



Conversion Stories in the Book of Acts

An Adult Bible Class by Don Hooton

After His death and before He ascended into heaven itself, Jesus Christ gave disciples a charge that is designated commonly as “the great commission.” Matthew’s gospel contains the admonition to “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (28:18-20). Mark’s gospel ends: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved” (16:15-16). And Luke’s gospel ends, “repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47). And Luke tells Theophilus that he had recorded this “account of the things accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2) so that he would know the exact truth about Jesus and His way. This series of lessons explores what the Bible shows are real life conversion stories in what was accomplished among the Apostles.

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Each Lesson will focus on aspects of the conversions as recorded in Scripture.

1. [3/7] The OverView and Objective
2. [3/14] The Conversion of some Jews on Pentecost (2:1-41)
3. [3/21] The Conversion of more Jews in Jerusalem (3:1-4:31)
4. [3/28] The Conversions of an Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40)
5. [4/4] The Conversion of those Samaritans and Simon the Sorcerer (8:4-25)
6. [] The Conversion of Saul of Tarsus (9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18)
7. [4/11] The Conversion of Cornelius and his household (10:1-48; 11:1-18)
8. [4/18] The Conversion of some Philippians (16:14-15, 25-34)
9. [4/25] The Conversion of some Thessalonians and Bereans (17:1-4; 10-12), a ProCounselor in Paphos (13:6-12) and people in Rome (28:16-31)
10. [5/9] The Conversion of some Athenians (17:16-34)
11. [5/16] The Conversion of some Corinthians (18:1-11)
12. [5/23] The Conversion of some Ephesians (18:24-19:10)
13. [5/30] The Failed Conversions: Felix (Acts 23:10-25) and Agrippa (26:1-29)

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Lesson 1 (3/7/2021)

The Overview and Objective



After His death and before He ascended into heaven itself, Jesus Christ gave disciples a charge that is designated commonly as “the great commission.” Matthew’s gospel contains the admonition to “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (28:18-20). Mark’s gospel ends: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved” (16:15-16). And Luke’s gospel ends, “repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47). And Luke tells Theophilus that he had recorded this “account of the things accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2) so that he would know the exact truth about Jesus and His way.

This series of lessons explores what the Bible shows are real life conversion stories in what was accomplished among the Apostles. The actual term for “conversion” (Gr. *epistrephei*) and its more common verb “to turn” (Gr. *epistrepheo*) appears a total of twelve times in the Book of Acts (3.19, 9.35, 40, 11.21, 14.15, 15.3 [noun], 19, 36, 16.18, 26.18, 20, 28.27). Except for three instances (9.40, 15.36, and 16.18), the terms are exclusively used with reference to people turning to God in response to the Gospel. These verses show that people who were converted were repenting and turning (3.19; 14.15; 26.20), “turn[ing] to the Lord” (11.21), were seeking redemption (9.35; 15.3, 19; 26.18; 28.27) and had faith in Christ (26.18). Conversion is, therefore, a process where belief leads you to something God has presented in the message of the gospel. And in these lessons, we will learn what that really is.

Each lesson will also try to understand the people, their backgrounds and the reason the gospel was believed by them. It is true to say that they believed, they repented and they were baptized and this is precisely what was being accomplished among the disciples just as Luke wrote to Theophilus. However, the succeeding lessons will cover not merely what all of them had in common – but rather what made each of them different and compelling. It seems to me that the story Luke tells was intended to make the reader think about these unique aspects.

Still, it is important – even critical – in today’s pluralism in “Christianity” to see the consistency in the record that Luke wrote to Theophilus. It was, he said, the “exact truth” (Luke 1:4, NASB) that had been taught “so that you may have certainty” (ESV) or “know the certainty” (NKJV, CSB, NIV, HCSB). So Luke’s record of not merely the life of Jesus in the gospel – but his continued work to Theophilus in Acts was to help him know not just what he had been taught but that what he was taught was accurate.

The people were all different. Some were Jews; some were Jewish leaders; Some were followers of John; Some were soldiers; Some were businesswomen; Some were leaders in synagogues and others were pagan worshippers or idols. Yet all of them heard the same message and responded to the gospel with extraordinary consistency.

Further, the book of Acts also shows failures in the efforts of sharing the gospel. There was the failed attempt to convert Felix (Acts 23:10-25) and Agrippa (26:1-29) but as the gospel messages keeps being spoke, people keep believing.

In this lesson we want to trace with the chart on the next page what either was said by proclaimers or what was done by listeners (in Luke’s own words) in order for them to be saved by the gospel of Jesus.

Read through each of the Scripture Narratives and check the appropriate box for what either the presenter of the message said *should be done* or what is said *that the listener did* in order to be saved.

	Hear	Repent	Confess	Be Baptized	Significant Beliefs or Backgrounds	Approaches the Teacher Used
conversions						
Jews on Pentecost (2:1-41)						
Jews on Solomon's Porch (3:1-4:4)						
Samaritans (8:4-25)						
Ethiopian (8:26-40)						
Saul of Tarsus (9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18)						
Lydia (16:14-15)						
The Jailer (16:25-34)						
Thessalonians (17:1-4)						
The Bereans (17:10-12)						
ProCounselor Sergius Paulus (13:6-12)						
The Athenians (17:16-34)						
The Corinthians (18:1-11)						
Apollos and the Ephesians (18:24-19:10)						
Jews and Greeks in Rome (28:16-31)						
non-conversions						
Felix (Acts 23:10-25)						
Agrippa (26:1-29)						

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Lesson 2 (3/14/2021)

The Conversion of some Jews on Pentecost (2:1-41)

Ten days after the ascension of Jesus, the twelve apostles were immersed with the Holy Spirit as promised by the Lord (Acts 1.5; John 14.1-31, 15.18-16.24). They spoke in the languages of the Jews visiting Jerusalem for Pentecost and preached the good news of the risen Lord for the first time (2.14-36). The message deeply troubled the Jews in the city (2.37). They responded with a question on how they could be saved from God's wrath for their sins – including the rejection and execution of Jesus. Luke records Peter's response who says clearly to those who now believe who Jesus was indeed: "repent and be baptized" (2:38).

The day called "Pentecost" is named after the Greek word *pentekostos*, which means "fiftieth." On the day after the Sabbath after Passover, Israelites chose a sheaf of the first grain harvested that spring which became an offering, waved it "before the Lord" (Lev 23:11-12). Pentecost was observed in ancient Israel on the 50th day after this (verse 15). Since seven weeks elapsed between the day of the first grain offering and the beginning of Pentecost, this holy day was sometimes called the Feast of Weeks. [Exo 34:22; Lev 23:15; Num 28:26; Deut 16:9-12.] By the time of Jesus, most Jews regarded Pentecost also as an anniversary of the giving of the Mosaic covenant at Mount Sinai (Exo 20–24).

WHO WERE ALL THESE PEOPLE WHO GATHERED IN JERUSALEM? They were **devout** Jewish men from "every nation under heaven" and some proselytes, who were visiting Jerusalem for Pentecost. And on that day 3,000 men obeyed the gospel (2:38). Through this response to the Gospel, they were added to the group of the saved – the church (2.47). This is how they turned to God. Should we expect God to change His mind?

Consider this first group of people in Acts 2:14-38. Read the text and answer the questions below. And as you do, go back to the chart in lesson 1 and fill in the right two columns from what you learn in this lesson.

1. Describe the majority of the audience, beliefs, background, home location, language.

2. What would have been the thing they all shared in common at that moment? In their religion? In what they had experienced the last several weeks?

4. What was unique about the scene they were now witnessing?

5. What was Peter's approach? (Was it subtle, harsh, truthful, sarcastic, condescending, heartfelt?)

6. Did he excuse their behavior? What are other ways he could have "said it"

7. Describe some of the different thoughts that might have been going through the minds of the people who were listening:

8. Did Peter get their attention? If so, how?

9. What was the recorded reaction of many?

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10. Who brought up the need for them to do something?

11. What did Peter tell them they should do (2:37-38)? What would be the results (2:38)?

12. From what is recorded in Acts 2, what was the reason for their obedience to the words of Peter?

13. What was the result of their actions (2:47)?

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Lesson 3 (3/21/2021)

The Conversion of more Jews in Jerusalem (3:1-4:31).

After Pentecost, the Apostles continued to work in Jerusalem and in Acts 3 and 4, it is the story of Peter and John who had been friends in their youth and business partners in fishing (Lk 5:10), sharers in the hope of Israel (Jn 1:41) and who would be the first to run to the empty tomb among the 12 (Jn 20:3). First, we are told that they “were going up to the Temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer.” Perhaps they were praying with their fellow Jews, but the result of their presence there was surely to speak the word of Lord to them (Acts 3:12; 4:20) and they will at the end of the narrative, praise and pray to God that they would speak the word “with boldness” (4:31).

The people they spoke to are different than the audience on Pentecost, but still the same ethnically. In chapter three, the audience is people who are described as filled with wonder and amazement at the healing of the lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate of Jerusalem. They are excited to understand how this lame man now walks. And Peter begins his conversation with them at their amazement. He starts where they are. Another two thousand men will be added to the number at Pentecost of three thousand (Acts 4:4). And the Bible says **they believed** the message Peter shared with them – which is a message they heard, not felt.

Who were these people?

1. People who had had interest in prayer. It was customary among Jews to denote the 3rd, 6th and 9th hours for private prayer (compare Dan 6:10; Psa 55:17).
2. People who were deeply religious. Luke reminds us it was the ninth hour which would have been the time of the evening sacrifices (c.f. Exo 29:41; Num 28:3,4) and the Temple would have been full of people (Reese, 152).
3. The healed man was a beggar. Such poverty was commonplace (Lk 16:20; Mk 10:46; Le 18:35; Jn 9:1-8).

What did Peter do? He looked at him and he saved him from his physical infirmity to introduce him to his spiritual healing in Christ. The man thanked God for the healing – and it’s natural to presume became a follower of the Christ in whose name he was healed. And then to the people, Peter “answered them” – he responds to questions he sees in their expressions. And he preached that the miracle was God’s work to glorify Jesus. And in stubborn ignorance, the Israelite nation rejected Him. But Jesus fulfilled the promise made to Moses and God has sent Him to bring times of refreshing if they would repent and turn from their wicked ways and be saved by the Gospel.

But the arrest of Peter and John, orchestrated by Jewish leaders, gave them another group of Jews to speak to – but different than the ones in chapter three. The Jewish leaders in chapter four had been accusing Peter and John and will ultimately command them to not speak or teach in the name of Jesus (4:18). With John, Peter defies their demands and says they will keep on teaching. And they return to their fellow Christians and together they rejoice.

QUESTIONS:

1. What was similar in this to his lesson on Pentecost? (3:11-26)
2. What was different from Pentecost?
3. What is different about the two groups of people Peter and John speak to in chapters 3 and 4?
4. What was it that caused “many of those” to believe (4:4)?
5. For the people, was this conversion experience because of a miracle or because of words? How does that affect the way you think about evangelism today?
6. Describe the “two thousand more” who would have been converted. What was their background? What can we presume about their beliefs?
7. When Peter and John had just been admonished to “not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:17-18), what was their answer (4:19-20)?
8. When they gathered again together, how does Luke describe them (4:23,31).
9. In both of these attempts to teach the message of Jesus, was one weak and one strong? Why would some believe – and others reject? Why would they not want to follow along in the steps the Apostles were living?
10. Can the religiously sincere be converted?

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Lesson 4 (4/4/2021)

The Conversion of those Samaritans and Simon the Sorcerer

(8:4-25)

During the ministry of Jesus there was contact with a group of people known as the Samaritans and continued in the expansion of the gospel in Acts. Their history, which is hardly present in records outside of Scripture is succinctly related by John: "Jews do not associate with Samaritans" (4:9). When Assyria captured Israel with some 27,290 of Israel's population were deported (these figures are taken from Sargon's record of the conquest), the city Samaria was in the tribal land of Manasseh (721 B.C.). In 2Kings 17:24, the first inspired record of their history is when Assyria, after the conquest, brought foreigners to colonize and to overtake the landscape. The scribe called them Samaritans, the only usage in the OT (17:29). Ultimately, they intermarried with those Israelites who remained in the land. Some remained Jews still, evidenced after the Assyrian conquest of Samaria, when men from Manasseh as well as Zebulun, and Asher went to King Hezekiah's great Passover in Jerusalem (2Chr 30:10, 11). Even as late Josiah, Manasseh and Ephraim contributed to the repairs on the Jerusalem Temple (34:9). Even during the post-exilic events and rebuilding of the temple with Zerubbabel and Ezra, nothing was ever said regarding Samaritans blockading the work. The objection was raised by foreigners working together as a political block against Jerusalem. Yet, by the intertestamental period, Samaritans were rejected by Jews. Ecclesiasticus 50:25, 26 speaks of them as "no nation" and as "the foolish people that dwell in Shechem." The Testament of Levi also calls Shechem "a city of fools." The Jews' major theological indictment against the Samaritans was their insistence upon Mt. Gerizim as the true place of worship instead of Jerusalem. It grew to a clear hatred as shown in John 8:48 when Jews called Jesus a Samaritan. Still, Jesus was rejected at different villages of the Samaritans (Luke 9:52, 53) yet still some were illustrated as "Good" (Lk 10:29-37) and shown to be grateful for healing (17:11-19). At His Ascension Jesus commanded that world evangelism begin at Jerusalem, then reach out into Judea, *then to Samaria*, and finally to the uttermost parts of the earth. Not only is it distinguishable from Judea there, they were clearly a mission of the gospel.

To fulfill that mission, the Apostles sent an evangelist named Philip. He is first mentioned in Acts 6 as one of the deacons, a Jew with Greek backgrounds, appointed to superintend the daily distribution of food to remove all suspicion of partiality. He is the precursor to Paul's work among the Gentiles. The scene which brings Philip and Simon the sorcerer together (8:9-13) occurs when the magician has to acknowledge a power over nature greater than his own. Later, he will baptize a Eunuch of Ethiopia (8:26). At the end of the chapter, Luke said Philip continued to preach at Azotus (Ashdod) and among other cities that formerly belonged to Philistines, and came down to Caesarea. The last glimpse of him in the New Testament is in his house when Paul and his companions turn to him for shelter with his four daughters, who possess the gift of prophetic utterance (21:8-9).

In Acts, Luke introduces one specific man, Simon, who "amazed all the people of Samaria" (8:9), but the account does not identify him as a Samaritan himself. Justin Martyr suggested that Simon was a Samaritan from the city of Gitta. The Jew called Simon who "pretended to be a magician" is referred to by the historian Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews, book 20, chapter 7), but most think he is a different historical figure, born in Cyprus. But Simon is a sorcerer. Sorcery, strongly condemned by God (Deut 18:9-13), was common in the ancient world, and, while some acts and demonstrations were no more than illusions of the mind, others were empowered by Satan in an attempt to discredit the power of God (Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9). It appears Simon was the latter, as Luke states that he had amazed the Samaritans "for a long time with his sorcery" (Acts 8:11), some even declaring that he was "the great Power of God" (Acts 8:10), a messianic title. Interestingly, however, Simon's empowerment by Satan did not include loyalty. In the wake of hearing and seeing the disciple Philip "as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12), Simon "also believed" and was baptized (8:12) just like the other Samaritans but he "followed Philip everywhere" (Acts 8:13).

The Bible says that "the Holy Spirit had not yet come" upon the Samaritans (Acts 8:16). Later, the apostles Peter and John arrived, at which time the Spirit came upon the believers. Simon witnessed this event and "offered them money and said, 'Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit'"

(Acts 8:19–20). At this point, Peter strongly reprimands Simon for his greed and states that he needs to “repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart” (Acts 8:22). Fearful of the apostle’s words, Simon pleads with Peter to pray to the Lord on his behalf.

Some say Simon was never saved. Yet, Peter reacts not to Simon’s sin of deception but of avarice from jealousy for the apostolic power (20). When Peter says, “You have neither part nor portion in this” (21), the most obvious matter is not illegitimate salvation but Simon’s *illegitimate* privilege to the power they had. Then Peter says that Simon’s heart is not right with God (21) which would be an odd way to describe an unbeliever. He then tells Simon to repent “of your wickedness” and find God’s forgiveness (22), again, an odd way to address an unbeliever. Peter says that he has been “poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity” to which all Christians are warned they can succumb (Eph 4:32; Heb 12:15). We will never hear of Simon the Sorcerer. Some consider that *he was repentant* and continued to be faithful. However, Justin Martyr and other Christian apologists like Irenaeus insist he was an antichrist and continued his sorcery. **His legacy, however, is his greed** in even our modern word simony, “using religion as a means of profit.”

Questions (Refer to the chart on page 3 and complete):

1. To what ends would Samaritans have to go to hear the gospel and believe? What prejudices would they have to abandon?
2. What are “modern” Samaritans to you?
3. What does the record say that they did when hearing the preaching of Philip?
4. What does the occupation of a sorcerer at least imply about Simon?
5. Does Luke say the actions of Simon to be saved were the same or different from the Samaritans? Explain:
6. Where was Simon when he asked to purchase the power of the apostles? Do we know why he followed the apostles? List some possible reasons:
7. Why was Simon told he could not purchase the power?
8. Are there Simon’s today who obey then fall away? List some reasons (Matthew 13:1-23)