Famous Conversions: E. Stanley Jones Memory Verse: 2 Corinthians 1:20

Aug. 20, 2023 Scripture Reading: 2 Peter 1:3-10

SLIDE 1: TITLE

As we have seen over the course of this series, conversion is a multifaceted miracle of God. It is personal and unique; no two stories are the same. We have said conversion is an act of God that changes us for a special use, a special purpose that only God can determine. We have mentioned as well the mystery of this reality. No, we cannot boil it down to a formula, but we cannot let that stop us from recognizing and celebrating and seeking after it powerful affects.

Through conversion, God captures us with a vision of the truth. The truth of who he is and the truth of who we are: sinner in dire need of healing and forgiveness. This conviction of sin leaves us helplessly condemned, until we arrive at Christ himself, who offers us forgiveness and freedom. Our response is one of joy, and out of the joy we live into a new calling, a new mission, a new life.

Throughout this series, we have seen these characteristics of conversion play out in many different ways in different people: From the apostle Paul on up through the founder of the Salvation Army, General William Booth, God uses the means of conversion to change the hearts and lives of his people.

SLIDE 2: PICTURE

The man we are considering today wrote, “The deepest need of man, East and West, North and South, is to be converted, to be regenerated, to be made over again.” These are the words of a man who truly believed. He worked all his life as a missionary in India and became world-renowned as a powerful evangelist and preacher and was the author of some 30 books. His name was Eli Stanley Jones. E. Stanley Jones was a confidant of President Roosevelt, close friends with and actually a biographer of, Gandhi and was nominated twice to receive the Nobel peace prize. I also recall our very own Peter Law, who pastored this church in the 80’s, tell a story about when he was young, he and his brother attended an event where E. Stanley Jones was speaking. And Pastor Law remembers going to have Jones pray over him after the service concluded. But Stanley Jones would never call his himself extraordinary. He understood he had no great education or superlative talent. He admitted he was ordinary, but he made his life’s work an extraordinary subject. He writes, “I have an extraordinary subject, the good news of Jesus Christ. That gives my speech extraordinary content, weight, authority. I represent something, no, Someone.” Maybe you feel ordinary. And that is okay…most of us are. But even if we might be ordinary, can we still discover the extraordinariness of Christ? Can we make much of him in our ordinary lives? After all, we are Christians, we represent Christ…what could be more extraordinary?

E. Stanley Jones was born in Baltimore in 1884 and grew up going to Sunday school at Fredrick Avenue Methodist Church. Jones says that at that point, he was more interested in how he looked dressed in his Sunday suit, not so much in the content of the services. When he was fifteen, Jones attended an event where a preacher from England, from John Bunyan’s church in fact, was speaking. Jones and his friends sat in the back of the balcony. They had plans to goof around and cause a distraction, but Jones’ remembers the preacher pointing to him and his gang saying, “Young men, Jesus said, ‘He that is not with me is against me.”

**SLIDE 3: He that is not with me is against me.**

“It went straight to my heart. I knew I wasn’t with him, but I didn’t want to be against him. It shook me. I turned to my chum and said, “I’m going to give myself to Christ. Will you?” He replied: “No, I’m going to see life first.” Doesn’t this young man’s hesitancy ring true for us? We saw the same response in Augustine. “Lord heal me, but not just yet….I still want to hang on to this life, I still want to enjoy these sins, I want to see life first before I have to hand it all over to you.” And, and Jones points out, we are talking about the difference between “life” and “Life”; the abundant life of Christ verses the crumbs we can come up with on our own.

Jones continues: “Then I saw I would have to go alone, and did. I climbed over the young men, went down the steps and up the aisle to the altar, and took my place among the seekers. I felt undone, and wept – wept because I was guilty and estranged. I wanted the Kingdom of God, wanted reconciliation with my heavenly Father, but took church membership as a substitute…I felt religious for a few weeks, and then it all faded out and I was back again exactly where I was before, the springs of my character and my habit formation unchanged. I had been horizontally converted, but not vertically.”

**SLIDE 4: horizontally converted, but not vertically**

This is something we have yet to talk about in this series on conversion, it is something we have not specifically come across yet in these accounts of famous people, but I suspect it is quite a common reality and that is partial conversion. Again, because we are talking about conversion, we are talking about a mystery. But this mystery still has some parameters…we have said before the proof of conversion is in the changed life. And Stanley Jones was honest enough with himself to know that he remined unchanged. Something happened that day in the church. It was an emotional experience, it served to adjust his mindset. It instigated his church membership and attendance. But church attendance is not the proof of conversion. He says his character and habits were unchanged. He had been nudged by the Spirit, and Stanley responded to that nudge. He was aware of his sin and his need for a Savior, but for whatever reason, that first conversion experience did not take. This story could indeed apply directly to many of us. Sometimes we equate emotional experiences as the working of the Holy Spirit. We might think that since we had goosebumps, the Spirit was present. Well, make no mistake, God is present. The Holy Spirit is working, but tears and chills are not the deciding factors…. transformation is. We read from 2 Peter earlier in our service, and right from the beginning of that letter, Peter jumps on this idea of transformation. He tells us that by God’s divine power we have everything we need to live in godliness. It’s not by our own efforts or abilities, it’s not by the power of the environment that surrounds us, or the power of the other Christians that surround us or the power of our upbringing or the power of the preacher in the pulpit…our ability to be transformed belongs to God. Peter says, “Through his honor and glory he has given us this promise: that you may share in the divine nature.” And sharing in that nature means escaping death and doing away wiith immorality and indeed, the very craving of sin. Is that possible? To do away with the craving for sin? Let me be very clear: no, it is impossible. But our God does impossible things…Amen?

I am sure you have heard the phrase, “Once an alcoholic always an alcoholic.” Meaning, the person who is given to strong drink, who has a weakness for it, must accept that they will always be broken. They will have to settle for getting by on a strict regimen of self-control and self-supervision and will-power lest they fall off the wagon. This is a good thing. It is good to be aware of your weaknesses and it is good to live with self-control and restraint, but it is not transformation! Transformation, by God’s power is a new identity. What was broken and diseased, addicted, and weak becomes strong and whole in the grace of God. Old becomes new, dead becomes alive.

We thank God for those incremental steps that bring improvement to our lives. We thank God for those partial conversion experiences as well. It wasn’t the full thing, but it was progress in the right direction. As Jones says, he was, “Horizontally converted, but not vertically.” He was able to live in right relationship with people and family members, but his own relationship with God was still stymied and lacked the divine life that Peter talks about. Jones puts it in a very telling way. He says he settled. He wanted reconciliation with God, but settled for church membership with other people.

This allows us to ask in what ways have we settled? Are we content to continue to wear the nametag that says “Hello my name is Broken”? Are we content to limp along through life trying to stay away from the temptations that we know can do us in? Are we okay saying with a sigh, “Once a sinner, always a sinner.” Keep seeking…know that the divine power of God, the Holy Spirit is still working.

Jones continues his story: “The real thing came two years later. He would have been 17 years old at this point…READ pg. 27

**SLIDE 5: Picture**

I just want to highlight three aspects of Stanley’s account. This first is the speaker, Robert J. Bateman, who incidentally died aboard the *Titanic* while singing “Nearer My God to Thee”, had something that Jones wanted. He was a former alcoholic, healed, renewed, not just merely scraping by under the identity of diseased or broken. He was touting a new and whole life in Christ. A life that was attractive to those who were seeking. A life that makes others say “I want what he has.” Can we say that same of the way in which we live? Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 2 that we are the sweet smell of life to those who are being saved. May our lives give off the fragrance of Christ as Bateman’s did.

Secondly, I’d like to point out the complexity of the prayer Stanley Jones prayed on the day of his conversion. He said, “O Jesus, save me tonight.” What could be more simple? And yet, what is more profound? This simple prayer is all anyone needs. But a prayer is no a spell or an incantation of some kind. It has no magical effects. In order to be genuine, a prayer must be spoken from the heart, from the very depths. And Stanely did just that. He found an answer to his deepest heart cry…save me!

And lastly, Stanley concludes, “I’ve got it!” Meaning, salvation, forgiveness, love, acceptance, joy. But all of these things are not really it. Stanley realizes that what he has is not something but rather someone….he has Christ and Christ alone provides everything needed.

Jones continued to find camaraderie and spiritual support from his small group at the Methodist church that he attended. After a short venture into law school, Stanley Jones attended Asbury College in Wilmore Kentucky. This is actually the same school Pastor Dan Hair, and pastor John Blackford attended. It’s the same school that attracted thousands upon thousands of people this last February as God moved mightily pouring out his Spirit upon the campus. A very similar event occurred previously in 1905 when Jones was a sophomore at the school. God broke out upon them and provided a very palpable experience of God’s presence. Stanley writes that besides speaking in foreign tongues, everything that happened to the disciples at Pentecost happened to him and his classmates. From that experience, Stanley was given two things: A great indifference to what people thought about him and a distinct call into the mission field.

In 1907, at age 23, Stanley Jones was sent by the Methodist Mission Board to India, the place where he would live for the rest of his life. There is established Ashrams, or forest retreats, where he would host roundtable discussions where people of different faiths could speak about what their faith offered them. Stanley saw himself as a witness. He did not feel he had to defend Christ, just share Christ. Jones writes, “I have found that this is what people want to hear – testimony of what has happened and is happening to you…Philosophy reasons; moralism demands; music and art please; witnessing shares – shares at the depths.”

**SLIDE 6: “I have found that this is what people want to hear – testimony of what has happened and is happening to you…Philosophy reasons; moralism demands; music and art please; witnessing shares – shares at the depths.”**

E. Stanley Jones brought a disentangled Christ to India. He did not connect Jesus to Western Civilization or to any type of church or method or cultural trappings. He said he would not speak to Muslims or Hindus, he spoke to people who all had the same need: Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

At the end of his life, Stanley summed up his work in a book called “The Divine Yes” based on 2 Corinthians 1:19-20; “God’s Son, Jesus Christ wasn’t yes and no. In him it is always yes. All of God’s promises have their yes in him. That is why we say Amen through him to the glory of God.” In Christ all of God’s promises are yes. Stanley Jones, an ordinary man, believed in the extraordinary yes of Christ. He sought to do impossible things, like penetrate the ranks of the religious elite in India with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Stanley writes: “A cloud overshadows any person, any group, any denomination, any movement, any situation where you make Jesus only one of your emphases.” Christ must be our center. He must hold our gaze, our adoration, our commitment. He must preoccupy our thoughts, motivate our actions and make his home in our very hearts. Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, “Look! I am standing at the door knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and will have dinner with them and they will have dinner with me.”

**SLIDE 8: Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, “Look! I am standing at the door knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and will have dinner with them and they will have dinner with me.”**

Jesus doesn’t just want to stop by for a quick visit. Jesus wants to remain. He wants to abide in you and you in him. He wants to save you from your sin…he wants to give you his life; that’s abundant life with a capital “L”.

Stanley Jones was taught that if you wanted Jesus, you went to church and came up to the front. As a young man, he was so eager he sat in the front and waited until the speaker was finished so he could get to the altar, so he could invite Jesus into his life, so he could pray that prayer, “Jesus, save me!” Alter calls are no a part of our culture usually, but I think it is fitting. If we want to let Jesus in, we do have to get up and walk to the door in order to open it. So I want to encourage you today, right now, to do that very thing. Get up, walk to the door, open it and let Jesus enter. Get up, walk to the front and find that he has been waiting all along. Maybe you do know Jesus but he has been shut out for whatever reason. Maybe you left him to sit at the dinner table, maybe you have been partially converted, maybe you just had a rough time and sin got the better of you and you asked him to leave. Well, he remains. Christ remains on your doorstep, ready to be reconciled, ready to take his proper place again. Repent, turn from your sin, come to Jesus, invite him in and we he will eat with you. It is the best decision you could ever make. You are trading crumbs for life. Come on down and let’s pray together.