

SERMON NOTES
Acts 8-9
“How to Become a Christian”

Intro:

- Do you believe people should have the freedom to change religious faiths or should they adhere to the religion they were born into?
- In many countries of the world – religious freedom is defined as the freedom to practice the religion you were born into – *but it is illegal to convert from Islam or Hinduism to Christianity – and it is absolutely forbidden to try to convert someone else from Islam or Hinduism to Christianity*
- But true religious liberty – as practiced in the USA – includes not only the freedom to practice one’s religious faith – but also the freedom to change one’s religious faith – and also the freedom to share one’s religious faith with others in an attempt to persuade them to change
- True religious liberty and tolerance allows for an open marketplace of religious ideas and beliefs and values – where people are free to spread their ideas // argue for their ideas // argue against other ideas // change their ideas // choose their own beliefs // change their beliefs // try to persuade others of their beliefs – *all in an environment of civility and mutual respect in the midst of strongly differing convictions*
- True religious liberty is currently being undermined by a false concept of Tolerance that is really just another form of relativism
- *This relativistic tolerance states that all religious beliefs are equally true and valid – and that it is intolerant to believe that your faith is true and other religious faiths are false – and that it is intolerant to try to persuade others to convert to your religious faith – and it is absolutely intolerable to believe that there is only one way to God and to heaven*
- This concept of relativistic tolerance has infiltrated the church as well so that now about half the people attending evangelical churches believe there are many ways to heaven and that trying to convince other people to become Christians is unnecessary and even wrong
- *Even among many professing Christians, the words “conversion” and “evangelism” have negative connotations*

- But what is conversion except the freedom to change one's religious faith – *and what is evangelism except the freedom to share one's religious faith with others?*
- **There is no true religious liberty without the freedom to choose, to change and to share one's religious faith**
- According to the Dogma of Relativistic Tolerance – truth is in the eye of the beholder
- *What's true for me may not be true for you – and vice-versa*
- There is no transcendent truth that has authority over us – we are each free to make up our own truth
- *And in the end, it really doesn't matter what you believe because all beliefs are equally true and valid and lead to the same God and heaven*
- G.K. Chesterton: *"Tolerance is a virtue of a man without convictions."*
- Where there are strong convictions – there will be people trying to change people's ideas and beliefs – *whether the issue is same-sex marriage or abortion or global warming or immigration reform or health care reform or evolution*– people with strong convictions one way or the other are always trying to change other people's minds to conform to their point of view
- Why is it OK to do everything in your power to convince other people of the rightness of your position on same-sex marriage or stem cell research or global warming – *yet it is wrong to try to convince people that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life?*
- **True Religious Tolerance believes in and practices an open marketplace of religious ideas – including the freedom to change one's religious faith and the freedom to share one's religious faith with others – whether that be a Muslim trying to convert a Christian or a Christian trying to convert a Muslim**
- Today we look at two very different conversion experiences – one of a Gentile seeker who was very open to the Gospel and the other of a religious Pharisee who was hostile to Christianity and a persecutor of the church

I. THE CONVERSION OF A SEEKER

- God used extraordinary means to lead Philip away from successful mass evangelism in Samaria to bring the Gospel to one high-ranking official from Ethiopia

- *Philip was sent by an angel to the desert road that goes southwest about 60 miles from Jerusalem to Gaza*
- *There Philip met the Timothy Geithner of Ethiopia – the head of the Treasury – a very powerful man – and presumably a black African – perhaps looking something like Obang Okello*
- *Though not a Jew, this man was a God-fearing Gentile who worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and had gone to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh*
- *(Acts 8:26-40) The Holy Spirit told Philip to go to the Ethiopian’s chariot and stay near it*
- *The man was reading aloud from the OT prophet Isaiah – Isaiah 53 to be exact – which talks about the Messiah as the Suffering Servant of the Lord*
- *The Ethiopian did not understand the passage of Scripture he was reading – was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?*
- *Philip then explained from that Scripture passage the good news of Jesus the Messiah who suffered and died as a sacrifice for our sins*
- *The Ethiopian man then believed in Jesus Christ as God’s Son and Savior and was baptized in water*
- *From this story we can learn these important principles about evangelism:*

(1) *Evangelism is a matter of obedience to God’s leading*

- *the Holy Spirit gives the power and boldness to tell others about Jesus as we obey His leading and obey His call to witness*

(2) *The Gospel is for all people – regardless of race, social class, religion or nationality*

–Philip, a Greek-speaking Jew, overcame many deep-seated prejudices in sharing the Gospel with despised Samaritans and with a black African man

(3) *Evangelism can be done in large groups or one-on-one*

*–in Samaria Philip preached the Gospel to large groups of people
–then the Spirit directed him to reach out to one God-fearing African*

(4) *God prepares hearts to respond to the Gospel*

- *long before Philip met the Ethiopian official, God had been drawing this man to Himself*
- *the Ethiopian’s journey to worship in Jerusalem indicates that he was sincerely seeking God – and God then revealed to Him the Good News about Jesus Christ through the witness of Philip*

(5) *Evangelism is sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in accordance with the Scriptures*

–Many other activities and ministries can accompany and support and pave the way for evangelism – *but evangelism itself involves talking about Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for our salvation*

–Good works and acts of service and medical ministry and showing mercy to the poor and broken are all part of the continuing ministry of Jesus and all help to make evangelism more effective – *but evangelism itself involves telling people about Jesus and his death and resurrection so that they can believe in him and be saved from sin, death and hell*

(6) *Evangelism does not require building a close friendship first*

–Friendship evangelism and relational evangelism are very effective ways of making disciples and should be practiced by Christians as much as possible

–*but there are simply way too many lost people in the world to all be reached by friendship evangelism*

–There is no indication of Philip and the Ethiopian building a long-term close friendship before talking about Jesus

–*If the Spirit prompts you to talk with someone about Jesus Christ – open your mouth and obey – regardless of whether that person is a friend or neighbor or co-worker or teammate or complete stranger*

(7) *Evangelism calls for a response*

–*Evangelism is not merely sharing information about Jesus – evangelism aims for a response of repentance and faith*

–and throughout the NT, baptism was the outward indicator of an inward acceptance of Jesus Christ

(8) *Evangelism is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit*

–It was the Holy Spirit who gave Philip the power to do miraculous signs

–*It was the Holy Spirit who gave Philip the power to preach the Gospel boldly and clearly and effectively*

–It was the Holy Spirit who led Philip to Samaria and then to the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza

–*It was the Holy Spirit who opened the Ethiopian's mind and heart and gave him spiritual understanding of the Gospel to enable him to believe in Jesus*

– and it was the Holy Spirit who gave the Ethiopian a new birth and spiritual life to become a new man in Christ

- *Evangelism is the work of the Holy Spirit*

- We join God in His work of bringing people to salvation in Christ by our obedience to the Spirit's leading

II. THE CONVERSION OF A PERSECUTOR

- Saul was not a seeker – he was an adversary
- *He had Zero openness to the Gospel and absolutely no interest in finding out more about Jesus and the faith of his followers*
- To the contrary – he was zealous to eliminate Christianity and its followers
- *Saul was a bitter opponent and persecutor of Christ and his church*
- Saul gave his full and enthusiastic approval to the stoning and death of Stephen
- *Then Saul began making a house-to-house search in Jerusalem in order to drag off Christ-followers to prison*
- Even that did not satisfy his hatred and hostility – when he learned there were also Christians in Damascus – this self-appointed Inquisitor persuaded the high priest in Jerusalem to give him authority to arrest Christians in Damascus and bring them to Jerusalem for trial
- *Saul embarked on the 150-mile journey to Damascus like a wild beast in a raging fury on a mission to wipe Christianity off the face of the earth*
- When you hear stories today of militant Muslims or Hindus persecuting and imprisoning and torturing and sometimes even killing Christian believers in other parts of the world – *think of Saul – that is what he was like before he met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus*
- **But just as Saul was in hot pursuit of followers of Jesus – Jesus was in hot pursuit of Saul – Just as Saul was getting ready to arrest Christians – Saul was himself apprehended by Jesus**
- As Saul and his companions approached the desert oasis city of Damascus in Syria, at about noon, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around Saul – brighter than the midday sun
- *The overpowering Light both blinded him and knocked him to the ground*
- Then a voice addressed him personally and directly in Aramaic: **Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?**

- Note well how closely Jesus identifies himself with his church: *To persecute the church is to persecute Jesus himself // to serve the church is to serve Jesus*
- Those who say today: *I believe in Jesus and love & follow Jesus – I just don't want to have anything to do with the church – do not understand Jesus' relationship with the church, which is his body*
- Prostrate before the One he had been persecuting, Saul asked: *Who are you, Lord?*
- Saul knew he was in presence of the glorious Light and Presence of the Lord God – but whose voice was calling his name and saying: *Why do you persecute me?*
- The voice replied: *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."*
- **While Saul was striking the church – Jesus was feeling the pain**
- Saul was so sure that those who had been proclaiming: *Christ is risen! Jesus is Lord!* – were dead wrong
- **Yet here was irrefutable proof that Jesus was alive and was indeed deserving of the title: *Lord***
- *The same Jesus who was crucified and who then appeared alive to his disciples was now appearing alive in Person to Saul*
- This was no dream or hallucination – **this was the living Lord Jesus appearing to Saul in person just as He had appeared alive to the apostles**
- Saul did not “decide for Christ” as we say today
- *Saul was apprehended and seized by God's sovereign grace*
- **God's Light shone into Saul's heart and revealed to him the truth of Jesus Christ as risen Lord**
- C.S. Lewis knew what it was to be pursued relentlessly by God and likened God to the Great Angler playing his fish, or to a cat chasing a mouse, or to a pack of hounds closing in on a fox, or to a divine chess player maneuvering him into checkmate

I suspect there are some people in this room today who are in the process of being pursued by the Hound of Heaven

-If the Spirit of God is pricking your conscience / don't harden your heart / don't buck the breaking process / rather open your heart to the love of Jesus Christ today

III. MARKS OF BIBLICAL CONVERSIONS

- **Some of you may be able to identify more with a seeker like the Ethiopian eunuch who responded favorably to the Gospel the first time he heard it**
- *Others of you may be able to identify more closely with someone like Paul who was hostile to Christianity until his life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ*
- There is not one type of conversion – nor one type of person needing conversion - but many different kinds of experiences for different individuals
- C.S. Lewis: militant atheist, Oxford professor. The last thing he wanted was to be converted. God sneaks up on him, and Lewis is "surprised by joy," and he says, "I am dragged kicking and screaming--the most reluctant convert in all the world--into the Kingdom."
- John Wesley: fanatical son of a minister, a missionary to America, a great theological mind, but feeling a failure as a human being and a minister. One day he sits in the chapel in England, and his "heart is strangely warmed." John Wesley becomes converted.
- Or Saint Augustine, the monk with a mistress, who is struggling with his soul, sitting under a tree, saying, "O Lord, make me pure, but not yet." One day God gets him, and Augustine becomes Saint Augustine.
- Chuck Colson - so ruthless in his dealings with people, he was frequently referred to as Nixon's "hatchet man"--the one who handled the president's dirty work. One person described Colson by saying he'd walk over his own grandmother.
But then Chuck Colson experienced a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ and was born again and began his Prison Fellowship ministry

- **Jesus Christ is God's only Son and the only Savior of mankind**

Acts 4:12 (NIV) ¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

- *There is only one Way to God – through Jesus Christ – but there are many ways to come to faith in Jesus Christ*
- **There are many different types of conversion experiences – repenting of our sins and turning to Jesus Christ for salvation**
- **But these are the common distinguishing marks of biblical conversion:**

(1) God is the Initiator in our salvation experiences

- ***Even if you had an experience of searching for God – God was pursuing you before you were seeking Him***
- ***It is the sovereign grace of God that frees us from our bondage to pride, prejudice, rebellion and self-centeredness so that we are enabled to repent and believe and come to Christ***
- ***The very fact that you are here today listening to the Gospel is an indication that God is at work in your life drawing you to Himself***

(2) Conversion involves a personal encounter with the living Christ

- *For the Ethiopian eunuch, that encounter occurred through Philip's explanation of the Gospel from the pages of Scripture*
- ***Paul's encounter was much more dramatic***
- *Today as well, sometimes God reveals Jesus to skeptics in dramatic ways, including dreams and visions and miracles*
- *But often, the encounter with Christ takes place through embracing the truth of the Gospel message as someone explains to us the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection*

Contemporary Christian musician Kathy Troccoli was a rebellious teen who drank, partied, and was caught in a vicious cycle of bulimia. But at a summer job, she couldn't escape the Christian witness of co-worker Cindy:

"She was the epitome of a girl I could not hang out with. When she started telling me about Jesus, I made fun of her. And yet, deep down inside, I admired her. I liked that she didn't seem to care what people thought about her. I even suspected she was right, and I was on the wrong path.

"Finally, Cindy said to me, 'You know, Kath, Jesus is Lord whether you accept him or not.' I went home thinking about that. If Jesus was real, I had to check him out. I plowed through the Gospel of John and when I got to the end, I knew I had to make a decision. Everything would have to change. And sixteen years ago, it did."

(3) Conversion involves a surrender to the Lordship of Christ

- ***Conversion is a personal encounter with the living Christ resulting in a surrender to the Lordship of Christ***

- **Biblical conversion is at root not merely a decision for Christ or an acceptance of Christ – but a surrender to the supreme authority of Jesus as Lord**
- **That surrender can grow in depth and scope as we come to know Jesus Christ better and trust Him more fully – *but an acceptance of Christ that does not include at least a beginning surrender to Christ will rarely produce a fully devoted follower of Jesus***

Conversion involves the breaking of pride, the surrender of self-will, and a willingness to submit to the Lord's authority

At the heart of the conversion is the experience of surrender and trust -

*-surrendering our pride, our self-righteousness, our self-will to the Lord Jesus Christ
-and trusting him and his finished work on the Cross for our salvation*

- **This past week at VBS, many of us working in the Salvation Room had the joy and privilege of explaining the Gospel message in small groups after Bob Brady told the Bible story of Moses and the Exodus**
- ***The majority of children in my small groups prayed the prayer to receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior***
- **Other leaders had the same experience**
- ***But we are not saved by praying a prayer***
- ***There must be saving faith in the heart – a genuine trust in the blood of Jesus to wash away our sins – and there must be a sincere surrender of the will to Jesus Christ as Lord***
- **Only God knows how many of those children who prayed the prayer were genuinely converted and born again and are now children of God and will grow up to be fully devoted followers of Jesus**
- ***But surely many children were saved last week – Praise God!***
- **All of you who helped with VBS last week played a role in the salvation of many children!**
- ***To God be the glory!***

(4) Conversion involves a call to service and witness

Acts 26:16-18 ¹⁶Now stand up! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and my witness. You are to tell the world about this experience and about other times I will appear to you.

¹⁷And I will protect you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am going to send you to the Gentiles, ¹⁸to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.'

- Paul was given a specific commission as Apostle to the Gentiles, but all of us at conversion receive a call to be Christ's servants and witnesses wherever He would place us

II Corinthians 5:19-20 ¹⁹For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others. ²⁰We are Christ's ambassadors, and God is using us to speak to you. We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you, "Be reconciled to God!"

- *All of us are called to represent Jesus Christ in the world and to spread his message to those who need to be reconciled to God through the Cross of Christ*

IV. HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN

- How about you? Are you sure of your salvation?
- *Maybe you believe in God and are a member of some church – but are you certain that Jesus Christ lives in you and that you will spend eternity with God in heaven?*
- **There is more to becoming a Christian than being born into a Christian family or going to church or believing in God**
- *According to the Bible, how do we become a Christian?*

By accepting God's gift of forgiveness and salvation through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ

- *This decision to accept Christ as our Savior and Lord involves understanding and believing with our mind that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that He died on the Cross for our sins, that He was raised to life on the third day, and that He is alive today*

- This decision also involves our emotions – including our sorrow for our sins and rebellion against God // our gratitude for His mercy and grace shown to us in the Cross of Christ // and our love and devotion to Jesus Christ in recognition of the greatness of His love and His unique supremacy as Lord
- *This decision also involves our will – for conversion involves humbling ourselves and surrendering to Jesus Christ the right to control our life – accepting Christ involves committing our lives to Him in a way that will change the future direction and purpose of our lives*
- ***Becoming a Christian is a decision – a choice – an act of repentance and faith – involving our intellect, emotions and will***
- If you have prayed a prayer to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, how can you be sure that you are saved?

(1) The Authority of God's Word

John 1:12 (NIV) ¹²Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—

1 John 5:11 - 13 (NIV) ¹¹And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

- ***The assurance of our salvation is based on the trustworthiness of God's Word, the Bible***

(2) The Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit

Romans 8:16 ¹⁶For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children.

- *When we accept Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to live inside us and He assures us in our inner being that we are God's children through faith in Jesus Christ*

(3) The Evidence of a Changed Life

Colossians 1:6 ⁶This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is changing lives everywhere, just as it changed yours that very first day you heard and understood the truth about God's great kindness to sinners.

I John 2:3-6 ³And how can we be sure that we belong to him? By obeying his commandments. ⁴If someone says, "I belong to God," but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and does not live in the truth. ⁵But those who obey God's word really do love him. That is the way to know whether or not we live in him. ⁶Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Christ did.

- ***Saving faith produces obedience to God and changes in our thoughts, attitudes, behavior, speech, values and priorities***
- ***Not that we become perfect or sinless, of course – not that we experience a complete character make-over instantaneously, of course – but conversion does produce within us a new desire to obey God and live as Jesus did***

In Charles Schulz's "Peanuts" comic strip, Lucy asks Linus, "Do you think people ever really change?"

"Sure," replies Linus, "I feel I've changed a lot this past year."

Lucy says, "I meant for the better."

- How about you? Do you believe that people can change for the better by the power of the risen Christ? Do you believe that Jesus Christ can change your life for the better?

You can experience a personal encounter with the living Christ by turning to him in repentance and faith - turning from sin and self-will and self-righteous pride / trusting in his death on the Cross to take away your sins / opening the door of your heart to receive Jesus into your life as your Savior and Lord

- **Many people begin their Christian life by saying a prayer of faith to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior:**
- **Salvation Prayer**
- **"Knowing You"**