

Bible Conversions (1) - Manasseh

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[0 : 00] Let's turn briefly this morning to 2 Chronicles and chapter 33 where we read and looking at verses 12 and 13 especially.

And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom.

Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God. I'm going to look for a couple of months or so at our morning services at what we're going to call Bible conversions or conversions of people as described in the Bible.

You'll appreciate that most of these will be in the New Testament because that's where most of the conversions that are recorded in the Bible, at least in detail, are given to us.

But there are some in the Old Testament as well. And we're beginning with this one, the conversion of Manasseh, who was a king of Judah in Judah.

[1 : 16] Now we're going to see, rather than try and define conversion conversion in theological terms and then move on to look at examples of it, what we're going to do is look at the examples of conversion or the accounts of conversion in the Bible.

And from that, we'll be able to extract some details about what conversion is, what it consists of, what sort of things accompany it, what does it lead to.

That sort of thing as to the nature of conversion will actually come across to us from the various details that we see in these Bible conversions.

But of course, conversion itself, essentially, in the very essence of it, is the same in every case. It involves a change. Conversion is a change.

You convert money when you go on holiday into some other currency or the currency of the country you're going to. You convert your UK money into the money of another nation so that you can use it there.

[2 : 22] So it's changed or exchanged. And conversion in spiritual terms involves, at its simplest and its most basic, a change. A change of opinions.

A change of outlook. A change of lifestyle. It's something that does involve or is connected to, inseparably connected to, such things as faith, repentance.

All of these things the Bible so much emphasizes and are so important for us in our understanding and practice. But conversion itself is really the change that takes place in a person's life when they come into a new relationship with God.

Now that can be, although it's the same in that sense in the case of everyone, no two conversions are exactly the same in every detail with regard to things that accompany that change.

That change may be brought about very suddenly in the case of some people. It might be brought about very, very gradually in the case of others. If you think of the difference between a flash of lightning that you see and stand in awe of sometimes when it's a big flash of lightning and then it's accompanied by a huge clap of thunder, it's an impressive thing, but it only lasts for a moment.

[3 : 49] And that's very different to the light that you get in the coming of the day. It's much more drawn out, much more gradual, but no less definite.

You've seen spectacular light when you've seen a bolt of lightning. You've seen less spectacular light in some senses in the coming of a day or dawn, but light is the same.

It's the same that you're seeing in essence in a conversion that you might say is sudden and a conversion that's much more gradual in the process that leads to our coming into a new relationship with God.

And that's why, as we'll see from some of these studies as well, we shouldn't be disturbed if our conversion has been the kind that has not had a spectacular experience.

Some people can actually say where they were, what they were doing, when they experienced this change coming over them from God. People would say, I was standing in the kitchen, I had a cup of coffee in my hand, or I was in the pub, I had a glass of whiskey in my hand, and I just felt, and I knew God had come into my life, and my life had been changed.

[5 : 06] But as other people will say, including myself, I'm not sure the moment my life changed. Only God knows that. But I know the process in which I was involved.

I know the experiences that I had that led to it. I know pretty much the period in my life during which it took place. So don't be disturbed if you can't put your finger on the exact moment and place and the details of it in that sense.

And if you have been spectacularly converted that way, don't think that you've lost out if you haven't had the longer gradual.

So everybody's different as God sees our need. And conversion, as it is conversion, is different in some of the details as you compare one with another.

Now we're beginning with Manasseh. And we're beginning with Manasseh because it is one of the prominent conversions described in Scripture.

[6 : 12] And in fact, when you think of a sudden or spectacular conversion, what does your mind usually go to? Well, your mind usually goes to, and it's the one that's usually quoted, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who of course became the Apostle Paul.

On the way to Damascus, Jesus met him, there he was, on the way to do further destruction and havoc to the church of God. Jesus met him, changed him there instantly. He was a new man with a new life.

He was converted. But Manasseh's conversion is every bit as amazing and spectacular and sudden as that of Saul of Tarsus.

Here is someone who had, first of all, what we'll call an unexpected conversion. Why is this conversion unexpected?

I'm sure in every sense, every conversion is unexpected in some ways. But when you see somebody grossly wicked, somebody who really went out of his way to challenge the ways of God, to overthrow the ways of God, to introduce things which were grossly offensive in the presence of God, then when you find someone like that converted, it is, in that sense, unexpected.

[7 : 30] Of course, we know that God can do all the things. But when you look at the characters of Scripture, of all the characters described in Scripture, Manasseh comes across as about the worst in the whole Bible.

When you read the account you have of him here, and even more so in the second book of Kings, I've given you the reference there in 2 Kings chapter 21, and it's verses 1 to 16.

One of the things that's mentioned there that's not mentioned in Chronicles is that in verse 16 there, for example, moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin, so that they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

He introduced child sacrifice. There was obviously an opposition to him in Jerusalem at the time, so he made sure that they were wiped out. He just exterminated them.

He killed them. Put them to death. He filled Jerusalem with blood, is what that verse says. He was a tyrant, and a cruel tyrant. He caused the death of who knows how many thousands of people, of his own people.

[8 : 53] And it could well be that Micah, the prophet, who was a prophet slightly before the time of Manasseh, but prophesying into the future as it was in his day, in chapter 7 of Micah, you can read it for yourselves later, but just read the first six verses of the prophecy of Micah, chapter 7, and it describes a society that would be terrifying to live in.

And it's probably, in all likelihood, a description of what he could see was coming in the days of Manasseh. Woe is me! The godly have perished from the earth.

There is no one upright among mankind. They all lie in wait for blood. Each hunts the other with a net. Their hands are set on what is evil to do it well.

The prince and the judge ask for a bribe. The great man utters the evil desire of his soul. And so on and so on. And then you've got verse 5, Put no trust in a neighbor. Have no confidence in a friend.

Guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your arms. For the son treats the father with contempt. The daughter rises up against her mother. The daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

[10:14] A man's enemies are the men of his own house. See, long before you had the China of today or the other parts of the world where you have secret police going about, where you have North Korean situation, where everybody is watching one another to report them to those in authority.

Long, long before that, you had it in the days of Manasseh. A reign of terror is too mild a description for the likes of Manasseh's reign.

But it was a reign of terror. And you notice here in 2 Chronicles, here in the chapter we're looking at, verses 6 and 9, how it's described there.

Where he says, He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. And then verse 9, He led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel.

These incredible statements for somebody who was an appointed king over the people of God in the city of Jerusalem. That's why it's an unexpected conversion.

[11:27] Because provoking the Lord to such anger as brought the might of Assyria upon these people, you would expect that this was a man. And indeed, if you just read 2 Kings and if we didn't have 2 Chronicles, you would think, well, this was definitely a man who went to hell.

This was somebody surely whom God just rejected. And for whom God had no more time, having done all that he did, being so wicked as he was, having committed the appalling sins and crimes that he committed, surely there's no hope for this man.

And yet, here he is, a prisoner in Babylon turning to the Lord. Where do you best see, we've used this illustration many times, where do you best see the sparkle of a pure, precious, expensive diamond?

Where will you best see it? Will it be against a background of light? Or will it be against a totally dark cloth?

Where do you see a string of white pearls best? Is it on a white dress or on a black dress? It's on the black one, isn't it? And the diamond shines most brightly of all, the darker the background is against which it is held.

[13:05] And so does the forgiveness and the grace of God. The more dark the background against which that forgiveness shines, the more you actually see its brilliance, its luster, its quality.

And all the way through the Bible and we'll see from these conversions, the more wicked the person that's converted, the more wonderful it is to behold the grace of God at work, to behold God bringing that person to know his forgiveness, to see himself as he's never seen him before and God as he's never seen him before and to actually come to be converted and saved.

The dark background of sin in order to highlight the brilliance of God's grace doesn't make sin good. But it does show forgiveness to be glorious.

And it does actually confirm to us that however great your sin is today and however great a sinner you yourself might see yourself to be today.

The saviourhood of Jesus is far greater. However great a pile of sin and a weight of sin your life and my life is Jesus Christ is far greater.

[14:37] That's using words really similar to what John Newton used of himself. shortly before he died when he was asked I think it was when he was asked what he would like people to know or what he would say to them tell them he said that John Newton is a great sinner but tell them that Jesus Christ is a great saviour.

doesn't matter how great your sin is it will never be too great to outreach the grace of God to outreach the forgiveness that's in Christ whatever you've done whatever I've done whatever is in your past nobody here has a past as bad as Manasseh and if Manasseh received forgiveness there's forgiveness for you here is the sparkle of God's grace and the other thing it teaches us is that we should never dismiss anyone as beyond the reach of God's forgiveness whatever you see in the world today whoever it is you look at and say well that's a very wicked person that's an ungodly person that person is absolutely straight up opposed to God and committed to really trying to wipe out everything to do with religion with the gospel with Christ never give up on them never stop praying for them never think they're beyond the reach of God's grace the worst the most

committed atheist in our country the most committed secularist the most openly profane and blasphemous person in our nation the most openly in terms of writing columns of bile against Christians the most committed against the ways of Christ in our nation today never give up on them Manasseh teaches us that no one is beyond the reach of God's forgiveness it's an unexpected conversion but what a glorious one what a powerful one when you read that on the pages of scripture you have you have to say at many right reading through this this description of Manasseh you know to use common parlance you stop very often through it and you say wow that is quite something that's just amazing then you come to this part of it and to his conversion and it's an even bigger wow that is just mind blowing that for such a person

God should have forgiveness and it says far more about God than it does about Manasseh so it's an unexpected conversion but secondly it's an unmistakable conversion because there are features in it that show us it was genuine how do we know that it was genuine well first of all look at when it happened when he was in distress he entreated the favor of the Lord his God Manasseh was a man who loved to control people he was a man who was able to give orders for people to be put to death and that's what happened it was carried out he was a manipulator he was somebody who loved power and the sense of grandeur that power gave to him and many people's lives from that perspective he controlled and dominated and bullied but he couldn't control himself and the one thing he could not control was

God's providence he had absolutely no control when it came to the developments of his life and the life of the nation and God brought as you read there he spoke there he spoke to Manasseh and the people he paid no attention therefore the Lord brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria you see God has his way of getting even to the most obnoxious of tyrants and the most resistant of hearts God has his way of getting into those people's consciences and these people's minds and that's what happened with Manasseh his circumstances change God turned the tables on him he went from being the tyrant that he was commanding all of these people under his his control to do as he liked he went from that to being under the control of these Assyrians this powerful force that had grown in the world to such an extent that they took over so many nations the Assyrian empire as it spread reached towards

[19 : 46] Jerusalem reached towards Manasseh and took Manasseh captive and there is this tyrant this man who had filled Jerusalem with blood and whose word was the law God had turned the tables on him he was taken bound with hooks and chains of bronze and brought to Babylon a prisoner a slave of the Assyrians notice the difference between verses 10 and 12 because when you read there the Lord spoke to Manasseh but they paid no attention and then verse 12 when he was in distress he entreated the favor of the Lord in the darkest time of Manasseh's life things changed in this crisis point in his life things changed

God brought him to this low point and at his lowest point he turned to God God turned the tables on him so that he would turn to God that is God at work it's God that's in control it's God that's doing this to him so that he will come to realize his need of God and the greatness of God's forgiveness now that does not mean that we need to come to a really really low point in our esteem of ourselves a really low point in our experiences in life before we can be converted some people think that some people think that you can't be converted if things are going well in your life that you're not really in a position then to receive God that is only when you really come into a low point into a real crisis in your life that you're then in a in a condition to receive God it's not like that because for one thing for all the people that receive

God into their lives and listen to God in a time of crisis there are at least as many other people in similar times of crisis who never turn to God crisis of itself does not make us converted human beings it doesn't make us Christians it doesn't mean that you really need to become so low in the providence of God before you can be converted the Lord's word to us today is seek the Lord while he is to be found call upon him while he is near whatever your circumstances in life whatever's been in your past whatever's in your present whether you're filled with comforts or like Manasseh just filled with distressing things every circumstance in life is a circumstance to look to God to come to him to receive his favor to accept his forgiveness and the evidence that this is an unmistakable conversion the evidence that it's a genuine conversion is in a number of things that are recorded here for us in these verses the first is that he entreated the favor of the Lord and you can see he also prayed to the two things go together to entreat someone is to plead with someone and prayer obviously fits in alongside with alongside of that what what he was doing in prayer was entreating

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Lord he was he was begging he had he was doing something that he had never done in his life before this wasn't a man who was used to begging for others to help him this was a man who commanded people to do things for him this was a man who paid no attention to the commands of God to the demands of God to the requirements of God to the law of God to the holiness of God to the righteousness of God to the sovereignty of God to the rights of God no man I say he wasn't a man who paid attention to any of that but what's he now doing he's pleading with God he's entreating this God what a change what a difference because you see he's come to be concerned about all that he had done and all that he is concerned about what's in his heart and concerned about his conscience concerned about how God sees him concerned about what God thinks of him he has a realization that God's anger against the nation is his fault as much as anybody's and more than most and because he sees God's anger in relation to his sin he comes to God and begs forgiveness that's what conversion really contains to some degree or other somebody who comes to be converted is someone who cries out to God comes to know themselves for what they are God shows them what they are God brings them to see themselves as they really are not as they once thought themselves to be not as they imagined things to be and God brings them to see God as he really is not as they imagine him to be not as they would prefer him to be not as they would like him to be but as he really is C.S. Lewis in his writing somewhere talks about the reaction of not just children but adults but mostly children when you come across something like a frog on the ground it looks dead so you take a wee stick you start experimenting as to whether it's dead or not and you start poking at it and there's no movement there and you conclude it's dead and you give it a bigger poke and it goes like that and you jump back and you say it's alive and C.S. Lewis says that's how it is when God comes into your life you've not it's not as if you've never thought about him before but he's just there somewhere he's not really alive to you but when you realise yeah this God's actually alive and he's just as he describes himself to be and he's that big and he's that holy then you see life takes on a different perspective you think differently about things and that's what happened with Manasseh he began to think seriously in Babylon where he had never thought seriously before about himself about God about eternity about sin about his conscience and he entreated the favour of God he wanted

[27 : 09] God's approval every convert wants God's approval it's a concern in coming to know God for yourself second thing that shows that this conversion was indeed genuine he humbled himself greatly in the presence of God he humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers well just look at these words and think of what Manasseh was beforehand think of what he was before this crisis had come into his life he was a man who didn't humble himself he was a man who took pride in his position in his power and all that he had at his disposal he was a man who gave commands even about the temple and introducing all these pagan practices and these horrible practices into the very worship of God in the temple including child sacrifice in the valley of the son of Hinnom all these horrible abhorrent practices that God had so severely denounced and belonged to some of the pagan practices of the nations around him he was a man whose word brought all of that into the practice of Judah of Israel what's he now doing he's humbling himself in the presence of God if we say that we're converted and we think of ourselves as we've always thought of ourselves we don't know what conversion is if you come across somebody who's converted and they still have the same view of themselves that they've always had they're not converted because conversion means that you come to see yourself as

God sees you you take on a new look about yourself a new view of yourself a new opinion of yourself and instead of arrogantly parading your own abilities against God and his rights you humble yourself in the presence of God you fall down before him and say Lord you were right and I was wrong and now I need your approval and that's as we sang in Psalm 51 that's exactly what you see in David's prayer of repentance there as he comes once again to know the Lord and that's one of the things that you'll see in conversions as well with David with Peter as well there's more than one conversion in people's lives it's not just a conversion in the first place where we come for the first time to God because Christians go astray people need to be reconverted turned round again to come back from backsliding from failures from that sort of thing in our lives and that's what David is doing in Psalm 51 but you see his concern same as Manasseh here Lord against you you only I have sinned and done this great wickedness and what's his concern Lord cleanse me accept me approve of me give me your approval let me have your

favor same as Manasseh here he humbled himself before the God of his fathers and I think that's such an important description of God here in that verse he humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers why does it put it that way because this was precisely what he had rejected for most of his life he reigned for 55 years in Jerusalem the longest reign of any king of the kings of Judah and imagine the damage that a long reign like that would do under such a man as Manasseh but here he is the God of his fathers it's the very God that he now entreats he doesn't want any other God he doesn't want to change the view that the fathers had of God that God gave to them that's what you and I face isn't it in this world in the society we belong to because the God of our fathers has become so old fashioned so out of touch with human needs in the present day so we have to introduce other things about God that we ourselves think are appropriate and we have to introduce things about human relationships that we think God really nowadays ought to approve of that's what Manasseh did looking at God in his own terms and that wasn't progress was it that was regress was going back a spiral downwards into the misery of sin that's what our nation is facing that's why we need to pray that's why we need to pray for conversions for conversions even amongst those who profess themselves to be Christians conversions back to God and to the way that God describes things and the way that God approves of things and the way that God defines things like marriage like human relationships like what it is to be a Christian he humbled himself greatly the presence of the God of his fathers friends it's the God of our fathers the God that is to say the God that has revealed himself in scripture the God whose mind is plainly set out in the words of scripture that's why the devil is so keen that people should just change and alter the definitions of the Bible and our understanding of the Bible and what the Bible is because if you can do that then you're taking away the ground on which every other truth is based because they're all revealed in the Bible and if the Bible is not the word of God that you can depend upon if it's not the word of God for every generation just as it is then where do you find something on which to build your life you're left with your own opinions he humbled himself greatly in the presence of the God of his fathers and then thirdly you see there he prayed to him and God was moved by his entreaty

[33 : 59] God was moved by his entreaty why did you just look down at these words just read them yourself just now silently in your mind and think of who this is talking about who this man really is and was God was moved by his entreaty these are amazing words would you expect God to listen to such a man as Manasseh would you expect God to be moved by this man that's what it says Manasseh got to the heart of God by his prayer of repentance and entreaty God himself was moved as he listened to the pleadings of this broken sinner and doesn't that say so much about God about the wonder of who God is and what he is like and you know the more you really do get a view of yourself and what you really like inside the more

God shows us the sinfulness of our heart the more amazed you will be as well and I that God should be moved by anything we plead with him but he is have you yet to move the heart of God is it something that you've still not done are you saying about yourself whether you're a youngster or older I don't think God would listen to me would he not he listened and was moved by Manasseh what he did for Manasseh he will do for you God was moved by him and then it says fourthly then Manasseh knew that the

Lord was God now we could go on to other things as well the evidence is there in the way that Manasseh acted afterwards the things that he did that he put to place after the Lord brought him back to Jerusalem but let's finish with that one Manasseh knew then Manasseh knew that's that's the important word there then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God he had heard a lot about God he knew about God he lived in a nation that God had revealed himself to and given these rituals to in that worship he wasn't a stranger to the idea of God to the name of God to the ways of God but he didn't know God didn't know him personally but now he knew that the Lord was God again looking at C.S. Lewis this morning in daily readings in C.S. Lewis came across this reading this morning as you know in our nation secularists and atheists make a lot of noise about human reason and reason will tell you there is no God such as described in the Bible at least and reason will tell you that the way of these committed

Christians is just ridiculous and reason will tell you that there shouldn't be such a thing as Christianity taught in our schools well here is what Lewis said reason itself tells you that reason needs materials to work with okay reason you cannot by reason alone say convincingly there is no God why because reason itself cannot reach that conclusion without materials by that Lewis meant

without something else and then he uses an illustration he said if reason tells you that the cat may be in the linen cupboard reason cannot prove that to you reason will tell you something else go and look for yourself in other words

Lewis is saying taste and see that God is good reason sends you to experience and where reason says there is no God reason still says but I need to experience something as well and to taste and see that God is good is where you come to know him not by looking at the recipe and admiring the pictures and saying well some people like that but I find it rather distasteful that's what the humanist the atheist the secularist does there's the picture of the great dish that needs to be eaten the Bible presentation of salvation of forgiveness of the approval of God and the person who says by reason alone that's not for me is missing out and is wrong in just simply saying let reason decide because reason itself can't decide you've got to go and taste it and experience it and then you'll see that God is good let's pray

[40 : 10] Lord our gracious God we thank you that your word abundantly proves to us that there is forgiveness with you and that though our iniquities pile up against us yet our transgressions you will purge them away you are the God who deals with our sin because you dealt with it conclusively in the sending of your son into this world for you tell us in your word that he came in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin and that he condemned sin in the flesh and also that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us help us then to walk not after the flesh but after your spirit bless to us your word again we pray enable us to know the evidences of conversion in ourselves graciously deal with us we pray in a way that will constantly and daily come to realize the glories of that conversion that you effect in the life of your people here is now we pray for your glory's sake amen