

4 Understand the Conversion Experience

“Man is heaven-born”—so states a Chinese proverb. This bit of philosophy harmonizes with the biblical teaching of man’s creation. “Heaven,” explained a Chinese man once, “represents the Supreme Being.”

Moses wrote that God, the Supreme Being, “created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The Lord God created mankind in His own image for the purpose of worshipping Him, serving Him, and enjoying Him forever. Man, however, disobeyed and fell into sin. This brought separation from God, or spiritual death, and marred his image, but God had planned and provided a unique method of restoration.

The Chinese proverb can be adapted to illustrate this restoration through rebirth. Sinful man has to be made alive again spiritually. By being “born spiritually” (see John 3:6), a person enters into a new life in Christ. We call this being “born again” or “born from above.” We trust that this lesson will help you understand more fully the conversion experience and help you effectively explain it to others.

lesson outline

What Conversion Is

What Conversion Is Not

Results of Conversion

lesson objectives

When you finish this lesson, you should be able to:

1. Recognize how spiritual rebirth is similar to natural birth.
2. State the relationship between turning and conversion.
3. Relate the concept of regeneration to the conversion experience.
4. Describe false approaches to conversion.
5. List three evidences of conversion.

learning activities

1. Read the lesson in this independent-study textbook and do the exercises in the lesson development
2. Memorize the *Fingertip Text*.
3. Take the self-test at the end of the lesson and check your answers carefully.

key words

abstain

simultaneous

accumulation

vow

merit

lesson development

Your study so far has included the use of the words *conversion*, *converted to Christ*, or *converts*. As further explanation of these terms, you will study in this lesson what conversion *is*, what conversion *is not*, and some of the *results* of conversion.

WHAT CONVERSION IS

Objective 1. *Recognize how spiritual rebirth is similar to natural birth.*

A Spiritual Rebirth

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, He visited Jerusalem during the Passover Festival. He performed miracles among the crowds, resulting in many believing in Him. The apostle John records an interview Jesus had with one of the important Jewish leaders (John 3:1–2). Following is how I picture this event.

Jesus had been busy all day ministering to people and now He was tired and about to go to sleep. Suddenly, there was a knock at His door. It was Nicodemus—a teacher in Israel, a Pharisee, and a member of the Jewish ruling council.

“Rabbi,” Nicodemus said, “may I speak to you alone?”

“Very well,” replied Jesus. “Suppose we go up to the flat rooftop and talk there. The night is pleasant.”

In the still night, the two men talked together in private. It could be that Nicodemus came at night because he wanted an opportunity to talk without the usual interruptions of the day.

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles that you do unless God were with him.”

Face-to-face, the two men studied each other—Jesus, a young teacher only 30 years old, and Nicodemus, a senior professor of the Jewish faith. Although Nicodemus was a man of high standards, Jesus did not return a compliment. Instead,

He used a shock approach of evangelizing. He respectfully startled Nicodemus by saying in essence, “Believe me, Sir, although you are an upright man, you need to start all over. You must be born again.”

“What do you mean by a rebirth? How can a grown man such as I be born the second time?” he asked curiously.

Jesus challenged his intellect. “This may surprise you, Nicodemus, but no one can enter heaven unless he is born of the Holy Spirit.”

The old professor questioned Jesus further. “How can this take place? I don’t quite understand.”

Jesus went on to explain carefully that a spiritual change as mysterious as birth itself had to take place in a man’s life. He told Nicodemus that God sent His Son to be the means of eternal life. Just as Moses had at one time lifted up a bronze snake on a pole in the desert so that the dying, snake-bitten Israelites might look and live, Jesus would one day be lifted up as the symbol of God’s love and mercy. Because Nicodemus knew the story (Numbers 21:9), he could relate to it.

The old man nodded his head in wonder. He had heard marvelous truths, things that he would never forget. The hour grew late. He finally had to leave. Jesus did not seem to press him for a positive decision. The time was not yet ripe

Almost three years went by. Roman soldiers crucified Jesus by nailing Him to a rough cross, which was lifted up where all could see Him. There, He bled and died for the sins of the world.

Who would take care of the body? Nicodemus, until then a secret follower of Jesus, came boldly forward, ready to identify himself with the Son of Man. Together with Joseph of Arimathea, he prepared the body of Jesus for burial in a new tomb (John 19:38–42).

From the story of Nicodemus we learn that even the best of people must experience a spiritual rebirth. Good family

background, education, or even a high standard of morality are not enough to merit salvation. Neither will religious zeal save a soul. Jesus said, “You must be born again” (John 3:7).

Application

- 1** Circle the letter in front of each TRUE statement.
 - a** Jesus spoke respectfully to the older man.
 - b** Jesus aroused Nicodemus’ curiosity and intellect.
 - c** Jesus used unfamiliar illustrations to further confuse Nicodemus.
 - d** Jesus allowed time for the truth to work in the man’s heart.

 - 2** Circle the letter in front of each correct completion to the sentence: Our spiritual rebirth is like our natural birth in that
 - a)** it is the beginning of a new life.
 - b)** we become part of the family into which we are born.
 - c)** regardless of how much we know about it, it is still a mystery.
 - d)** we are forced to accept the new birth.
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A Wholehearted Turning to Christ

Objective 2. *State the relationship between turning and conversion.*

Conversion may also be described as a “turning.” It is the act of turning away from “wicked ways” (Acts 3:26) in repentance, and turning to the Lord (Acts 9:35; 11:21). You might say that it is a “roundabout turn,” a “180-degree turn,” a “U-turn,” or an “about-face.” In other words, it is a wholehearted turning to Christ. Peter preached, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out” (Acts 3:19). This turning involves a change of heart, of motives and attitudes, and a resulting change in actions.

The experience of conversion has both negative and positive aspects. We shall list these. Please be sure that you look up the references in your New Testament.

Negative –	Positive +	Scripture
Turning from wickedness	to God	Acts 3:26
Turning from vanity of idols	to the living God	1 Thess. 1:9
Turning from darkness	to light	Acts 26:18
Turning from the power of Satan	to God	Acts 26:18
Turning from sin and self	to Jesus Christ	Acts 26:18

Conversion, therefore, is a *positive turning to Christ in repentance and faith*.

Repentance may be thought of as the act of *turning away from sin*. *Faith* is the act of *turning to God*. Both repentance and faith are needed to effect conversion.

Conversion is, of course, an individual matter, yet as the Holy Spirit moves upon many hearts, it is possible for more than one conversion to take place at the same time. Simultaneous conversions occur when perhaps two or more people in a family or circle of friends turn to the Lord. They are saved individually, yet jointly as a group, each encouraging the others.

The apostle Peter went to a place called Lydda where he visited a group of believers. There he met a man named Aeneas who was paralyzed and had been in bed for eight years.

“Aeneas,” Peter said to him, “Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat.”
Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord (Acts 9:34–35).

Through a remarkable healing, many turned to God. Their conversions were simultaneous.

Application

3 What does it mean to “turn” to the Lord?

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4 Fill in the correct words. In repentance we turn away from

.....

and in

turn to



A Regeneration

Objective 3. *Relate the concept of regeneration to the conversion experience.*

A clear understanding of conversion helps soul-winners lead people to Christ. You have learned that conversion is a spiritual rebirth and a wholehearted turning to Christ in repentance and faith. A third meaning of conversion is regeneration.

By *regeneration* we mean a spiritual renewal through the work of the precious Holy Spirit. Paul wrote to Titus, a young pastor on the island of Crete, that it was “because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).


Regeneration, then, is our “new life” in Christ. As you read your Bible, you will discover quite a few “new” features in regeneration. As a person is “joined to Christ” he or she becomes “a new being,” or “a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). God said to Israel, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you” (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

Dr. Christian Barnard, a South African surgeon, became world famous when he and his team of doctors successfully

replaced the heart of a very ill man with a heart taken from an accident victim. The operation was considered a miracle in medical circles. A greater miracle than this occurs in our lives when God takes out the old “stubborn heart of stone” and replaces it with “an obedient heart.” This is the miracle of regeneration!

Application

5 In your notebook, describe the experience of conversion as if you were talking to someone who didn't understand what it involved. In your description, explain the ideas of “spiritual rebirth,” “turning to Christ,” and “regeneration.”



WHAT CONVERSION IS NOT

Objective 4. *Describe false approaches to conversion.*

In personal evangelism you will meet those who have false ideas regarding conversion. Some think that conversion is reforming oneself, building up merit, being religious, or perhaps belonging to a church. Let us examine these ideas.

Reforming Oneself

Self-reform is simply trying to improve by removing faults and doing good. This may be commendable in itself, but it does not solve the basic problem of sin and a fallen nature.

In spite of our best intentions, self-effort falls far short of divine standards for righteousness and holiness. The Bible says, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isaiah 64:6).

Reforming oneself is like tying a small green orange to an orange tree and expecting it to mature and ripen. Of course, we know that only as an orange draws life from a tree can it ripen to full size and sweetness. It is not reformation but regeneration that we need.

Building up Merit

A lady in the Far East, devout in her religious belief, had made a lifelong vow as a vegetarian to abstain from eating any meat. She was hoping to build up merit and escape punishment for her sins by accumulating good works.

Then, four of her children accepted Christ. She became very angry when they could no longer perform the rites she thought would take care of her in the place after death. Try as she did, she couldn't make them give up their new faith. Instead, they loved her and treated her better than before.

Eventually, the mother turned to the Lord and experienced the forgiveness and peace of heart that comes only through knowing Jesus. She realized that it was not because of any good deeds that she had done but because of Christ's own mercy that He saved her and gave her assurance of heaven (Titus 3:5–6).

Trying to build up merit or spiritual credit for one's salvation through making religious vows, observing holy days, going on pilgrimages, repeating prayers, or even donating money for worthy causes leaves the heart still dissatisfied. Salvation in Christ is absolutely unmerited—that is, it cannot be earned. Because Jesus paid for it, He offers it to us freely. We have only to accept it as a gift.

Being Religious

Being religious is a natural tendency that is easily misdirected. It has led some into deep superstition and others into the worship of images or idols. Still others show their devotion in worship in a mosque. The apostle Paul stood as an example of those whose religious fervor leads them away from the truth, but, like Paul, they can experience salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 22:1–14).

Being religious cannot in itself bring about spiritual rebirth; it must be the work of God's Spirit alone. We must pray and trust the Holy Spirit to help people realize this as we teach them the way of salvation as God's Word shows us. Giving our own personal testimony may help a person at this point.

Belonging to a Church

If people say that they go to church or are members of a church when you are talking to them about salvation, you should commend them for it. Don't ever downgrade any church. Point out to people as graciously as you can that they must be "born from above." They must place their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and not in a church or religious leader such as a priest, father, pastor, or rabbi.

Application

6 Fingertip Text

Title: Salvation through Christ	Reference: Acts 4:12
Text: Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.	

7 Would the *Fingertip Text* be helpful to use for someone who trusted in the name of his or her church for salvation?

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8 In your notebook, list three false approaches to conversion and describe each.

9 Read each of the following Scripture passages. To which of the three false approaches to conversion might each be addressed?

- a Luke 18:9–14
- b Romans 7:23–25
- c Philippians 3:5–6



RESULTS OF CONVERSION

Objective 5. *List three evidences of conversion.*

We have studied what conversion *is not*, and now we will look at some of the evidences of conversion—the results of

what conversion *is*. It is being “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8), and entering into a new life.

A Change Takes Place

A clock-radio suddenly snapped on. A voice spoke, “Friend of mine, where do you expect to spend eternity?” This question irked James, and he quickly switched off the radio.

James was rising rapidly in the entertainment world as a talented young dancing school instructor. He did not want his ambitions thwarted, but it was easier to switch off the radio than to forget the disturbing question, “Where do you expect to spend eternity?” James seemed to hear the voice again and again. He could not escape it.

At last, in sheer desperation, the young man called on the Lord to save him. Surrendering fully to Christ, he experienced a revolutionary change in his life. Old values weren’t the same anymore. New values replaced them. No longer did a successful worldly career control him. Instead, he found joy and fulfillment in serving Christ. Today, James is a soul-winning pastor who heads a program training lay believers to evangelize.

Jesus once called a child to come and stand in front of His disciples and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

When a person turns to Christ, a great change does take place! Jesus himself becomes the center of the believer’s life. The old lifestyle is replaced with a new lifestyle that reveals the Holy Spirit’s presence in that person’s heart and life: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

A Cleansing Is Effected

We referred earlier to Titus 3:5, which tells us that God saves us “through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Salvation involves a cleansing! This is not a

reference to water baptism; here it is a picture of conversion as baptism. “For we were all baptized”, Paul wrote, “by one Spirit so as to form one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). This is the great experience of being born again, into the family of God!

A Chinese man, after turning to Christ in repentance and faith, exclaimed with joy, “I feel so clean inside!” He had experienced this washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Application

10 Read Psalm 51:7. What did the psalmist desire of the Lord?
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11 Read Luke 19:1–10. What happened to Zacchaeus when Jesus came to his house?



New Family Ties Are Formed

When we are born again we are born into the family of God. Fellow believers are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Though you may not have received a new name at the time of your conversion, you are recognized as a *Christian*, a follower or disciple of Christ.

Application

12 Read Matthew 1:23 and Revelation 2:17 and answer the following questions.

- a** What does the name Immanuel mean?
- b** Write the meaning of your own name, if you know its meaning.
- c** What is the new name which you, as a born-again believer, will receive?

13 List three things we can expect to happen as a result of conversion.

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self-test

TRUE-FALSE. Write **T** in the blank space if the statement is true. Write **F** if it is false.

- **1** Nicodemus, a learned teacher, said, “You must be born again.”
- **2** Because he was an upright man, Nicodemus had no deep needs.
- **3** Jesus foretold His own death when He spoke of the bronze serpent in the wilderness.
- **4** According to John 3, everyone needs to be born again. Put the letter **S** in front of each application to our spiritual birth, and an **N** in front of each application to our natural birth.
- **5** We take the name of our earthly father.
- **6** We become part of the family of God.
- **7** Someone must feed us until we learn to eat by ourselves.
- **8** We are fed the “milk” of God’s Word.
- **9** We are here only for a while; one day, we will die.
- **10** We have inherited eternal life.

MULTIPLE CHOICE. Circle the letter(s) of the correct answer(s).

- 11** Circle the letter in front of each correct completion to the sentence. When we are converted we
- a)** turn away from our sins.
 - b)** turn around to follow the Lord.
 - c)** experience a change in our thoughts and desires.
 - d)** become a “new being” or a “new creation.”

12 Being “baptized into the one body by the same Spirit” refers to

- a) being baptized in water.
- b) joining a church and becoming part of the local group.
- c) being born again and cleansed through the washing of the Spirit.

SHORT ANSWER. Write the answer to the question on the lines provided.

13 List at least three things that conversion is not.

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14 The unconverted may have many needs, but their greatest need is

FINGERTIP TEXT

15 From memory, write in your notebook or quote to someone else the *Fingertip Text* you learned. Include the title, reference, and text.

answers to study questions

- 1** **a** True.
b True.
c False.
d True.
- 8** (Any three.) Reforming oneself, building up merit, being religious, or belonging to a church. Compare your descriptions to the text.
- 2** **a)** it is the beginning of a new life.
b) we become part of the family into which we are born.
c) regardless of how much we know about it, it is still a mystery.
- 9** I would answer in the following way. Your answer may be different.
a Those who trust in their own merit.
b Those who try to reform themselves.
c Deeply religious people who don't know Christ.
- 3** It means a change in our attitudes and actions whereby we forsake sin and follow the Lord.
- 10** To be cleansed.
- 4** sin, faith, God.
- 11** You could say that a miracle or a change took place or that salvation came to his house that day.
- 5** Your answer should include the main ideas presented in the lesson.
- 12** **a** God with us.
b Your answer.
c We do not know what our new names will be.
- 6** Without looking at your card, you should be able to quote all three parts of the *Fingertip Text*, Acts 4:12.
- 13** A change of values, a cleansing from sin, and the formation of new family ties.
- 7** Yes.