a Christian family or you just came in? Why did you show any interest when most people don't?

Why are you here this morning if you're not converted? What's happening inside people who have a spiritual interest? God is preparing all over the world people for conversion.

God is at work. That's our first point. Second point. A servant of God met him. In this chapter we have a preacher. His name is Philip.

[19:57] He's been preaching in Samaria. Hundreds of people have been coming to Christ.

Actually I think probably thousands. Because he's been preaching in this village and that village and that town and that city and wherever he's gone in the nation of Samaria people are coming to Christ.

And then he receives a message from God which says stop. And he doesn't quarrel and he doesn't answer back. Go.

Go south. to Jerusalem and then down the road which leads to Gaza which is desert.

That walk Samaria down south and over to Gaza is 70 miles. How long would it take you to do 70 miles in a car if you drove legally?

How long would it take you to walk 70 miles on foot? How long would it take you to walk 70 miles on foot in the heat? He probably had to walk about five days.

[21:19] But he did. And I expect he's wondering to himself, why has God stopped me preaching? Why has God brought me to this lonely, lonely place?

And then he's standing there or maybe just walking along the desert road this sort of flat bit of sand, probably still asking the question. And along come some chariots.

I think there were several. I think we can conclude that from the Greek text. And then the spirit says to him, you see that chariot? Go and get near that one.

So he runs. You're not to think of a chariot race. They're just trotting along at a sort of jogging speed. Do you do jogging?

Do you call it that? Will you go out running? Okay, well, he's just jogging along by the side of the chariot. And there's a man inside reading the Bible.

[22:18] Reading Isaiah. Reading chapter 53 of Isaiah. How did he know, by the way, that the man was reading chapter 53 of Isaiah?

He's down there and the fellow's up in the chariot. We have double-decker buses in our country. We have downstairs and an upstairs. If I'm standing outside on the sidewalk and someone's reading a book up there, I can't see what they're reading.

How did he know he was reading Isaiah the prophet? Well, he's reading it out loud, just like the answer was out loud.

That's all I was waiting for. That's still the best way to read. Then it goes in the ear and it goes in the eye and maybe it'll get in the brain.

He's reading out loud, but he doesn't understand what he's reading. And Philip guesses that. So Philip's running alongside the chariot and he says do you not understand what you're reading?

[23 : 27] And the man says, he didn't seem at all surprised there was somebody there. How can I? He says, unless someone guides me. Come up here. And there, the man whom God has prepared, well a servant of God has met him, there they are sitting together in their chariot.

convert. Why are you converted? God prepared you. But it didn't just happen, did it? Somebody was involved.

There was a family member who gave you a Bible. There was a friend who gave you a tract. There was someone on the radio who you listened to. There was a book which somebody wrote that you read.

Ah, says somebody, it's not always like that. I have a friend who just bought a Bible and went out and read it and was converted. There was nobody involved in that.

Think about it. Who translated the Bible? Who printed it? Who transported it to the shop?

[24 : 36] Who sold it? There's always people involved in anybody's conversion because the sovereign God who saves who he will nonetheless uses us to bring about the conversion of others.

He does. And that's the reason, Christian, why you live where you live. Maybe you've tried to move and haven't managed it.

The Lord is keeping you where you are. Why? Because he wants you to meet somebody that you wouldn't otherwise meet. That's why you work where you work. Or that's why you no longer work where you worked, but you now work somewhere else.

Because the Lord wants you to meet someone that only you can help. Different keys open different locks. And the reason that you are where you are with the people that you're with is because you're probably the key that God will use to open a lock which would not otherwise open.

A servant of God met him. So every time we walk around this world, we Christians have a little bit of expectancy because we are where we are, because there are people on our path who God wants us to meet.

[26 : 05] God prepared him, a servant of God met him. The Lord Jesus Christ was presented to him from the scriptures.

This man was reading Isaiah the prophet. Isaiah the prophet. Now think about it. The Old Testament is like a big chain of mountains. Here's a little peak and here's a peak and here's a summit.

And here's a ridge. But the part of the Old Testament which is not the last summit, not the last mountain, but the highest is Isaiah chapter 53.

But it doesn't matter where you stand on this range of mountains. Wherever you stand, you can look and you can see the coming Christ. But from Isaiah chapter 53, that's the place where you can look and see most clearly.

the coming Christ. There is no place in the Old Testament where you can see Christ more clearly than Isaiah chapter 53. This is what the man had just read.

[27 : 12] These are the words he had just read and about which he was asking questions. Here they go. He is despised and rejected of men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

grief and we hid, as it were, our faces from him. He was despised and we did not esteem him. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him.

And by his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[28 : 18] He was despised and he was afflicted, he was oppressed, yet he opened not his mouth. Then we take up the reading in chapter 8 of Acts verse 37.

He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth. And this Ethiopian says, who on earth is the prophet talking about?

Is he talking about himself? Or is he talking about somebody else? Who is he talking about? And now Philip understood why God had brought him.

Who is the passage about, by the way? Who is the passage about? It's about Jesus. When was it written? How many years before Jesus came? 700 years before Christ came.

[29:22] Isaiah wrote those words, but it's all about Christ. This great chapter talks about someone who is very high, who becomes very low, who suffers terribly for our sins, but lives afterwards to be a living saviour, and is exalted back to the high place he came from in the first place.

It's about Jesus, and he speaks to him about Jesus. So, Christian friends, when you meet someone whom God has prepared, you know what to do.

Speak to them from the Bible about Jesus. people want to debate the existence of God and the origin of evil, and whether things have always been here, and how many exist, and how many exist. But you talk to them about Jesus. Don't play by their rules. Play by God's rules, because there's a simple power in the gospel which opens hearts.

near where we live is a little seaside town. I'll translate. Near where we live, there's a little town by the side of the ocean.

[30:49] It's called Sandedno. What's it called? Right. Sandedno. Since 1950, that's 61 years, every summer for 11 weeks, the gospel is preached by the seaside in the town of Sandedno.

Great, isn't it? But I was there once a few years back, and there was quite a crowd listening to the preacher, and they were very insulting indeed. Go home!

Nobody believes what you believe. You're a fossil. You're a dinosaur. You're out of date. You've got an empty head. And somebody even said, if your brain was made of elastic, it wouldn't even stretch around a sparrow's knees.

Go home! So the man stopped. And then he started again.

And all he did was tell them the story of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The crowd went completely quiet, and then he told them why God sent his son.

[32:16] And then he said, and there was nothing to hear except the gentle sound of the waves now, and his voice. If you would like to know more about what I've just said, here is a little book written by someone who actually saw what I've told you.

His name was John. This is John's gospel. Come and take one if you want. I won't talk to you unless you want to. Just come and take one.

Out of that angry, hostile, threatening, vile crowd, six people came out, took a John's gospel, and walked into the night.

Because there is a simple power in the message of the cross, which quietens and convinces the heart.

God prepared him, the servant of God met him, and the Lord Jesus Christ was presented to him from the Bible. Fourth point and the last one. the Holy Spirit worked in him.

[33:30] When this man got into his chariot in Ethiopia, he wasn't a Christian. When he got out of his chariot in Jerusalem, he still wasn't converted.

When he got into his chariot again to go home, he still wasn't converted. When Philip got into the chariot, the man still wasn't converted. But then, verse 36, as they traveled along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, look, here is water, why shouldn't I be baptized?

So Philip must have spoken to him about that as well. At this point, people often ask a question, didn't you say it was desert? Now you're talking about water.

water. Well, I don't live in the desert, I live in Wales, we have rain 250 days a year. And you don't live in a desert by the look of it, but in the desert there are such things as wadi.

There's such things as an oasis, of course, but also in the desert you get a wadi. A wadi is just like a dry riverbed, and it could rain 100 miles away, but the rain's got to go somewhere, so it runs down this channel, and it leaves great big puddles and little lakes behind which can be up to six feet deep, and they stay there for days and sometimes longer, and probably that's what they saw.

[35:02] Look, here's some water, what's to stop me being baptized? Now I'm going to ask you to do something difficult. Please look at verse 37.

Ah, somebody says, I see verse 36, but the next verse is verse 38. Where's verse 37? Well, I'm not going to go into this today, but some people dispute whether verse 37 is a scripture or not.

That's not my subject. What I do know is that what's written at the bottom of the page, which is verse 37, we've had that information ever since the earliest centuries of the Christian church, whether it's scripture or not.

So we can take it as true. So the question is, look, here's water, why shouldn't I be baptized? Now at the bottom, Philip said, if you believe with all your heart, you may.

The eunuch answered, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Do you? if you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, if you really believe that, you won't stay away from him.

[36 : 20] You'll worship him, you'll honour him, you'll reverence him, you'll love him, you'll trust him, you'll entrust yourself to him, you'll come to him, you'll pray to him, and you'll never keep your distance from him.

Because if you did, you would not be believing that he is the Son of God. This man has been converted. Yes, but didn't you say the Holy Spirit worked in him?

Yes, I did, but it doesn't say that in the passage of somebody. No, but that's not the whole of the Bible. The Bible says, no one, no one, can say that Jesus Christ is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit. A parrot can say Jesus Christ is Lord, but it's not in the heart. But no one can really say Jesus Christ is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit.

I believe, he says, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Same thing. The Holy Spirit has obviously worked in him.

[37 : 43] So I'm drawing things to a close now. Who prepared him? God. God the Father. Who was presented to him from the Bible?

Jesus, the Son of God. Who worked in him? The Holy Spirit. Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

So who is his Saviour? The Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit? God is our Saviour.

Isn't he? God is a man. But did God bring about this conversion without using a man? No. This great God uses people to bring about the great work of conversion.

What dignity that puts upon you, and what optimism that should give you. Did this conversion take a long time, or a short time?

[38 : 50] Once when I was preaching from this passage, I asked, people to say, if you thought it was a long time, do this. And if you thought it was a short time, do this. But I saw there was a man doing this. And he was right.

It takes a long time to be converted, because God plans it in eternity. Jesus Christ died for us long before we were born. Centuries went by before we were born. And then the Holy Spirit worked in us and brought us to faith in Christ.

That takes a long time. And yet, when he got into the chariot, when Philip got into the chariot, he wasn't converted, but at a particular moment, at a particular spot, somewhere hidden in the desert, he went over the line and he was a converted man.

So it took a long time and a short time. Now you unconverted people, do you know why you're here this morning? It's probable that God is preparing you for conversion.

Do you know who's met you this morning? A servant of God with a strange accent. Do you know what's happened in the message this morning?

[40 : 07] The Lord Jesus Christ has been presented to you from the Bible. The proof that the Holy Spirit has worked in you will be that you say to the Lord, Oh God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

And you Christians, here's something to understand. God is at work in the world. Understand it. Here's something to pray for.

Well, here's something to expect. Here's something to expect. Expect to meet people that God has prepared. Here's something to do. Speak to them about Jesus from the Bible.

And here's something to pray for. The Holy Spirit will work in them. Because their salvation doesn't depend on you. And doesn't depend on them.

but depends on God. Which is why there's hope. Let us pray. heavenly father, we thank you for the great miracle of conversion.

[41 : 24] We thank you that all conversions are different, and yet they're all similar. We thank you for your great preparing work, which goes back to all eternity. We thank you that you bring our paths to cross with people who you have prepared.

bread. We thank you for the power of the gospel message, the power of the word of the cross, which is wisdom to those who are being saved, but foolishness to others.

And we thank you, heavenly father, for the Holy Spirit who opens blind eyes and persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ as he has freely offered to us in the gospel.

O Holy Spirit, breath of God, work amongst us we pray even in the remainder of this morning worship, and bring lost people to close in on our Lord Jesus Christ, and to entrust themselves to him, and to live under his lordship and enjoy his salvation.

We pray it for his name's sake. Amen.